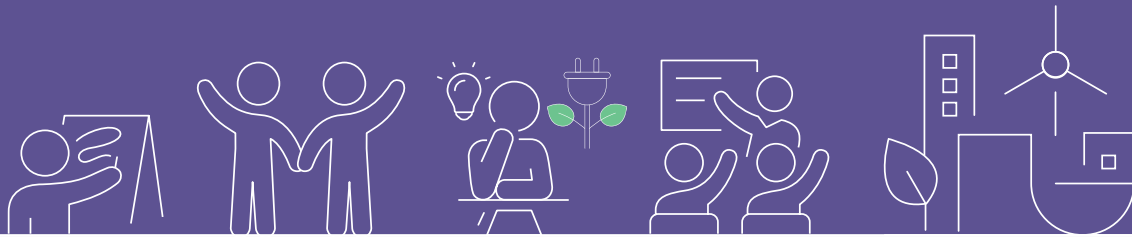


SPARCS



Youth engagement and a sustainable lifestyle: Guide to the **SPARCS** project '**Buddy Class**' concept



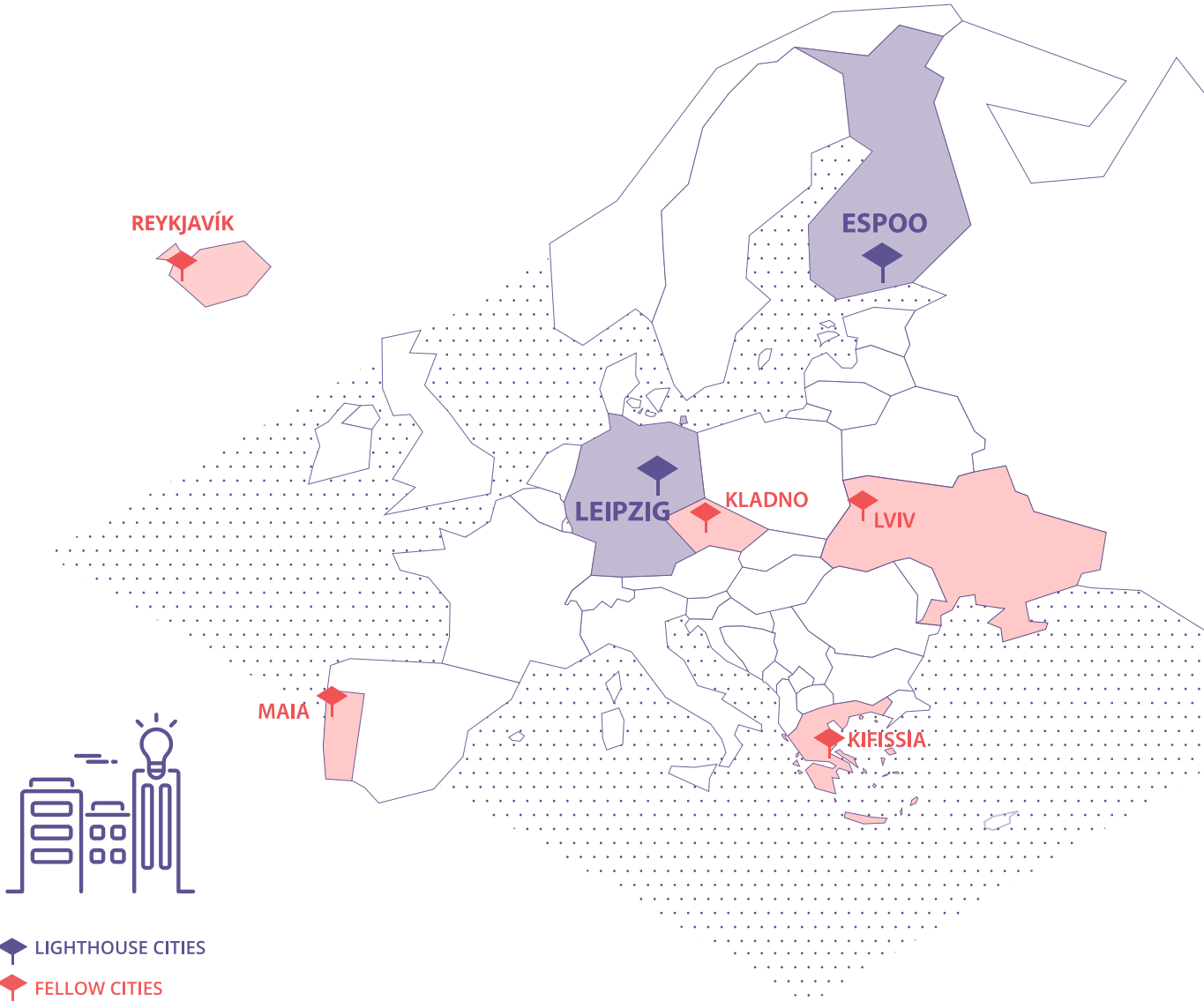
Horizon 2020
European Union funding
for Research & Innovation

This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under Grant Agreement No. 864242. Topic: LC-SC3-SCC-1-2018-2019-2020: Smart Cities and Communities. The sole responsibility for the content of this publication lies with the authors. It does not necessarily reflect the opinion of the European Communities. The European Commission is not responsible for any use that may be made of the information contained therein.



Contents

Introduction	1
Communication: methods and channels	3
Benefits achieved	4
Benefits for the public and private sectors	4
Benefits for the partner	4
Benefits for young people	5
Toolbox	6
Case: SPARCS Buddy Class	7
Summary	10
SPARCS Project Partners	11



Introduction

This document describes the Buddy Class concept developed in the SPARCS project. You can use the concept in development projects that aim to reach young people and increase their engagement in the development work, for example. The concept also offers support if a school wants to collaborate with a company or organisation(s).

The EU-funded Horizon2020 [SPARCS project \(Sustainable energy Positive & zero-carbon Communities, 2019–2024\)](#) focuses on looking for more efficient and sustainable energy solutions in urban environments together with several partners and European cities. The aim is to create concepts and operating models that will be adopted by the project's follower cities around Europe. In addition to technical solutions, the project has also involved cooperation on the topics of engagement and a sustainable lifestyle.

Espoo aims to become carbon neutral by 2030. Being carbon neutral means that the City of Espoo will only generate the amount of greenhouse gas emissions that it can bind from the atmosphere into carbon sinks. The aim is to reduce annual emissions by 80% from the 1990 level by 2030 and bind the remaining 20% to the City's own carbon sinks. Carbon neutrality is a part of the Espoo Story, the City strategy. We can only achieve the carbon neutrality target together with the entire Espoo community by ensuring that all Espoo residents have the opportunity to live sustainably. Overall, achieving the sustainable development goals requires a change in attitudes, motivations and behaviour, support for more sustainable solutions at city level and national level, and the adoption of innovations, technologies and operating models as a part of everyday life and the cityscape. These can only be achieved through active work towards engagement and stakeholder work, and open dialogue.

Youth engagement is a key factor in developing our society and building a future. Engagement involves young people having the opportunity

to influence their operating environment, take responsibility, participate in decision-making and act as a valuable part of development work. This benefits not only the young people themselves, but also society and the City organisation as a whole.

Promoting youth engagement is important for several reasons. Firstly, **young people have the right to be heard and influence things that affect them.** It is also important for young people to live in a city that serves their needs as well. Engagement increases young people's self-knowledge, responsibility and democratic thinking. Young people learn to value different perspectives and look for solutions together. This will lay the foundation for future generations who are active and aware residents. Espoo schools have already been working on sustainable development and education extensively; it is hoped that the Buddy Class concept will bring inspiration and complement the existing work.

Secondly, **young people are a resource for society and a potential source of inspiration.** When their voices are heard, we gain new ideas and perspectives on problems that adults may not have realised. Young people's views are valuable in many areas of society, such as sustainable development themes and social issues.

Thirdly, **engagement reduces the risk of marginalisation.** When young people are given the opportunity to influence the world around them, they feel that they are a part of society. This supports commitment and participation in positive activities. Engagement and inclusion may also reduce social tensions and disagreements between age groups.

It is important for decision-makers, schools, parents and other adults to take young people's opinions into consideration when making decisions. Young people must be able to participate in various forums and influence the things that affect them. We also need to improve our communication and information sharing in

order for young people to know how they can become active members of society. Recent studies have drawn attention to young people's climate anxiety, which the Buddy Class concept aims to reduce by offering more information and diverse opportunities for processing the topic.

Young people's engagement is necessary for the development of society and strengthening democracy. Engagement provides young people with skills to act as responsible members of society and allows for finding new solutions. Both cities and organisations in various fields should encourage and support young people in participating in decision-making and take their voices seriously. This way, we can build a future where everyone's voice is heard and everyone can influence the development of their life and their community.

A key theme of the SPARCS project is the development of means of engagement, and it seeks the best tools for reaching and involving different resident segments. One of the project's key objectives is to build engaging management and planning models, ecosystems and processes together with companies, partners, research organisations, and, above all, residents. The aim is to survey the aspects that must be taken into account in youth engagement and find a solution that truly works for long-term engagement work with a specific group. Residents are inspired to incorporate sustainable lifestyle goals into their daily lives through active engagement work.

The Buddy Class activities held during the project aimed to increase youth engagement and link schools to the themes of sustainable development and more sustainable lifestyles and to the development of the future city. Sustainable development themes are also a part of young people's lives, and our aim is to have more aware young adults who recognise their agency in Espoo. The Buddy Class activities offer the opportunity to work with young people in their own environment and as a part of school days. Youth engagement is an interesting research topic and an important part of realising a sustainable lifestyle in practice.

The planning of the Buddy Class activities made use of Espoo's Participation Model, which provides a vision, goals and policies for the engagement work, the methods of interaction and the cornerstones for participation. Read more in the 'From Hearing to Partnership' guide [here](#) (in English). This method is a research-based and participatory way to operate and reach young people as part of their everyday activities. School offers an ideal place to reach young people and initiate a dialogue.

The residents play a significant role in achieving the City's carbon neutrality goals, and we must take this into consideration when planning engagement and participation work. As such, the project has aimed to increase youth engagement through the Buddy Class activities, and our aim is to spread the concept born out of the pilot project extensively to those working in engagement and participation.

Further
information



[From Hearing to
Partnership' guide](#)

Communication: methods and channels

Efficient communication is vital for the success of participatory activities. It should be executed before, during and after the activities. The participants must feel and be aware that their contribution is valuable and impactful, and hear what further actions their contribution led to. This gives the participants, especially young people, a feeling of the activities being impactful and a sense of belonging.

For the Buddy Class activities to succeed, we need commitment and long-term contributions both from the organiser and the participating school and pupils. Interaction should not only take place between the organiser of the Buddy Class activities and the pupils, but also between the pupils and the teacher and the teacher and the organiser. The active presence of the teacher or other teaching staff is essential for the meetings to go smoothly.

To improve young people's commitment and active participation in the activities, it is important that you adapt the message to the audience's special needs and concerns. The message may be more impactful if it relates to the recipient's life. This is especially significant with young people.

During the three-year Buddy Class activities, communication with the young people and their guardians was essential. The Buddy Class pupils in lower secondary school received important information via the Wilma channel commonly used by schools. Schools use this channel for all communication between pupils, parents and the school staff, and also for monitoring absences and grading schoolwork. We also posted announcements to the young people's guardians on Wilma at the beginning of each term.

With the help of the announcements, the parents received extensive information about the project, sustainable development, and the young people's actions during the Buddy Class activities. Thanks to the communication, the guardians also stayed up-to-date and committed to supporting the young people's growth and a sustainable future together. The communication channel could also

be used for pre-assignments if you wish for the young people to contribute to or learn about a topic before the next meeting.

We also used various surveys and polls to help with the discussions with the young people. The young people liked the easy polls and surveys. Brief introductory answers submitted digitally using their phone or computer gave the young people space to think about a topic and orient their minds towards it.

The surveys aimed at young people brought the project valuable information about topics that young people are interested in or concerned about. After the meetings, it is very important that you convert the answers to a digital format and pick out ideas from the materials. Especially if the activities and cooperation are spread over a long period, it is useful to keep the data collected from the meetings in order and up-to-date. Depending on the activity topic, various kinds of extensive interim feedback may also be valuable.

At the final meeting of the Buddy Class activities, we collected extensive feedback about the three-year activities from the young people. What did the Buddy Class pupils think of the activities? What did they learn, and which activity did they like the most? The Buddy Class experience shows that listening carefully to the pupils and allowing them to influence the choice of topic results in commitment and active participation from the young people.

Benefits achieved

BENEFITS FOR THE PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SECTORS

The cooperation between the public and private sectors provides various benefits for promoting sustainable development. When sustainable development themes are put into practice jointly, the activities become more impactful and efficient. Cross-administrational cooperation is essential because it allows you to combine the parties' knowledge and resources.

The benefits for a private operator may include offering ecologically and socially sustainable services to customers, and increasing young people's ownership: for example, when a young person has been personally involved in planning rules of conduct, they are also more likely to follow the rules. Increasing youth engagement and responding to their needs may benefit private-sector operators both financially and socially.

The dimensions of sustainable development are extensive: they include ecological, social and financial sustainability, among others. Cooperation can answer to the challenges involved diversely and comprehensively, which leads to long-term and sustainable results. The benefits to the public and private sectors from solving challenges are numerous, and they have a positive impact on society, companies and young people. The purpose of the Buddy Class activities is to raise young people in Espoo into aware adults who act sustainably in their daily life.

BENEFITS FOR THE PARTNER

The Buddy Class activities also offer various benefits for the collaboration partner (such as the school, but other participant groups are also possible). If the Buddy Class activities could be tied more closely to everyday functions, it would strengthen their meaningfulness and impact on the participants' learning. Through the Buddy Class activities, the partner can provide the participants with practical experiences of sustainable development principles and engagement in society. This supports the depth and meaningfulness of learning. At the same time, the activities bring broader cross-administrative benefits and get other operators to commit more actively to supporting young people's education.

The experiences gained from the Buddy Class activities may also enrich the curriculum offering, providing expertise and practical examples of various topics, such as energy, circular economy and climate. The activities support the concepts of sustainable development and social responsibility, which is in line with the current curricula in Finland, for example. You can easily incorporate the Buddy Class activities into lessons and discover connections between school subjects and themes.

For their part, the Buddy Class activities strengthen community spirit and reinforce the school's role as an active promoter of sustainable development themes.

BENEFITS FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

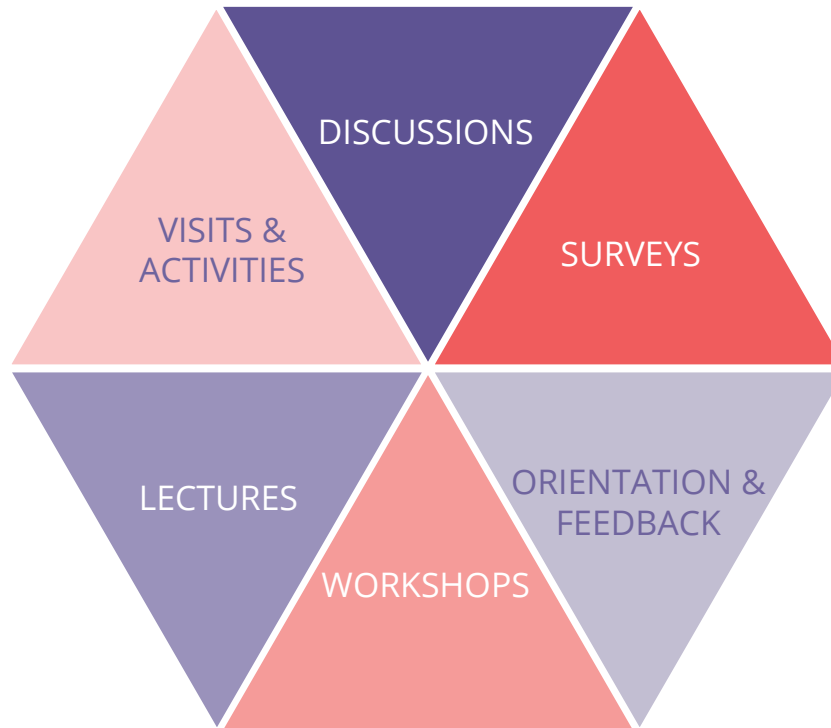
The Buddy Class activities have various profound and positive impacts on young people. The activities get young people to commit to sustainable development themes and the work done by the City in this regard more strongly. Young people also have a concrete opportunity to participate in improving their community, which reinforces their understanding of their significance, participation and ability.

Their understanding of participation broadens when they see the impact of their actions in their immediate environment. This increases their confidence in their abilities and fosters the feeling that young people are able to have a positive impact on society. At the same time, the Buddy Class activities improve young people's experience of the concrete aspect of participation when they see that their suggestions and actions yield results. They also hear about various organisations' willingness to involve young people in the development of their operations.

The Buddy Class activities also bring the City and its residents closer to each other. Young people feel that their voices are heard and their efforts are appreciated. This increases their trust in local decision-making and their will to be involved in the future. It also strengthens their sense of community. Because social sustainability was one of the themes handled with the young people, it may have a positive impact on reducing marginalisation, for example.

Furthermore, the Buddy Class activities may affect young people's future opportunities. Participation and responsibility in promoting sustainable development are excellent evidence of young people's abilities and attitudes. This is why it is a good idea to hand the participants a certificate of participation at the end of the activities. It may help the young people when they apply for their first summer jobs, for example.

Toolbox



During the SPARCS project, we developed the toolbox for Buddy Class activities, which creates a consistent whole out of various types of meetings and combining them into impactful and interesting engagement activities.

The base for the toolbox were Discussions and Surveys which were present at every meeting. The discussions help the participants gain new ideas and observations and share their experiences with peers. This supports commitment and learning. The purpose of the surveys is to orient the participants to the topics of each meeting and collect data from the meetings and about the participants' thoughts.

The other elements (Orientation & Feedback, Workshops, Lectures, and Visits & Activities) are also in different colours, and they alternate at each meeting, with a focus on a specific element at a time. It is essential to provide the participants with variety between meetings, because this makes the meetings more appealing and impactful. There are proportionally more active meetings (Workshops and Visits & Activities) than lecture meetings because active meetings were observed to be more interesting and impactful among the participants.

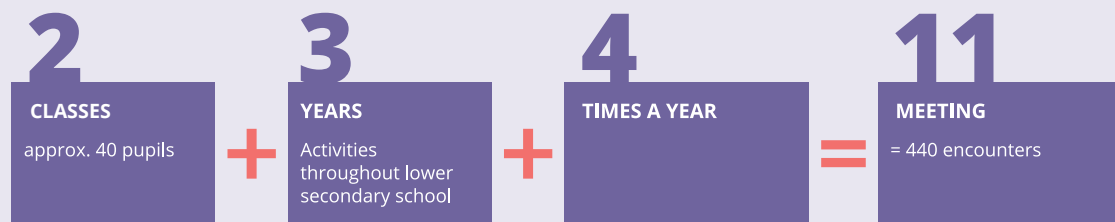
Case: SPARCS Buddy Class

The SPARCS project had two separate Buddy Classes, one of which was instructed by the SPARCS partner company Citycon and the other by the City of Espoo. The Buddy Class activities were piloted as a part of the SPARCS project in 2020–2023. These Buddy Classes had similar activity content, but the desired results varied, reflecting the goals of a business operator and the public sector, respectively.

The project partner Citycon was actively involved in the Buddy Class activities and also responsible for the themes and content for its Buddy Class. The activities were planned jointly by the City of Espoo, Citycon and the other project partners. Citycon also enlisted the help of the Buddy Class

in the development of Urban Centre Lippulaiva, which was built during the project.

The Buddy Classes selected were two lower secondary school classes in Espoo who started 7th grade in autumn 2020. There were a total of 40 pupils aged around 11–13 at the beginning of the activities. The duration chosen for the pilot project was the duration of lower secondary school (ca. three years) so that the activities could be held throughout a school level and the group remained largely the same. Pupils in lower secondary school were considered to be old enough to understand the project themes in-depth, but also at an opportune age to adopt more sustainable habits in their lifestyle.



The activities began with contact with school management: in this case, the principal. This allowed us to choose the suitable target group and ensure that the engagement activities would not disturb schoolwork or the school's routines excessively. Because the participants were underage, it was important to ensure that their parents had given them permission to participate in the activities. VTT Technical Research Centre of Finland, the project coordinator, helped with formulating the permission forms and the ethical questions of the research. In the SPARCS project, the ethical perspective was essential when planning and implementing the engagement activities. The City's Growth and Learning Sector also supported the launch of the activities. A research plan was also prepared for the project, according to the City of Espoo's instructions. The first meeting with the pupils and their teachers took place in autumn 2020. After that, meetings with the Buddy Class pupils were held four times

per academic year, between spring 2021 and spring 2023.

Themes supporting the introduction of a sustainable lifestyle were discussed during the meetings. The young people's own interests and questions were taken into account when picking discussion topics and meeting-specific themes. The meetings provided opportunities for reflection, dialogue and sharing information about a sustainable lifestyle. The aim of these meetings was to inspire young people to make sustainable choices and participate in social discussions. In the discussions, we looked at ecological, social and financial perspectives on how to achieve a sustainable lifestyle.

During the Buddy Class activities, the young people and the instructors learned about themes related to sustainable development and the urban environment. In addition to surveys, discussions

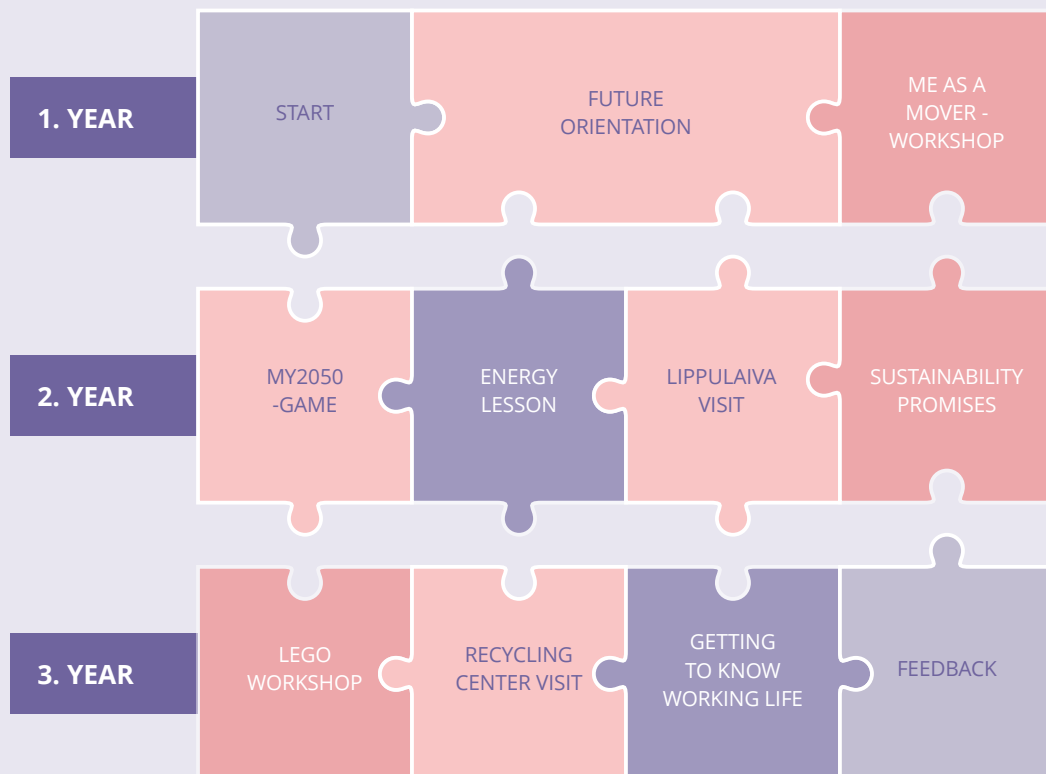
and polls, the meetings also involved various learning methods, such as lectures and visits. At the first meeting of the activities, the Buddy Classes gathered in the Espoon keskus district to play the experiential [My2050](#) game and learn about the impact and prevention of climate change.

The young people learned about the various stages of building and developing Urban Centre Lippulaiva by visiting the construction site and planning the functionality and visual look of the library that would be located in the centre. In 2021, the young people also participated in a mobility workshop, reflecting on their own transport habits, thought about a city of the future at the urban orienteering in the Espoolahti area, and attended a lesson on energy held by the City of Espoo energy specialists.

In 2022, we met with the Buddy Classes four times. The classes learned about the newly constructed Urban Centre Lippulaiva. During the meeting,

they participated in website orienteering, based on which they would comment on the further development of the Lippulaiva website. The young people also designed a city of the future with Lego and visited a recycling centre to learn about the principles of circular economy. They also crafted image boards that reflected a sustainable lifestyle and thought about their own consumption habits.

The Buddy Class activities ended in spring 2023. At the meeting prior to the final event, we discussed social sustainability and the risk of marginalisation, and the young people listened to various operators talk about their career and study paths. At the final event for the Buddy Class activities, we focused on collecting feedback so that we could record young people's views of the activities. We requested feedback in various ways at the event, and young people had the chance to come up with slogans for Lippulaiva's autumn 2023 advertising campaign.



The example above shows what the meetings during the SPARCS project entailed

Meetings with the Buddy Class pupils between spring 2021 and spring 2023 offered a diverse look into sustainable lifestyle themes and young people's ways of thinking. The meetings consisted of various interactive features, such as visits, lectures, workshops, surveys and discussions. Through these diverse forms of participation, young people were able to actively participate and experience their daily life from the perspective of sustainable development.

During the visits, the young people were acquainted with various ways to live sustainably in practice, and learnt, for example, what sustainable energy solutions are and how circular economy solutions work. Above all, they learnt about the importance of sustainable development themes and actions, and how they too are active agents in achieving these goals. The lectures and workshops, on the other hand, allowed for more in-depth study of sustainable development themes and problems.

During the meetings, the young people also responded to surveys that allowed them to express their views and ideas about sustainable lifestyle topics and any concerns they may have had. For example, many young people suffer from climate anxiety and feel that marginalisation is a familiar topic in their own life or that of their family and friends. The surveys provided valuable feedback on the meeting content and how to develop it further to meet young people's needs.

The discussions were at the heart of the meetings, and they offered young people opportunities to share their experiences, feelings and views on sustainability. The discussions also supported peer learning and inspired young people to take on an active role in making sustainable choices in their lives.

Overall, these diverse meetings enriched young people's knowledge and awareness of the significance of a sustainable lifestyle. They also fostered interest and inspiration among young people to work for a sustainable future in their lives and communities.

Summary

The Buddy Class activities can offer significant learning experiences both for the young people and the partners. The diversity of the activities and the active role of the participants make the activities especially valuable for putting sustainable development themes into practice. The practical experience of sustainable development gained by young people and their participation in social discussion not only raised their awareness, but also increased their self-knowledge and opportunities to make a difference.

During the SPARCS project, young people's participation in various activities, such as visits, workshops and discussions, provided them an opportunity to look at their daily lives from the perspective of sustainable development. They were able to see concrete realisations of sustainable development and gain information about how their choices affect the environment and society as a whole. Paying attention to young people's perspectives was essential in planning the meetings, which increased their commitment and motivation.

The Buddy Class activities are also an example of how different sectors can cooperate to promote sustainable development. The cooperation between the public and the private sectors allowed for a broader perspective and the combination of resources, which made the activities more impactful and diverse. The partnership of Citycon and the City of Espoo offered unique experiences to the Buddy Class pupils, such as visits to Urban Centre Lippulaiva and participation in its development. The collaboration showed that youth engagement benefits not only young people, but also organisations and society at large.

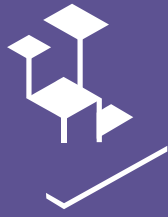
Based on the feedback and experiences gained during the Buddy Class activities, youth engagement and the promotion of sustainable development can be developed further in schools and cities' operations. The feedback from young people shows that they value the opportunity to participate and make a difference and be able to introduce new and valuable perspectives on sustainable development challenges.

A similar operating model can be used for the engagement of children and young people of various ages and achieving their own goals. The concept is well suited for shorter-term activities, as well. In addition to involving school classes, the model can be applied to various hobby groups where participation and community are key themes. The Buddy Class activities are a good example of how young people's voices and participation can play a key role in building a sustainable future.

The Buddy Class activities in the SPARCS project show that youth engagement is necessary to achieve the sustainable development goals. When we give young people the opportunity to participate and make a difference, we are laying the groundwork for responsible and aware members of society. These activities are a significant step towards a more sustainable and inclusive society where everyone is heard and everyone has the chance to make a difference. By continuing to develop youth engagement and expand initiatives such as the Buddy Class activities, we can build a sustainable future where young people's ideas and innovations play a key role.

SPARCS Project Partners





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