

THE PROBLEM

Public sector services tend to be siloed. Inside national governments, the effects of these silos can be difficult to perceive, but the impacts become clearer closer to citizens, the end users. Municipalities deliver services to citizens “from the cradle to the grave”, but the services themselves are often so different that they produce few synergies between them. When public services are layered on top of each other, and designed and delivered in a fragmented fashion, value for citizens falls through the cracks. Yet, the sole reason that public services exist is to benefit citizens at different stages of their lives in a meaningful way. Those in the most vulnerable positions are usually the ones who suffer most from fragmentation, and are usually the biggest service recipients. Consequently, public services can add complexity to already difficult lives (e.g. through tiring application procedures, contradictory intervention aims, etc.), rather than helping people to find sustainable solutions.

Public sector organisations tend to address these co-ordination problems within existing organisational structures through cross-service meetings or arena gatherings. However, the knowledge that results stem from working across all pillars (e.g. welfare, work, health, education and housing) does not mean that organisations will act that way. Looking to address this dilemma, the Asker municipality asked: “What if the municipality starts thinking

Figure 65: Asker Welfare Lab team and programming



Source: Asker Welfare Lab.

like an investor – investing in people, instead of just being a case worker, pushing people and paper around?”

AN INNOVATIVE SOLUTION

In 2013, the Asker municipality participated in a project with the Norwegian Centre of Design and Architecture (DOGA)¹³⁷ and LiveWork Studio on service design as a method to reshape social housing. The purpose of the project was to create a new direction for social housing

137. See www.visitoslo.com/en/product/?TLp=15376.

Figure 64: Principles of the Asker Welfare Lab

Taking the risk of early investment to achieve long-term socio-economic benefits.

Planning long-term interventions where the municipality is co-ordinated as one unit.



Source: Asker Welfare Lab.

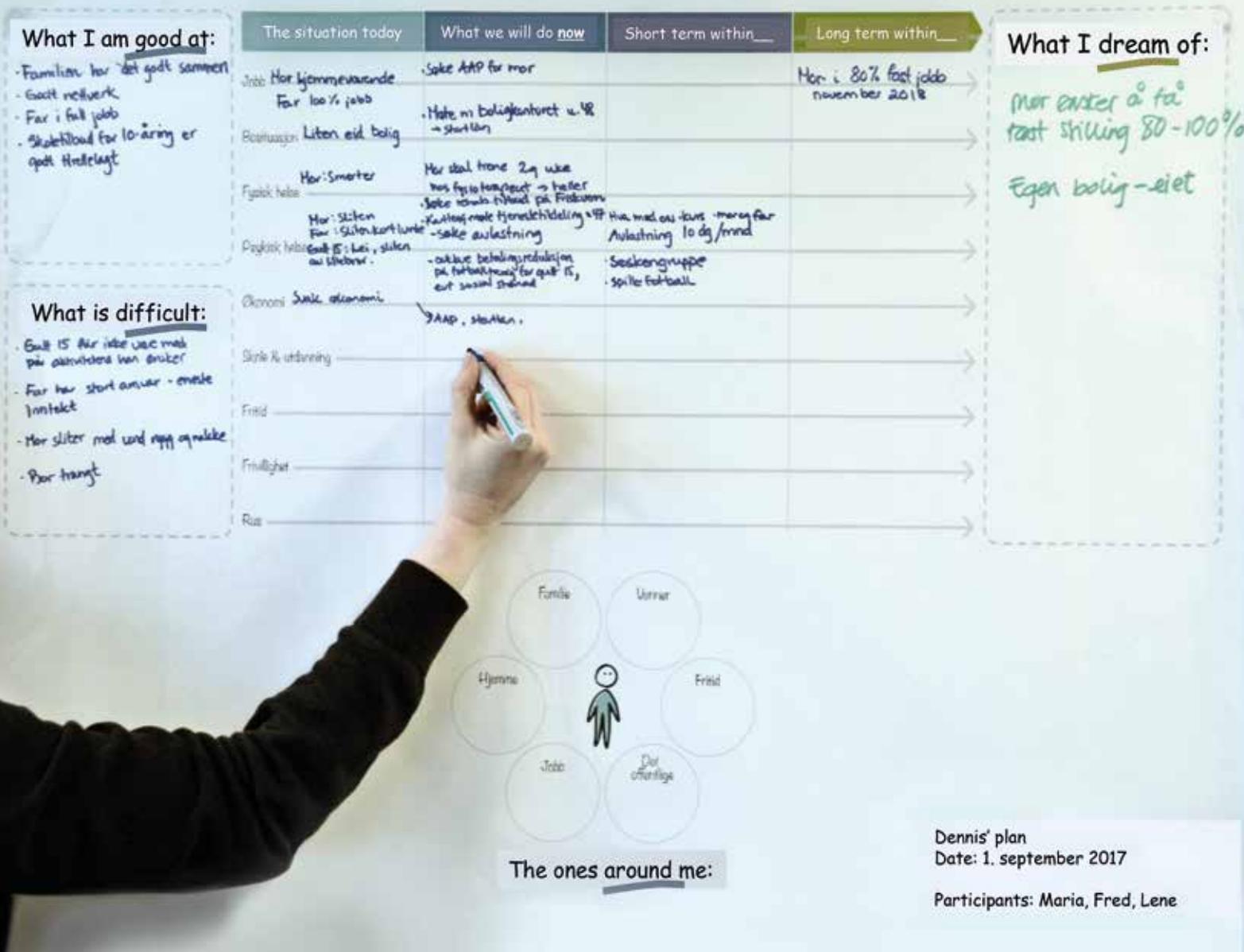


Figure 66: Asker Welfare Lab mapping tool Source: Asker Welfare Lab.

services under the heading of the "Housing Office of the Future". It quickly became clear that citizens' needs in complex housing and living situations were not adequately met and that the problem was too narrowly defined by focusing on just housing. Municipal workers found that they could not achieve their objective within the traditional service model in an adequate manner. The partners reframed the project and agreed that future services should have a singularly citizen-centric focus and that the public sector should adopt an investor-like mind-set. Before launching the lab, the investment thinking was tested and piloted in 2014 by a new department established within the municipality: the "Citizen Square". With new principles in place, the municipality developed the model for the service concept of the Asker Welfare Lab (see Figure 65).

The lab empowers frontline civil servants, as investors, to work across silos and map and identify citizens' comprehensive needs. To this end, a new planning matrix was designed to allow for structured conversations between the citizen and the investment team. This

approach helps to uncover the real nature of the problem. For example, in one case civil servants were working on a more stable housing situation, while the citizen's need stemmed from the immediate threat of losing a driving licence. While this was not a "municipal responsibility", it was clear that the person's overall situation would greatly profit from more targeted help. Investors therefore need an overview of the issues citizens face and must sometimes take risks and go beyond their usual remits, in the hope of attaining greater rewards. For this, the lab uses innovative tools (see Figures 66 and 67).

Nevertheless, investors, working with the citizen, need to choose carefully what they want to invest in and what would deliver the most value. They need to analyse the possibilities and barriers surrounding the citizen and their networks in depth. The lab helps citizens identify their own assets in order to strengthen the coinvestment with the wider Investment Team at the core of the lab. The teams consist of a variety of stakeholders that can help to pool resources in and outside the public sector and spur

change.¹³⁸ These teams are trained in investment thinking and have an extended mandate to make decisions.

Initially, the Citizen's Square was the only gateway to the Asker Welfare Lab. Now, any public service at the municipality can become a way to reach the Investment Team. The Asker Welfare Lab is currently in its second phase of development involving a broader set of services and participants. In 2016-17, a pilot focused on three specific target groups: families with children experiencing "vulnerable living conditions", vulnerable youngsters between the age of 17-25, and families with children with disabilities. The lab's focus switched from after-the-fact assistance to prevention and early intervention.

NOVELTY

While concepts of co-production, co-creation and collaborative innovation are increasingly common, the Asker Welfare Lab represents a totally new philosophy of service delivery, challenging the traditional public sector

138. The Investment Team can consist of individuals from health clinics, kindergartens and schools, among others, as well as specialised agencies (e.g. "Special Services for Children, Youth and Families", "Services for Mental Health and Substance Abuse", etc.) and representatives outside the municipal organisation from voluntary and private sector and the family's own network.

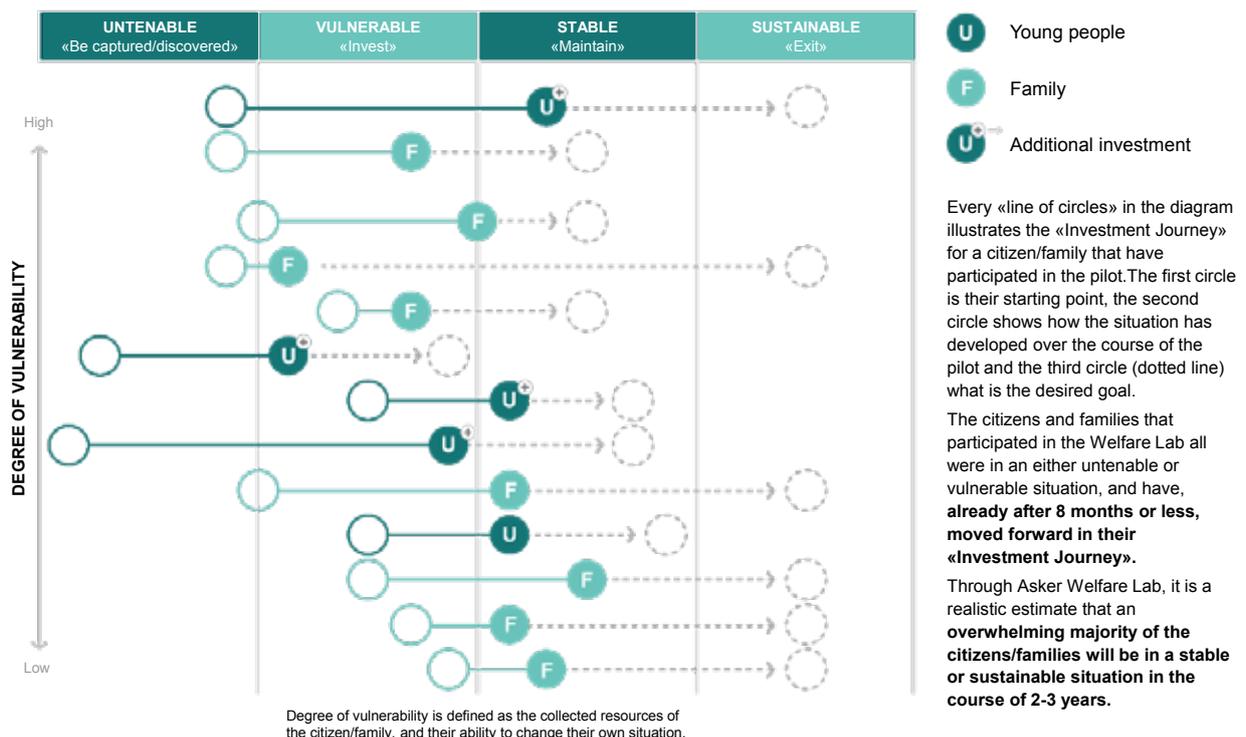
mind-set which tends to be expert-focused and, at times, patronising or condescending to citizens. The investor mind-set – "organising the way to a solution" – cuts across organisational silos, empowers frontline staff and gives them budgetary mandates. Furthermore, as citizen and partners have to act as co-investors in decision-making, power is shared with those in need.

RESULTS AND IMPACT

The piloting phase ended in the spring of 2017 and first user engagement shows that citizens experience value from participating. The Asker Welfare Lab model was tested with at least 20-30 citizens/families. Living conditions and quality of life were measured before and after the encounter with the Investment Team showing improvements. The municipal employees involved, who now have greater access to resources and can make investments at an earlier stage, feel that they can effect real change. Common planning also saves time that can be invested in more effective casework.

Investment thinking is further developed in a wider municipal context. Solutions and measures are created through co-operation with the voluntary sector, private

Figure 67: Asker Welfare Lab contributes to an evident improvement of the citizens' situation



Source: Asker Welfare Lab.

Trend 3: Inclusiveness and vulnerable populations

businesses and the Asker community as a whole. At the moment, the Asker municipality is working to identify key performance indicators needed to scale and disseminate the model both internally and externally. The municipality does not exist in a vacuum and cannot influence people's lives alone; hence, it is imperative that regional or even state-level interventions co-ordinate with those of the municipality in the future.

The project has been recognised as a National Learning Project in Norway and was one of three projects to receive the annual National Innovation Award from the Ministry of Local Government and Modernisation. It has also been awarded a Best Practice Certificate from the European Public Sector Awards (EPSA) 2017.¹³⁹

USER PERSPECTIVE

User perspectives are central to the Asker Welfare Lab including for problem identification and the lab's approach to working with citizens. Design thinking and cocreation were used throughout the development. While the lab is still developing more sophisticated evaluation tools, there is early evidence that this approach is working for citizens. One citizen explained that: "The mapping tool makes me feel included. It makes me feel that I actually can have an impact on the outcomes."

139. See www.epsa2017.eu.

CHALLENGES AND LESSONS LEARNED

The case of the Asker Welfare Lab highlights the importance of having supporting infrastructure in place for innovation. This includes leadership that allows for piloting, making mistakes and learning quickly from them. It is also crucial to have outside funding to free up the necessary competent workers to pilot new practices. Without this, pushing for change in public organisations becomes very difficult.

From experience, the lab has learnt that putting the family and citizen and their needs at the centre of services is key. This allows the lab to counter expert bias (trying to fit the reality to expert views) and make a real change in people's lives. "We have gone from being insecure about checking with the citizens to being insecure if we have not checked with the citizens first."

Maintaining an overview of problems and their solutions requires better co-ordination of resources, shared mandates and responsibility between public departments, and new models to measure effects. Furthermore, the case demonstrates that the potential results of co-operation between the voluntary sector, private businesses and social entrepreneurs are much greater than anticipated. While not always easy, this approach can deliver results.

Figure 68: Asker Welfare Lab planning session

