

HEVinnovations programme

Half term evaluation (2021–2024)

This document is an English summary of the original evaluation

Project: HEVi – Helsinki metropolitan ecosystems

Authors: Suvi Hänninen, Saana Rantsi

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HEInnovations programme half term evaluation 2021-2024

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Introduction

The mid-term evaluation examines the implementation of the HEVinnovations programme between 2021–2024 in relation to the objectives set in the innovation ecosystem agreement of the Helsinki metropolitan area, the cities' strategies, and current development needs. The goal is to provide input for further development of the programme for the years 2025–2027. Additionally, the evaluation offers an opportunity to reflect on the achievements in urban development and innovation activities so far.

We assess the structure of the programme and project portfolio, as well as the collaboration carried out under the programme within the Helsinki metropolitan area. The report specifically addresses the following questions:

- What has the project funding been allocated to?
- How do the activities align with the objectives of the ecosystem agreement and city strategies?
- How do the involved parties assess the implementation of the programme and cooperation within the Helsinki metropolitan area?
- What are the most critical considerations for the programme's implementation in 2025–2027?

The mid-term evaluation has been conducted by the HEVi coordination project, supplemented by interviews (9 in total) carried out by Synesis Oy, including views from the HEVi steering group and other key city representatives supporting the programme's coordination. In addition to the interviews, sources include an anonymous survey sent to project portfolio coordinators (14/32 responses, response rate 44%), project plans, and data from the EURA2021 system. The evaluation also utilizes tools from the programme's operational environment analysis and developmental evaluation frameworks.

Summary of the Evaluation Results

The programme has supported regional innovation activity and strengthened cooperation between cities, research institutions, and businesses. Its main focus has been on smart and sustainable urban solutions, with other thematic areas also adding value and flexibility. A key achievement has been the creation of new networks and collaboration models.

Areas for improvement include prioritising high-quality, long-term projects over increasing project numbers, and involving new actors such as NGOs and additional research institutions. Inter-city cooperation is a major strength, especially in addressing cross-boundary challenges, though overlapping activities should be avoided.

The programme has had a successful start and has built a strong foundation for innovation-driven urban development. Over the coming years, its impact can be increased by

deepening collaboration, broadening the range of actors, and focusing on projects with lasting impact, while maintaining flexibility and responsiveness to new challenges.

HEInnovations – Innovation ecosystem agreement of the Helsinki Capital region

The innovation ecosystem agreement for the Helsinki metropolitan area was established between the cities of Helsinki, Espoo, and Vantaa, and the Finnish state for the period 2021–2027. It was signed by Minister of Economic Affairs Mika Lintilä, Mayor of Helsinki Jan Vapaavuori, Mayor of Espoo Jukka Mäkelä, and Mayor of Vantaa Ritva Viljanen.

The implementation of the ecosystem agreement is named **HEInnovations**. The aim of this joint economic development and sustainable urban growth programme is to strengthen innovation activities and collaboration within the Helsinki metropolitan area. The programme is built around a **project portfolio**, which responds to timely development needs. The portfolio is structured around four focus areas:

- Smart and sustainable urban solutions
- New learning environments and digital solutions for skills development
- Wellbeing and health technology
- New ventures and general ecosystem development

The programme is primarily funded through **ERDF (European Regional Development Fund + state funding)** calls. The annual grant authorizations for 2021–2024 were €2.67 million, totalling an estimated €18.7 million over the 2021–2027 period. Each funded organization has also contributed with a **co-financing share of 40%** of the total budget.

To implement the agreement, the cities appointed a joint steering group. The cities also jointly lead the implementation, supported by a **shared coordination team**, responsible for funding calls, collaboration between portfolio projects, monitoring overall impact, and promoting regional cooperation.

Coordination was co-financed by the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment (60%, €800,000) for 06/2021–04/2024 via the “UKKE” (Sustainable Growth and Vitality in Uusimaa) funding. For 05/2024–12/2027, coordination is supported by **ERDF funding for sustainable urban development** (60%, €988,000) via the Uusimaa Regional Council. The remaining share is covered by the cities of Helsinki, Espoo, and Vantaa.

Status of the programme and the portfolio

As of the mid-term evaluation, three funding rounds have been organized (2022, 2023, 2024). Although the programme began in 2021, actual project activities were delayed until 2023 due to the **late launch of the EURA2021 system** (opened in May 2022).

A total of **18 projects** have been launched (comprising **54 sub-projects**), including two coordination projects for the programme itself.

Total funding allocated as of Spring 2024 (including the latest funding round): **€19 million**, with **60% in grants** and **40% in co-financing** from implementing organizations.

Activities have been funded through ERDF, except for the first coordination project (funded by UKKE).

In this section, the portfolio projects are categorized according to the original focus areas and methodological themes defined in the ecosystem agreement. The composition of the projects is also examined in terms of both **budget size** and **quantity**.

Thematic review of the portfolio

Currently, the portfolio contains the most projects under the themes *Smart and Sustainable Urban Solutions* and *New Ventures and General Ecosystem Development*. Both themes are broad in scope. While the “New Ventures” theme was originally intended to complement the portfolio only partially, it has proven valuable by enabling funding for initiatives and topics that were not yet visible at the time the ecosystem agreement was drafted. The theme also supports cross-cutting projects that benefit all focus areas.

Projects under *Smart and Sustainable Urban Solutions* have benefited from their alignment with the funding instrument's **horizontal selection criteria**, which award extra points to projects that actively support the EU's environmental policies. Additionally, not all focus areas are opened in each funding round:

- **Smart and Sustainable Urban Solutions:** 3 rounds
- **New Ventures and General Ecosystem Development:** 3 rounds
- **Wellbeing and Health Technology:** 2 rounds
- **New Learning Environments and Digital Solutions for Skills Development:** 1 round

<p>Smart & sustainable urban solutions 7,5 M€</p> <p>Energy as a service in urban district areas – energy cooperation into practice 2023-2026</p> <p>Innovation Challenge Engine for Cities 2023-2026</p> <p>Accelerating open innovation in built environment – from innovations to practice 2023-2026</p> <p>Sustainable Future Districts 2023-2026</p> <p>Food SystemiCity programme 2023-2025</p> <p>Food waste ecosystem 2023-2026</p> <p>Circular Buildings 2024-2026</p> <p>SOLMU - New services for Helsinki region mobility hubs 2024-2026</p> <p>New learning environments & digital solutions for learning 1,8 M€</p> <p>Resourceful Sharing: Innovative and co-usable learning environments 2023-2025</p>	<p>Wellbeing & health technology 2,2 M€</p> <p>Urban Environment as Innovation Platform for Wellbeing (KauKo) 2023-2025</p> <p>Breaking the silos for unified health innovations 2024-2027</p> <p>New ventures & general ecosystem development 6,4 M€</p> <p>Helsinki Region Softlanding Services for Startups 2023-2025</p> <p>Digital Creative Industries and Beyond 2023-2026</p> <p>GameLab for SMEs in the Capital Region 2023-2026</p> <p>Impactive ecosystems - recipes for high performing clusters 2023-2025</p> <p>HEInnovations - Helsinki metropolitan ecosystems 2024-2027</p> <p>AI Business Incubator 2024-2027</p>
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All projects that received funding in 2022, 2023 and 2024.

Implementation of Methodological Themes in the Portfolio

All projects implement at least one of the **methodological themes** defined in the ecosystem agreement:

- Experimentation environments
- Innovative procurement
- RDI centres: functions, structure, know-how
- New and better business incubators and services

A single project can address **multiple methodological areas**. Projects developing experimentation environments are most typical in the portfolio.

In practice, certain focus areas are more often associated with specific methodological themes. For example:

- “New Ventures and Ecosystem Development” is often linked with **business incubators and services**
- “Smart and Sustainable Urban Solutions” is associated with **experimental environments and innovative procurements**

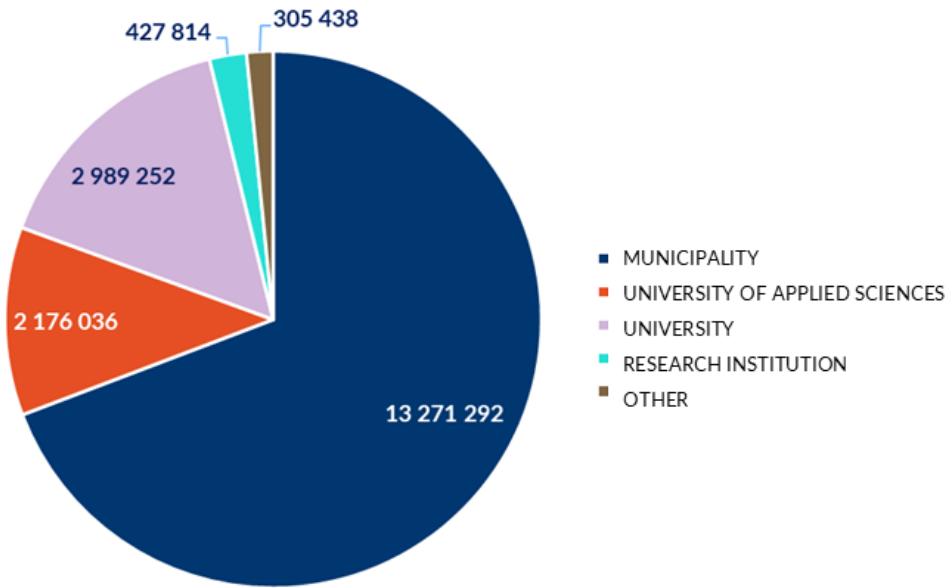
Portfolio project implementers

The programme is strongly **city-driven**: 13 out of 18 portfolio projects ($\approx 70\%$) are led by a city organization.

The HEVi coordination team has increasingly brought new actors into joint project planning and preparation. The programme continues to aim for broader engagement of diverse stakeholders. While **companies themselves cannot apply for project funding**, the programme ensures that funded content aligns with regional innovation and business growth needs. The Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment requires that **at least 25% of total funding comes from municipalities**, aligning with the cities' active involvement. Here is the breakdown of project implementers by role:

ORGANISATION	LEAD PARTNER	CO-PARTNER	ALT.
AALTO-YLIOPISTOKIINTEISTÖT ACRE		1	1
AALTO-YLIOPISTO		3	3
ESPOON KAUPUNKI	4	5	9
FORUM VIRIUM HELSINKI OY		2	2
HAAGA-HELIA AMK	1		1
HELSINGIN YLIOPISTO	3		3
HELSINGIN KAUPUNKI	6	4	10
HSY		1	1
LAUREA AMK		2	2
LUKE		2	2
METROPOLIA AMK	1	3	4
VANTAA KAUPUNKI	3	6	9
VTT		1	1

Project partners divided into lead and co-partners. Projects include those that have started in 2022, 2023 and 2024.



Total budget of (19 169 832 eur) after three funding rounds, divided by project partner types. Both coordination projects are included in the count (2021–2024 UKKE-funded and 2024–2027).

Interviews: Assessment of the current state of the portfolio and its role in the development of innovation activities in the SME region

We asked the respondents how well the current HEVi portfolio responds to the current need to develop the innovation ecosystem in the SME region. At the SME level, the interviewees represented the programme management team and other key people in the cities who have been involved in the planning and coordination of the programme. In all cities, the strategy has been a strong guide to which projects to join, and the projects are seen as contributing well to the development of innovation ecosystems in all cities.

Cities have chosen different ways of coordinating projects as part of the development of their industries. The functions of the urban environment and vitality services are most widely involved in all cities.

The distribution of the portfolio is currently considered to be quite functional, and the distribution of projects evenly between the priorities of the agreement is not seen as an intrinsic value. In addition, it was considered that the balance of activities would increase with the new projects. It is also the case that a financial instrument directs a particular distribution; general ecosystem development projects fit this instrument as well as sustainable urban solutions.

We also asked how well the HEVi portfolio meets the future growth and vitality needs of the Helsinki metropolitan area. Although the distribution of the portfolio is considered to be quite functional, from the point of view of effectiveness and continuity, it is considered

important to increase the number of projects that bind cities together, such as Helsinki Region Softlanding Services for Startups -project, in order to jointly solve important systemic and cross-urban challenges.

It would also be a good idea to involve new actors in new projects, such as organisations working with companies and more research institutes.

From the point of view of overall impact, those who are challenged feel it is more important to focus on specific projects and their good impact than to get as many new projects in motion as possible. In addition, new ventures and general ecosystem development projects were considered to be the most important from the point of view of effectiveness and cooperation.

According to the interviews, HEVi's cooperation platforms and projects play a key role in business cooperation between cities.

Programme in relation to the objectives of the ecosystem agreement

In the interviews it was asked "*How well has the HEVinnovations programme so far responded to the objectives set out in the Ecosystems Pact?*".

In general, the agreement is considered to be a success. It has succeeded in integrating development with existing development platforms and urban strategies. As a rule, the projects were considered to have succeeded in harnessing the skills and experience needed for development. The agreement was also considered to actively guide cooperation between cities.

The successes were considered to stem from the legacy of the 6Aika/6Cities strategy period, both in terms of experience and in terms of acting as a continuum of the programme. There are a lot of the same people involved, and not everything has started from zero. Thanks to previous experience, cooperation between cities got off to a faster and smoother start. HEVi has also been better able to link projects to large development entities, which ensures both performance and continuity.

The agreement also benefited from its sufficiently broad structure, which has made it possible to adapt the programme to the different current needs of cities. Cooperation between cities has increased with the programme. For some project content, cooperation was seen as more natural than for others.

Operational environment analysis: “Five messages for innovation development”

The thematic priorities of the ecosystem agreement are broad entities with a wide range of phenomena. Here, we present the societal change trends and local phenomena highlighted in the operating environment analysis carried out for the programme in 2022 by priority (excluding new ventures and general ecosystem development), and by HEVi coordination, we compare the work carried out in the programme with them.

1. Smart and Sustainable Urban Solutions

- **Align with strategies and global goals:** Projects are tied to city carbon neutrality targets, the EU Green Deal, “100 climate-neutral cities by 2030” mission, SDGs, and the Uusimaa Smart Specialisation Strategy. Programme coordination helps ensure thematic alignment, e.g., urban development agendas.
- **Address adaptation, biodiversity, and circular economy:** Construction circular economy projects are underway; autumn 2024 calls will seek biodiversity solutions. Climate adaptation remains a gap due to ineligible ERDF funding.
- **Respond to changing demand:** Programme flexibility—especially in “New Ventures” focus—has enabled rapid action on issues like energy self-sufficiency and food security, even when cities’ core functions couldn’t react quickly. However, national project instruments still tend to lock plans for years.
- **Human-centric smart city development:** Especially the projects developing new learning environments, edtech and well-being solutions bring citizens into testing and evaluation, providing companies with feedback for further development, but this approach could be expanded.
- **Follow EU developments:** EU-level monitoring uses Innocities networks and city experts. Some project proposals are redirected to other funding instruments when suitable, ensuring alignment with evolving EU regulation and opportunities.

2. Well-being and Health Technology

- **Promote preventive, holistic health:** Urban Environment as Innovation Platform for Wellbeing, KauKo project fosters urban wellbeing innovations aimed at preventing lifestyle diseases.
- **Cross-sector collaboration:** Links built between well-being, culture, sports, education, and leisure sectors; InnoVisions tool used to strengthen cross-industry cooperation.
- **Clarify roles post-SoTe (social and health services) reform:** Programme hosts events with experts from all three welfare areas, supporting a regional RDI network and clarifying cooperation channels for companies.

- **Non-technological enablers:** Programme discussions identify needs such as updated funding models and changes in professional practices to enable large-scale preventive care.
- **Health data innovation:** Events highlight business opportunities from integrating social and health datasets. HEVi connects actors to national initiatives like Sitra's Health Data 2030.

3. New Learning Environments and Digital Competence Solutions

- **Sustainability and wellbeing in education:** Resourceful Sharing: Innovative and co-usable learning environments, JAVIST project's mobile EdTech container TEKLA visits kindergartens and schools, letting thousands of learners test technologies, while supporting teachers in adoption.
- **Pedagogy-led technology development:** Solutions tested directly with teachers and pupils; consortiums include cities, companies, and universities to ensure pedagogical fit.
- **Promote equality in learning:** TEKLA mobile units bring equal access to technologies, including to schools with lower learning outcomes. Upcoming autumn 2024 call targets simulation teaching in virtual environments.
- **Export readiness:** Diverse project consortia build joint international ventures; HEVi shares information on Business Finland and ELY Centre funding to help companies grow abroad.
- **Continuous learning solutions:** Although ERDF funding is not skills-focused, calls such as the one for simulation teaching aim to support both school-age and adult learners. ESF+ opportunities are discussed at events, though so far no ESF+ projects are in the portfolio.

Operational environment analysis: 9 recommendations for innovation

The '9 recommendations for innovation' summarise the main development directions that cities should address in order to credibly act as an advocate, driver and supporter of ecosystem-based innovation. Below we have discussed the recommendations from the point of view of HEVi's operations to date. The implementation of the recommendation has been assessed with positive signs (1-3 +).

Active Role & Common Guidelines

1. **Actively support innovators (++):** Cities should act as forerunners and facilitators, providing technical prerequisites, developer communities, networks, and shared missions. Greater coherence and stronger strategic alignment are still needed.

2. **Embed innovation in strategies (+):** Integration of innovation into city strategies has begun, but progress remains dependent on day-to-day policy priorities.
3. **Strengthen developer networks (+++):** Regional cooperation—especially in sustainable urban development—is well established. HEVi supports this through joint events, project preparation workshops, stakeholder engagement, and open communication.

Opening & Inclusive Innovation

4. **Co-create with companies (+):** Cities offer opportunities for businesses to develop technologies and solutions, but activities are often isolated pilots with limited broader impact.
5. **Co-create with citizens (+):** Some projects promote openness and inclusivity, but this is not yet a consistent practice across the programme.
6. **Foster cross-sector collaboration (+):** Opportunities for multi-sectoral development exist, but the focus still leans toward thematic priorities rather than fully integrated collaboration.

Growth of Impact & Systemic Development

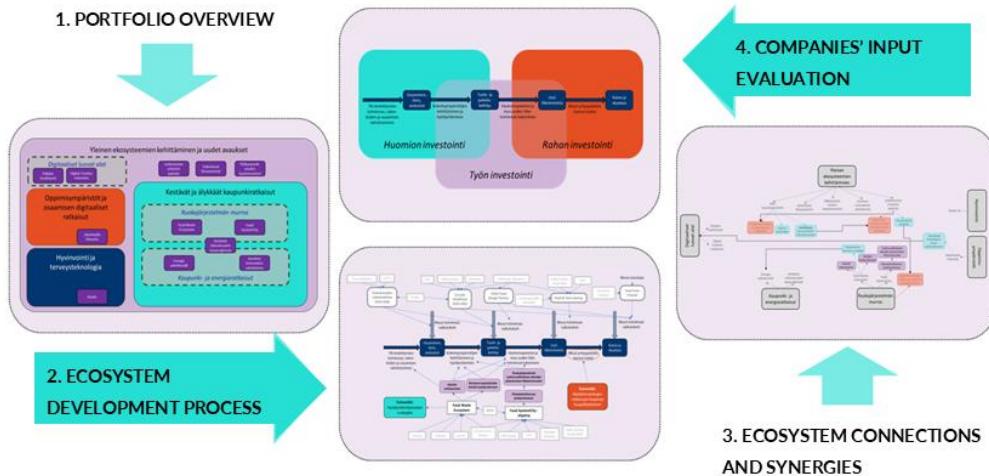
7. **Extend impact beyond project periods (++):** The programme develops capabilities across organisational boundaries, engages a wide range of experts, and shares results openly beyond the project portfolio.
8. **Adopt systemic approaches (+++):** Operations are planned at a portfolio level to avoid overlaps, leverage regional strengths, and promote co-creation. Tools such as InnoVisions support systemic evaluation and complementary project development.
9. **Develop shared capabilities (++):** Skills and tools for ecosystem work are actively developed and applied, with plans to expand their use—e.g., extending InnoVisions in the second half of the programme.

Metropolitan area cooperation; programme and portfolio

The HEVinnovations programme, implemented under the ecosystem agreement, has promoted regional and cross-municipal cooperation through open innovation, with cities acting mainly as enablers and facilitators. Rather than creating a local ecosystem management model, the programme has focused on joint stakeholder-driven development, open networking, and addressing innovation bottlenecks in sustainable urban development and business services.

All funded projects are required to be regional group projects that strengthen networking and RDI cooperation. Collaboration is further supported through programme communications, facilitation, events, and open planning workshops. Since the second funding round, project selection has been carried out by a joint expert panel appointed for each application round, ensuring assessment of regional benefits and genuine cooperation.

In addition to cross-municipal, regional cooperation, the programme has focused on both thematic and cross-sectoral cooperation and the cumulative nature of the project portfolio. This aspect has also been reinforced by the development evaluation tool InnoVisions, the first version of which was developed for the project in spring 2024. The tool will be increasingly deployed in the programme's operations during 2024 and 2025.



InnoVisions tool supports thematic and cross-thematic cooperation in the capital region

In addition to producing common tools and meetings, the personnel of the coordination project are represented in the steering group of each portfolio project, which supports the internal communication of the portfolio and also provides a channel for cross-project marketing and cooperation.

A LinkedIn poll showed that 60% of respondents believe HEVinnovations has promoted innovation cooperation in the Helsinki metropolitan area, though many respondents were themselves involved in group projects centred on such cooperation.

A separate survey of project workers rated:

- Added value from HEVi coordination activities: **3.3/5**
- Added value from other HEVi projects: **2.5/5**
- Cooperation between sub-projects in group projects: **4.5/5**
- Realisation of SME-wide cooperation and impact: **3.5/5**

The coordination project gathers feedback to tailor event themes and expects greater cross-project benefits as the portfolio expands in size and scope.

“Group projects are a good way to increase cooperation. In our own project, the cooperation and exchange of information between the cities has been very active. It is a good thing that more HEVi funding will be allocated to group projects in the future.” - HEVi portfolio project worker

Project workers also suggested ways to strengthen SME-wide cooperation within HEVi, including setting shared objectives and indicators for group projects, removing overlaps between sub-projects, and building enabling structures such as multi-actor group projects and experience-sharing. They also recommended increasing cross-sectoral links, ensuring all participants commit to active collaboration, and improving communication, marketing, and partner role clarity during project planning. These measures would help deepen cooperation and enhance regional development outcomes.

Programme performance and effectiveness

In this chapter, we examine the performance of the programme from the point of view of the quantitative objectives set for it and, in addition to the well-known, from the point of view of the material effectiveness of the activities.

Indicator targets for portfolio projects

We have compiled below the portfolio the result and output indicator targets for projects that have already started, which all ERDF-funded projects set for themselves.

Due to the lack of functionalities of the EURA2021 system, the overall realisation of the indicators is not yet available at the time of the mid-term review and the results of the indicators cannot be examined in the report.

Jobs, companies and business, pcs	
RCR01 New jobs created with support	315
RCO15 Capacity of incubators established, enterprises/year	150
SL01 in which women are employed	128
RCO05 New enterprises created with aid	120
ST01 of which women's start-ups	52
Innovations, solutions, demonstrations, pcs	
NR01 Innovations, products and services developed by networks and innovation ecosystems	225
NR08 Demonstrations for emission reductions, energy efficiency or renewable energy	7
NR07 New solutions for emission reductions	5
NR11 Demonstrations contributing to the circular economy or high-end bioeconomy	5
Involvement of enterprises, number of	
NO03 Companies involved in co-creation	447
RCO04 Enterprises benefiting from de minimis aid	126
NO02 Platforms and networks supporting co-creation	94
RCO10 Companies in cooperation with research institutes	91
NR02 Enterprises using RDI infrastructure	66
RCO07 Research organisations participating in joint research projects	13
NO05 Companies in co-operation with research institutes	2

Total result and output indicator targets for ERDF funding for projects started in 2022 and 2023. Source of information: EURA2021 database.

Awareness and visibility of the programme

“It is always interesting to hear about the good practices and results of projects; and specifically through the results and added value of the action (not necessarily from a project perspective).”

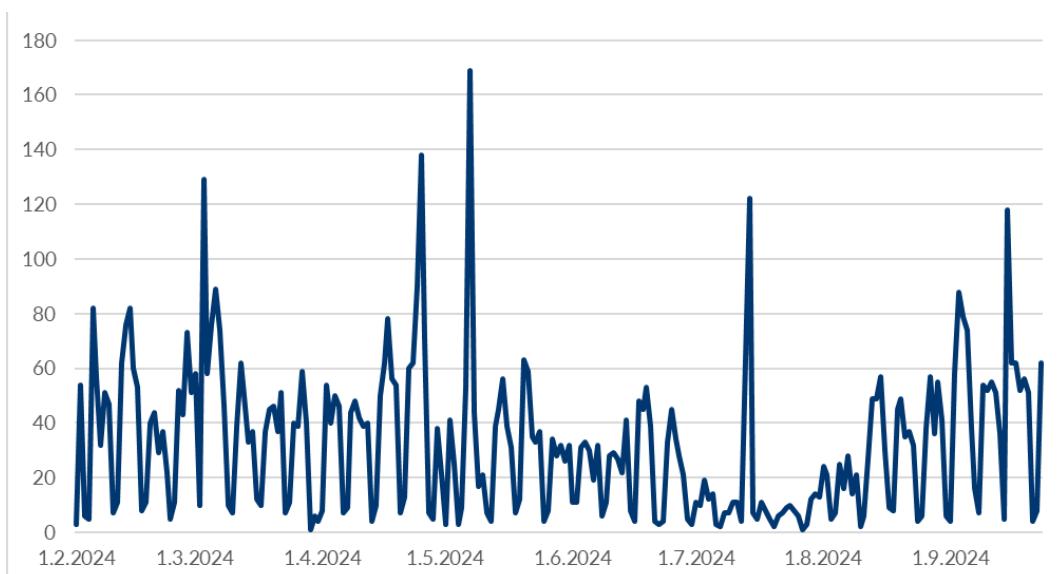
- Project worker of the HEVi portfolio

The HEVi programme has actively worked to increase the visibility and awareness of its activities, though the growing number of group projects adds to the workload. Survey responses from project workers rated the programme's visibility at 2.9/5 and their own projects' visibility at 3.2/5.

“HEVi projects should be where the target groups are. Support is necessary in this work” – HEVi portfolio project worker

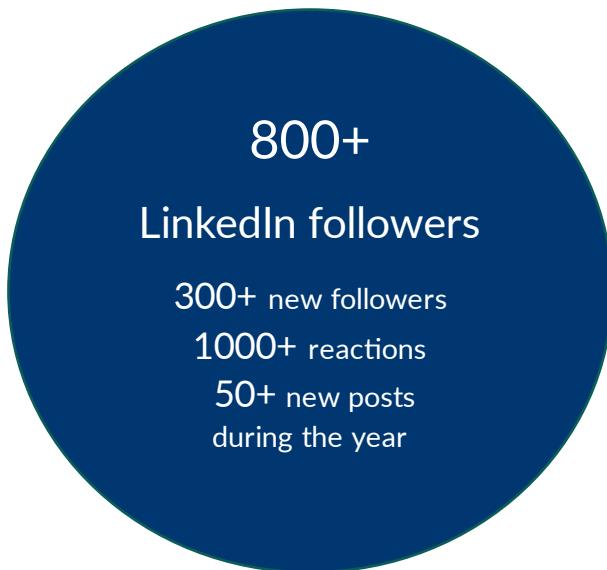
Project workers suggested several ways to improve HEVi coordination communication, including more up-to-date project information, better outreach to target groups, sharing concrete results and best practices, and using newsletters, blogs, and LinkedIn more actively. The programme's main communication channels are the HEVi LinkedIn page and the www.hevinnovations.fi website, which also hosts individual project subpages and serves for event promotion.

“I gladly welcome the development of HEVi communications. We have received great support from communications and the website looks great! Good work!” – HEVi project worker



Unique visits to the HEVinnovations.fi website from 1 February 2024 to 20 September 2024

Now that more projects are at an advanced stage of implementation, the communication of results is even more topical. The programme will also continue to be actively promoted in both external and internal channels. News and social media publications have also been produced for external channels and newsletters. The programme launched a newsletter in September 2024, with the aim of bringing the results and events of the programme and projects to the attention of the wider public, and strengthening the communication targeted at companies in the region. There were 98 subscribers to the first newsletter.



HEVi's LinkedIn page is a key communication channel for the programme and reaches an ever-growing number of new actors.

Interviews and surveys: effectiveness and continuity of operations

Interviewees highlighted that ensuring the effectiveness and continuity of HEVi activities requires proactive measures, ideally starting immediately. Three key factors were identified:

- **Understanding and demonstrating impact:** Clearly articulating the results and benefits of projects supports further funding applications and helps integrate project activities into existing city operations.
- **Ownership and follow-up:** Each project should have designated responsibility for continuation, while recognizing that not all projects are meant to continue long-term.
- **Engagement of management:** Involving political and civil servant management and effectively communicating impacts can strengthen support and visibility.

Additionally, maintaining the inter-urban cooperation model was seen as critical. Questions remain about whether future cooperation should be project-based or achieved through other mechanisms, and how funding bodies can be influenced to support continued cross-city collaboration.

Project workers identified several key factors that influence the continuation of their projects beyond the current funding period:

- **Demonstration and commitment of benefits:** Projects should clearly show their value and ensure responsible parties are committed to integrating activities into regular operations.
- **Creating a business model:** Future focus should be on developing models that can be applied beyond the SME area.
- **Strengthening the ecosystem:** Projects should reinforce the innovation ecosystem and explore new funding sources.
- **Deployment:** Project results should be permanently embedded into the working culture of participating organizations.
- **Other factors:** Ensuring follow-up funding with HEVi support, engaging the right stakeholders, and involving city officials.

Systematic attention to these factors during project implementation can help secure the continued operation of regionally significant projects after the funding period.

Project workers highlighted key areas to focus on over the next three years to enhance the impact of activities on vitality and sustainable urban development:

- **Supporting businesses:** SMEs should receive guidance in achieving their objectives, with project activities tailored to their specific needs.
- **Long-term cooperation:** Partnerships with companies and other developers should be sustained over time.
- **Pilot sites:** Testing new operating methods and technological solutions through pilot projects is essential, with challenges selected based on real needs.
- **Contacts and networking:** Projects should invest in attracting companies and facilitating connections between businesses, financiers, and potential customers.
- **Other priorities:** Strengthening cooperation between cities, improving communication, and creating a more business-friendly operating model.

Focusing on these areas can increase project effectiveness and help embed new solutions and operating models into the long-term practices of companies and cities.

With regards to sustainable urban development, the project workers raised in particular the following issues:

Urban engagement and common goals: The commitment of all cities and the promotion of shared Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is key.

Support for SMEs: Responding to the needs of small and medium-sized enterprises and supporting them in enabling sustainable development solutions.

Maximising effectiveness: The project should focus on measures that have the greatest impact on quality and sustainability.

Piloting of new energy technologies: Piloting carbon-neutral energy solutions in cities is crucial in implementing sustainable solutions.

Other priorities: Promoting the sharing economy and the potential of the creative sector in the SME area.

By taking these into account, projects can achieve significant impact in promoting sustainable urban development, strengthen cooperation between cities and businesses, and implement concrete and scalable solutions.

Shared direction, capabilities and tasks of cities for accelerating innovation ecosystems

In addition to the content recommendations, the operating environment analysis produced for the programme in 2022 with Demos Helsinki created tools for developing the role and capabilities of cities. We have included the following in this assessment:

- Capacities in the innovation ecosystem
- Development pathways and the role of cities in the innovation ecosystem

HEVi coordination has developed tools further, to meet current development needs and to bring more understanding of the operating environment. By utilizing these tools, we can examine the impact of the programme and the growing portfolio on the functioning of cities in innovation ecosystems.

City's roles and capabilities in the innovation ecosystem

The map of cities' capabilities has been created to describe the activities of cities as a forerunner, facilitator and enabler of innovation eco-systems. For the mid-term review, we looked at the capability map (see next page) from the perspective of what capabilities have been strengthened in the programme 2021-2024 (in bold) and what should be further strengthened (in italics) to develop innovation performance and skills.

HEVision of the city's roles in innovation ecosystems for regional growth and competitiveness

Visionary

Sets local agenda and targets with the ecosystem	Operates and monitors city-level portfolio of RDI activities and investments
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Knowhow and understanding of

Urban development	Portfolio management
Strategy deployment	High level networking
Market understanding	Impact thinking
City-specific needs	Future prospects and risks
Knowledge management	

Community agent

Connects ecosystem players and promotes transparency, cooperation and co-learning

Ecosystem-specific expertise
External funding opportunities
Regional development
Development culture
Monitoring of needs and shortcomings
Co-development of activities
Contextualisation of ideas

Service provider

Accelerates RDI and growth for business

City's part and responsibilities in daily RDI operations
Funding instruments

Operational environment and services

Co-ownership of innovation activity	Innovation networks and programmes
Resourcing of action plan and services	Ecosystem wide platforms and communications
City strategy	Events for shared learning and understanding
New ventures	Cooperation with higher education
Leading by example	City innovation networks
Future-proof policy	International networks and events
Innovation strategy	Cross-pollination
Lobbying of EU and national level decision-makers	Support in partnership building
	Sparring of project planners
	Voice of the ecosystem

Urban challenge portfolio
Innovative procurement
Agile management

Testbeds, RDI clusters
Facilitated experiments
City infrastructure
Service tracks and thematic packages
Incubators, hubs, accelerators
Soft landing services
R2B tracks

Validators

AI	Thematic expert pool
Foresight	Company and talent pool

BI, Analysis of local business environment and RDI activities

Thematic expert pool
Company and talent pool

Feedback
Accessibility

In general, it can be said that cities have strengthened their agency in the role of forerunner, facilitator and enabler. However, to succeed, especially in the role of intermediary between actors, more resources would be needed to make the most of synergies within the portfolio alone, for example. The service path packages included in the enabler's capabilities are also expected to be strengthened by the InnoVisions tool developed for the program. Some leadership capabilities, such as *operational resourcing* and *innovation strategy*, are elements that require stronger communication on operational performance.

Pathways for ecosystem development: "From basics to ecosystem elite"

While the above capabilities map describes the roles and capabilities of cities, the description of development paths is a tool for self-assessment of the current situation and discussions on how we want to develop in urban ecosystem work.

	1 START W/ THE BASICS <i>Reactionary</i>	2 NEXT-LEVEL CONNECTOR <i>Active, follows development and networks beyond national borders</i>	3 ECOSYSTEM ELITE <i>Proactive, internationally acknowledged partner and a pioneer</i>
INSTRUMENTS			
	The city strategy does not emphasize innovation work, and the work is based on individual action plans.	The city strategy and innovation agenda guide city's innovation work. Data-driven management – an overview of innovation activities is available to decision-makers.	Innovation is at the core of the city strategy and/or is complemented by an innovation strategy. Regional, national, and EU strategies are utilized, along with benchmarks and positioning in global contexts.
METHODS			
VISIONARY	Isolated decision-making and development work: Isolated investments, objectives set sector and organization specific. Utilizing feedback in further development is neither established nor comprehensive Challenges in developing innovation activities have been identified in narrow silos such as the cities' operational units and solving them is not coordinated across silos.	The vision for innovation activities has been co-developed, with contents, challenges, and objectives set through ecosystem collaboration. Actors expose their work to the insights and influences of various organizations and experts. Activities are guided by: continuity across funding and strategy periods, cross-administrative collaboration, systematic approach, and accumulation of results	Systematic utilization and continuous development of the innovation agenda/strategy. Proactive, transparent, evidence- and impact-based decision-making. The ecosystem and its direction are jointly steered: companies, RDI institutions, the public sector, and civil society.

		STRUCTURES FOR COLLABORATION		
		Community Agent	Enabler	System
Community Agent		<p>Collaboration is action-specific, based on closest contacts and established partnerships.</p> <p>Continuity and ownership are often missing in project activities, and knowledge is lost when a project ends, even though cities do share lessons learned with stakeholders.</p>	<p>A framework has been developed for city portfolios to account for different types of innovations and impact objectives – forming, funding, and monitoring synergistic entities.</p> <p>Networks are expanded and ecosystem work is developed: portfolio work, a culture of open innovation, practices for shared learning and development.</p> <p>Expertise from companies, researchers, and various city professionals is utilized to solve urban challenges.</p>	<p>Shared learning and openness are considered genuine success factors for the ecosystem.</p> <p>The portfolio's impact is evaluated both vertically and as a whole. Key ecosystem actors have effective innovation portfolios, and the portfolio approach has become established in collaboration with partners.</p> <p>Effective activities and results encourage ecosystem actors to make bold investments in the innovation work.</p> <p>Activities are adapted to topical needs, and results nor the path to results are predetermined.</p>
Enabler			SERVICES	
			<p>Services are provided mainly through basic business support functions, with limited and siloed resources.</p> <p>There are no platforms where science, everyday expertise, and business competence come together.</p>	<p>In addition to general business services, there are also service experiments and thematic services based on project activities.</p>
FUNDING				
<p>External funding is not systematically utilized, and funding applications are written based on the immediate needs and interests of individual actors.</p> <p>Although training is invested in, competence does not translate into innovations and companies at the level of peer cities; innovation is developed from a narrow perspective.</p> <p>Funding calls are guided by themes and objectives, but funding remains project-specific and does not develop broader entities.</p>		<p>Funding applications are planned ahead and capabilities are developed.</p> <p>Cities identify bottlenecks in actors' innovation activities and invest in scaling up activities by, for example, communicating about RDI work, allocating resources to competence hubs, and increasing innovation time for city experts.</p> <p>Own funding calls apply a jointly developed vision, challenges, and portfolio framework.</p> <p>Funding instruments are synchronized into a cohesive whole.</p> <p>Funding is available for all key themes, as well as for cross-cutting, multidisciplinary innovation work.</p>	<p>Activities are built long-term around strategically selected focus areas and development priorities, not around project entities.</p> <p>Funding enables risk-taking and ambitious large-scale experiments.</p> <p>Funding is available for the entire innovation pathway, from ideas to growth, and actors are encouraged to respond to environmental changes and emerging opportunities.</p> <p>Local, national, and international funding sources are utilized.</p> <p>Funders come from all sectors, and resources are allocated jointly with ecosystem partners to strengthen regional competence.</p>	

Vision: SMEs as active developers of innovation ecosystems

The region generates valuable innovations that solve global challenges and are in international demand. Innovations create added value from the point of view of productivity, exports and well-being.

Through increased cooperation, synergistic programmes and bottlenecks, the region's excellence is increasingly turning into innovation and business. The expertise of researchers is widely sought after and applied in the innovation ecosystem of the Helsinki metropolitan area.

The business is internationally scalable and attracts top experts in the field to the region. Increasing vitality creates and secures well-being.

Thanks to active networking, innovations are being developed in an increasingly multidisciplinary way, enabling solutions to be found to the wide-ranging, complex problems of cities. Innovations are developed in an environment where diverse backgrounds, sectors, companies, research bodies and communities are represented, and more people feel involved in the development of innovations.

The joint creation of a vision for the future and the examination of development paths help to identify which capabilities need to be developed in order to achieve the goals of innovation activities. What level of innovation must SMEs reach in order for the decisions and actions of the 2020s to build sustainable success in the region? The HEVi programme is one of the tools through which cities can achieve their development goals through successful cooperation and high-quality project activities.

Conclusions and recommendations for the implementation of the programme 2025-2027

To enhance the competitiveness of the Helsinki metropolitan area and Finland, innovation activities must continue to be guided through active dialogue with the network. Despite significant national and global changes, the Helsinki metropolitan ecosystem agreement has proven sustainable, supporting platform-based open co-creation and city priorities.

Looking beyond 2027, it is crucial that investments show clear benefits to ensure commitment to continued cooperation and confidence in new initiatives. Successful cooperation depends on identifying synergies and building trust, which should be a focus in 2025–2027.

Complementary financial instruments should be introduced alongside HEVi funding to diversify development targets, beneficiaries, and project activities. Diversified funding strengthens sustainability and long-term impact, requiring collaboration beyond the HEVi programme.

Practices for anticipating the operating environment, verifying effectiveness, and communicating results should be further developed. Prioritizing and resourcing the most impactful initiatives is essential, especially in a challenging economic climate. The portfolio should balance early-stage innovation projects with initiatives that deliver immediate financial impact. Effective communication will be key to sustaining and spreading innovations.

4 recommendations for HEVinnovations 2025-2027:

1. Harness cross-sector synergies

Collaborate across the HEVi portfolio to boost visibility, share knowledge, and enable multidisciplinary innovation.

2. Focus on regional challenges

Prioritize development targets that connect the entire Helsinki metropolitan area, linking projects with wider regional initiatives.

3. Communicate clearly to businesses

Deliver concise, targeted messages about HEVi services and co-creation opportunities, combining offerings into an accessible innovation and growth package.

4. Strengthen leadership for impact

Provide clear vision and direction, coordinate resources strategically, and monitor change across sectors to achieve long-term goals.

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