Together we make a better city

Participation tips for **residents, developers, planners** and **politicians**

A step
toward better participation

Since August 2024, municipal employees, residents, and researchers have met regularly in the city of Stavanger to explore how we can improve the conditions for meaningful participation in urban development together. We call this collaboration the *Participation forum*.

The brochure you are now holding is a preliminary result of our conversations. It is a draft in the best sense of the word – a work in progress that is not yet complete but awaits further development. By sharing our thoughts publicly, we invite you and everyone else to help us shape the road ahead.

How can we together create a better city for everyone?
On the following pages, we pose several questions that we believe are crucial to achieving participation that all parties can support. For each question, we attempt to outline what four key groups can do to help us collectively find better solutions:

What can we as **residents** do?

What can we as **developers** do?

What can we as **planners** do?

What can we as **politicians** do?

Our preliminary answers are incomplete. Some may even be wrong. But they are a beginning – an attempt to set in motion a development toward something better. And we need your help. The meetings in the Participation forum will continue, and this brochure is an invitation to join us.

Participation is at the heart of **local democracy**

Public participation in the Municipality of Stavanger
→ stavanger.kommune.no/medvirkning

For local democracy to function at the neighbourhood level, elected representatives need help from residents and others who are affected by planning decisions. Without participation from the local community, it is difficult to make decisions that truly serve the interests of local residents. That is why participation is required by law in all planning cases:

The law sets the minimum requirements that the municipality and the developer must meet. But they can also choose to go beyond what the law demands. In any case, the municipality and developers depend on the local community's active engagement in the process. Meaningful participation requires that all parties contribute and respect the roles and inputs of others.

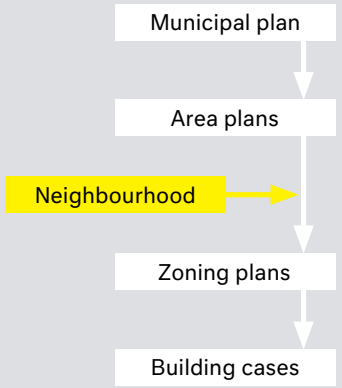
"Anyone who submits a planning proposal shall facilitate participation. The municipality shall ensure that this requirement is fulfilled in planning processes carried out by other public bodies or private entities. The municipality has a particular responsibility to ensure active participation from groups that require special arrangements, including children and young people. Groups and interests that are not able to participate directly shall be ensured good opportunities for participation in other ways."

→ Planning and Building Act §5–1

The planning system and **the neighbourhood**

Stavanger's municipal planning system operates on several levels. The Municipal Plan, along with national and regional guidelines, establishes the overall framework for planning at every level.

The neighbourhood level offers great potential because this is where residents are most motivated to actively participate in planning. While overarching area plans may remain valid for decades, local participation should be continuous. This engagement must be anchored as a core vision within zoning plans and applied to all individual cases. This approach not only secures valuable input for larger, holistic documents (like the Municipal Plan) but also ensures residents and local stakeholders have direct influence over the future of urban development.



Challenges

The Participation Forum has sought to identify the **barriers and challenges** that different actors encounter within the planning system. The following themes emerge as particularly relevant:

Relevance: Many people choose not to participate because the planning process does not seem relevant to their own future or everyday life in the neighbourhood.

Timing: A recurring challenge is that residents are involved too late in the planning process, and the time window for participation is too short.

Follow-up: It is difficult to keep track of what happens to the input provided through various participation activities.

Power balance: Many feel that participation has little effect because the balance of power between residents, developers, and authorities is too uneven.

Trust: Past disappointments and a sense of not being heard cause many actors to lose trust in participation as a meaningful way to contribute to urban development.

Possible solutions

How should we address these challenges? **Here are our tips:**

Relevance: Participation can be made more relevant by adapting both the topic and the method to the groups that are desired to be involved. This can be done, for example, by involving residents in the planning of participation activities – *participation about participation*.

Timing: More windows of opportunity for participation should be opened earlier in the formal process (see figure on the previous page). Developers and planners can also start the participation work in more informal ways even before the formal planning process begins.

Follow-up: The work of following up on formal and informal input can be systematized and made more visible. A principle could be that the recipient of the input always puts the same energy into following up as the resident put into giving the input.

Power balance: Participation shall contribute to reducing imbalances in the power dynamic of urban development. This can be partially achieved by actively prioritizing input from underrepresented groups.

Trust: Trust is built over time – when we show transparency, keep our word, and listen to each other, trust becomes something that strengthens local democracy.

Relevance

How can we ensure that participation is experienced as relevant and meaningful for those who should participate?

What can we as **residents** do?

Follow planning in the municipality with a view to what is relevant for us and what we can give input on. Provide feedback directly within the plan or via the contact form on the municipality's website.

Speak up and vote on meetings and activities that are planned to ensure that the participation development becomes relevant and truly reflects the local conditions.

Take contact with local politicians and civil servants about what is important and relevant for us in our neighbourhood.

What can we as **developers** do?

Focus on those who live in or closest to the project.

Clarify what our plans and visions are, be it for our everyday life, our work, or our neighbourhood.

What can we as **planners** do?

Involve residents in the design of participation processes – *participation on participation*.

Work proactively with participation to ensure that the framework for the plan is known and relevant for the residents invited to participate.

Prevent participation fatigue by ensuring that the plan is concrete and relevant before inviting residents to join the process.

Give examples of good input and follow-up that have already led to change in the topics that are relevant now.

Start participation work early in the planning process so that residents find both the overall area plans and the more detailed zoning plans relevant in time.

What can we as **politicians** do?

Gather knowledge about the daily lives of those living closest to the site is used in the planning.

Introduce decisions that give greater room for the neighbourhood level in the planning system.

Integrate public participation into policy decisions, not merely the planning processes.

Timing

How can we ensure
that the neighbourhood
is involved earlier?

What can we as **residents** do?

Keep up-to-date on the start-up of planning processes in the municipality, for example, by signing up for updates from current plans → stavangerplaner.no

Engage in dialogue with developers and others early in a planning case – it is not always clear who to talk to at what time.

Continuously talk to each other about our shared visions for the neighbourhood – then we are always ready to participate in the early phase.

Update each other and share active planning cases to increase the chances of change.

What can we as **developers** do?

Involve early and at the neighbourhood level (on site) at the start of the planning of projects.

Include representatives of the participation forum at the start of the planning processes – they can help us understand the neighbourhood.

Announce the start of planning work more broadly than legally required – this gives us a better process and strengthens our reputation.

What can we as **planners** do?

Initiate the development of neighbourhood visions in collaboration with residents, allowing them to impact future planning cases in the area and contribute to the City Plan.

Use the first meeting with the developer to propose establishing a resident group that can participate in the planning process from the beginning.

Host a participation café in the neighbourhood community centres where people can drop in to get information, talk to experts, and discuss their input.

What can we as **politicians** do?

Adopt requirements for early participation measures in all planning cases to ensure both the opportunity for public participation and predictability for developers.

Assist the administration in meeting residents in their neighbourhoods to stay in touch with the local situation.

Actively inform people about important planning cases that will impact their daily lives – we often gain knowledge of these matters sooner than the public.

Follow-up

How can we together ensure a more systematic follow-up of input?

What can we as **residents** do?

Submit input in writing and not solely verbally – this is how we help guarantee that the feedback finds its way to the politicians.

Ensure input is as concrete and clear as possible to maximize the ability of planners, developers, and politicians to follow up.

Ask the municipality for advice and guidance before submitting our input, to ensure its relevance and that it is directed to the appropriate authority.

What can we as **developers** do?

Issue continuous updates during the process – avoid leaving neighbours in the dark.

Before starting our own participation processes, request access from the municipality to input from previous planning cases in the area.

Establish a specific system to store and track input from both formal and informal sources.

What can we as **planners** do?

Give residents an overview of how they can follow their input through the planning process, via political deliberation, and up until the final decision.

Respond to the input and put the same amount of effort into the response as people used to write the input.

Take the initiative for the municipality to develop a searchable system where residents can follow the progress of their input through the planning processes.

Establish routines for sharing input with other departments or relevant professional areas within the municipality.

Measure the outcomes and real-world results of participation processes and maintain a system for recording them.

What can we as **politicians** do?

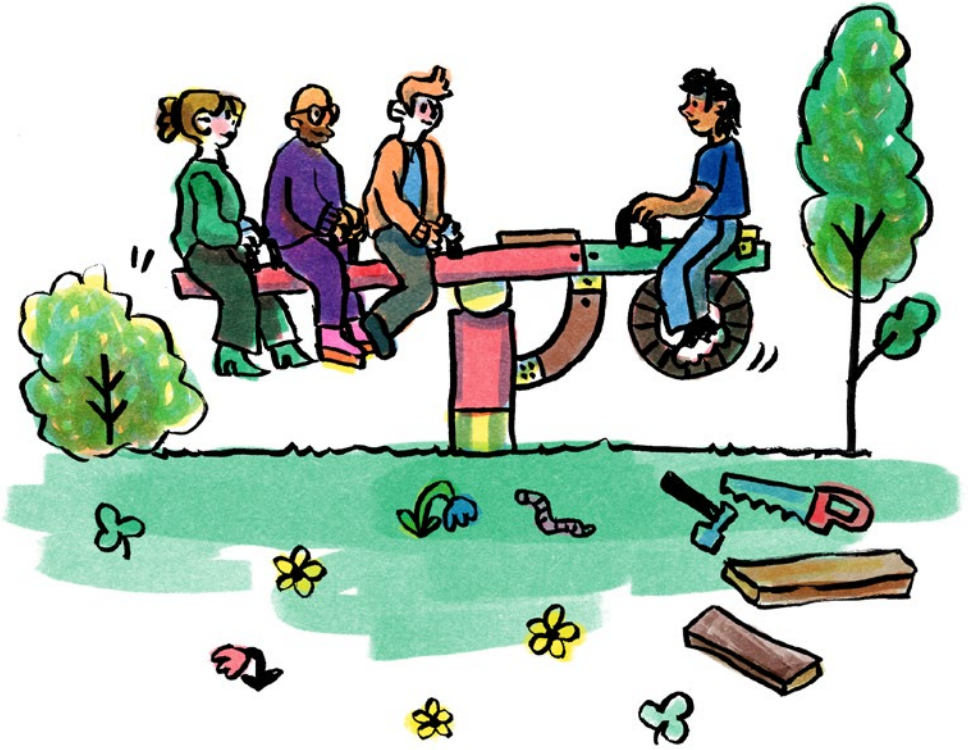
Share briefing documents *(orienteringssaker)* locally in the affected neighbourhoods.

Meet the residents face-to-face and explain our decisions and the significance of the input.

Ensure that all approved plans include a document that clearly demonstrates how public participation and input have been considered and incorporated into the plan.

Power balance

How can we together manage the uneven power balance in a way that gives everyone a fair opportunity to be heard?



What can we as **residents** do?

Take an active role in the public debate to be part of shaping the urban development agenda.

Ensure input is as concrete and clear as possible to maximize the ability of planners, developers, and politicians to follow up.

Bruke din rett til å delta i høringer og plan-prosesser – hver sjanse er en mulighet til å forme nabolagets fremtid.

What can we as **developers** do?

Establish concrete targets in the corporate strategies to strengthen trust between citizens and developers.

Talk to residents and organizations in the area, participate in events, and carry out site visits to listen and gather knowledge about the place's function and challenges before planning begins.

Regard critical feedback as a valuable chance to develop an improved project, which inherently fosters trust.

What can we as **planners** do?

Keep in mind that residents participate in their leisure time and meet them on their own conditions.

Organize meeting places where all roles in a plan are represented and get the opportunity to discuss solutions together.

Prioritize resident collaboration as highly as the dialogue with developers to ensure balance and quality in the process.

What can we as **politicians** do?

Increase administrative assistance for citizen-led initiatives and local politicians.

Find out how the neighbourhoods can gain a stronger voice in political decisions.

Mandate a requirement for a participation strategy for all plans and projects.

Study the viewpoints of residents, developers, and planners before we vote in planning cases.

Impose clearer requirements for development projects to be beneficial and advantageous to the residents and the community.

Trust

How can we together build trust between residents, developers, planners, and politicians?

What can we as **residents** do?

Support the good ideas!
Use your voice to actively champion the proposals that improve your neighbourhood.

Be critical, but with an open mind. Give planners, developers, and politicians the opportunity to show that they can be trusted.

Use your experience and knowledge – both about what worked and what failed – to create even better results in the next process.

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What can we as **planners** do?

Use clearer language and visual aids to make the planning documents easier to understand. It is easier to trust something that is understandable.

Team up with local community actors, for example, Volunteer Centres, and invite individuals and organizations with diverse expertise into the planning processes.

Make it clearer how participation in the Planning and Building Act shall be interpreted and create good local guidelines and methods for implementation.

Contribute to developing a culture and expertise for public participation within the municipality – establishing dedicated roles and professional teams to handle this.

What can we as **politicians** do?

Limit the granting of dispensations in planning cases to foster predictability and confirm that adopted decisions and rules are trustworthy.

Allocate budgets to build competence for participation, and for dedicated positions and professional environments.

Establish specific goals for increasing residents' confidence in planning participation and earmark funds to achieve the target.

Raise the level of ambition for participation, ensuring genuine involvement of residents, beyond the defined minimum requirements in the Planning and Building Act.

The way forward

The Participation Forum currently consists of ordinary residents, and representatives from the municipality of Stavanger and the University of Stavanger. Our conversations will continue, and if you have input or ideas, please join the discussion and contribute to a stronger local democracy.

You can also contact us by email
→ post@medvirkningsforum.no

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