

Future STEAM Cities

Quarterly Network Journal #4

URBACT



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Introduction

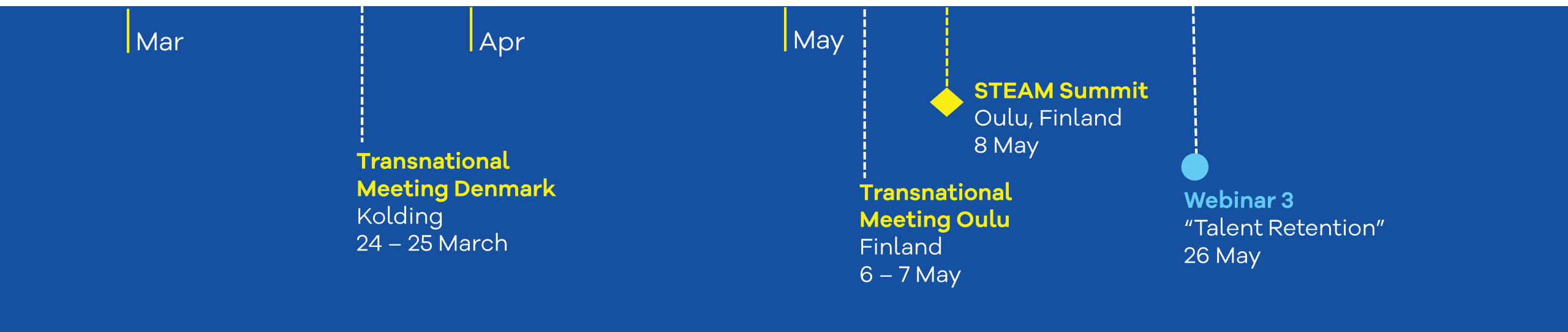
Five cities building their future in STEAM

Future STEAM Cities enters its final stretch. This fourth and last Quarterly Journal covers December 2025 to May 2026 — a period that began with cities still processing what their testing actions had taught them, and ends with all five holding a fundable investment logic for their Plans. We have extended the window slightly beyond the formal Adapt-to-Re-use boundary, because the work that matters here — turning testing evidence into investment decisions — carried through into April and the first weeks of Re-use, and cutting the story off in March would have left it half told.

The shift this journal documents is a real one. In December, cities were still asking what their testing had shown them. By May, they were pitching investment propositions to their peers and naming, out loud, what still needed to be resolved before submission. Two Transnational Meetings anchor this movement — Kolding in March, Oulu in May — and between and after them, a deliberate sequence of expert support, described in Section IV, kept that momentum coherent rather than leaving each city to find its own way through.

We are here on the roadmap

Adapt / Re-use (Dec 2025 – May 2026)



Key Tools

Testing Toolbox, ME framework, MEL approaches, Peer Review exercise tools, Investment Plan Canvas and Pitch, Investment Logic, Narrative Canvas, Funding & Resourcing cards

Ad-hoc Experts: Ian Graham, Liat Rogel, Jon Aguirre Such

The City focus

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Kolding in a nutshell: “A city with more jobs than graduates to fill them”

COUNTRY: Denmark

POPULATION: ~63,600

KEY CHALLENGE: Talent retention — bridging the gap between STEAM education and the local labour market

FOCUS OF TRANSFER: Challenge-based learning, entrepreneurship workshops, company Open Days, the Hard Skills Station

Kolding is home to some of Denmark's largest IT recruiters — yet many of its own graduates leave before those jobs can be filled. It is a paradox rather than a shortage: the opportunities exist, but the connection between education and the local labour market does not yet hold firmly enough to keep young talent in the city. Kolding's ambition through Future STEAM Cities is to close that gap, becoming a city where students see a clear STEAM career path in front of them, and where businesses no longer need to look



Kolding in a nutshell: “A city with more jobs than graduates to fill them”

beyond the city to find the skills they need. The network met in Kolding on 24–25 March, the moment the project turned from testing to investment. Morten Bjørn Hansen, CEO of Business Kolding, opened by naming the paradox the city itself embodies: companies here can't find qualified talent, and STEAM is the long-term answer.

Study visits into Kolding's own STEAM infrastructure — Sonic College, Nexttech, the STEAM Centre, Design School Kolding — set the tone: this was not a city arriving

empty-handed. But the sessions that followed were designed to unsettle, not reassure. Cities were sent away overnight with a single instruction: strengthening a Plan is not only about adding — it is also about deciding what to stop pursuing. Nothing changing after Kolding would mean the two days had been tourism.

The adhoc expert Jon Aguirre-Such asked each city to pitch its investment story aloud for the first time — three minutes, live, in front of peers. It immediately separated cities that led with their challenge from those that defaulted to describing activities.



Kolding in a nutshell: “A city with more jobs than graduates to fill them”

A Lead Expert session followed immediately, pressure-testing whether each city's underlying logic — who's actually accountable, where the money genuinely comes from, why public funding is justified at all — could carry the story just told. Cities then turned funder on each other in a peer fundability check, before distilling everything into a single test: an investment proposition in three lines, no more, that a funder could read in thirty seconds. The meeting closed with every city reading its next commitments aloud — no discussion, just declaration.

Kolding's own words

“

Across all cities, we face some of the same challenges. One of the most important is how we can inspire more young people to choose a STEAM education — and just as importantly, how we can ensure they stay and build their future in our local communities. Because our companies really need those competencies.

Morten Bjørn Hansen, CEO, Business Kolding

“

We house and educate students in Kolding, and when they graduate, of course we cannot keep everybody. But having a better understanding of what the job openings are — or could be — in Kolding, we think this will help.

Leendert Bjerg, Business Kolding

“

Co-design with companies and stakeholders is not just a delivery mechanism but a legitimacy strategy. Funders respond not only to the proposition, but to who is visibly behind it.

Jon Aguirre Such, URBACT Ad Hoc Expert

“

What we want to produce is giving students real-world application of their skills — not just working in academia on fake concepts, but on actual real-world cases. This should also give value to the data owner: new concepts, new insights they weren't necessarily aware of.

Arnthor Gunnarsson, Business Kolding

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Oulu in a nutshell:

"A STEAM ecosystem where everyone can thrive"

COUNTRY: Finland

POPULATION: ~117,000

KEY CHALLENGE: Retaining talent amid an ageing population; widening STEAM from an already-strong base to reach everyone

FOCUS OF CONTINUITY: STEAM 2.0 testing across four strands — a literacy skills robot, a Hackathon for upper-secondary students and the Artistic Residency

Oulu has earned its reputation as the "Silicon Valley of the North" — a city built around Technopolis and a dense network of start-ups, researchers and students, with STEAM already embedded across nearly all its schools. Having built that foundation, the city's own ambition is what it calls STEAM 2.0: an idea that first took shape in autumn 2025, when its original six STEAM schools gathered with the city's STEAM guidance group to ask what comes next.



Oulu in a nutshell:

"A STEAM ecosystem where everyone can thrive"

The working answer was "STEAM for all" — taking a strong system and deliberately widening who it reaches, from adults and seniors to families weighing whether Oulu is a city worth staying in.

That question of staying is the city's real challenge: an ageing population, and graduates the city struggles to hold onto. Oulu's Capital of Culture year gave that ambition an unusually public stage — the city describes 2026 as a "once-in-a-lifetime chance" to put its STEAM practice in front of a wider audience, with the Amazing North festival and STEAM Summit as the moment to do it.

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6-7 May 2026, Transnational Meeting

“Oulu: using the network's power to sharpen plans and pitches”

The Future STEAM Cities network met in Oulu for its third and final Transnational Meeting, 6–8 May 2026 — deliberately timed to coincide with the STEAM Summit, a major public event during Oulu's Capital of Culture year. This TM had a different character from Kolding's: partners were asked to bring ULG members and, where possible, political representatives. Aveiro's mayor and councillor attended.

The days opened at the Amazing North festival, where around fifty groups of children pitched STEAM solutions to real challenges — everything from a machine to create peace to time-travel VR experiences — a live demonstration of what years of investment in STEAM pedagogy actually produces.

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From there, the network moved into a Lead Expert session on Monitoring & Evaluation, working through the distinction between outputs and results, and what makes an indicator usable: a measurement method, and a timeframe.

Day 2 opened with Peer Review — cities reading each other's plans in pairs, using a structured tool covering six dimensions from local context to implementation readiness. The most useful moments came not from the scores but the questions: being asked to defend a plan as a funder would, rather than refine it as a colleague. That fed directly into the City Pitches that followed, presented in front of ULG members and, for the first time, political figures with real authority to act — a different register from performing for peers who already know the work.

Across the network, one pattern held: the gap between describing an activity and specifying what changes because of it remains the most consistent development still needed — the last conceptual step before a plan becomes genuinely fundable.

Oulu's own words

To maintain our vitality and innovative approach to life and work, we need to keep the brains in the city. The answer to plugging this leakage is STEAM — all the way, always, and for all.

Marjo Määttä, Oulu

It helps to grow competent and talented Oulu-based workers who, after having experienced the vitality of the city, have no need or desire to move away.

Marjo Määttä, Oulu

The key message is engaging the children to learn sciences through arts, to learn new technological skills through arts, to learn multiliteracy through arts... and to show the power of interdisciplinary work to everyone.

Paula Vorne, City of Oulu

Your Monitoring and Evaluation framework is not a reporting obligation. It is how you make the case that you know what success looks like — and that you will be able to show it.

Mónica Nagore Santandreu, URBACT Lead Expert

It's not just STEAM 2.0 anymore. It's STEAM for all.

Marjo Määttä, Oulu

This year, when I tried to find the teachers, it was really hard to choose which one would be the best partner for this programme. It tells something about the power it's gaining in schools.

Paula Vorne, City of Oulu

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Turning testing into investment logic

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Between January and April, Liat Rogel worked through 1:1 clinics with each city, doing much the same work in every case: taking what testing had actually produced and pressing cities to say, plainly, what it proved and what should follow from it. The method was consistent — treat testing as proof of concept, not a story to retell; replace ambition-language with concrete numbers and named ownership; and frame the result as a system worth funding, not a list of activities.

What that looked like varied city by city. In Oulu, the literacy robot ran into a simple problem — factory-made versions cost too much to scale — and rather than dropping the idea, the city redirected it into a Tool Camp challenge, asking students to design their own. In Aveiro, a two-day families workshop became the evidence a funder could actually use: proof that community appetite for STEAM exists, translated into three concrete asks — programmes, spaces, systems

— rather than the word "ecosystem" doing the work alone. Płock's five separate testing actions, run across schools, a university and a museum, were reframed as a single systemic programme, timed deliberately against Poland's incoming national STEAM curriculum reform. And in Alytus, the testing period's biggest finding wasn't a success story at all — it was fragmentation, cities and schools each doing their own thing — which became the direct case for a single "Local Talent Programme" rather than a problem to quietly fix.

The pattern across all four: testing had already answered the question of whether an idea works. The plans now needed to answer a harder one — what it would take to make it last.

	Your Test in a short phrase (focus on 1)	What did you really test?		What worked? what failed?	So what? what are you learning from it?	how can your action be described briefly?	Connection to an overall GOAL
Aveiro							
Alytus							
Kolding							
Oulu							
Płock							

The shift, city by city

City	What testing showed	What the plan now does
Kolding	Real collaboration works at small scale, but the link to the city's own tech strategy wasn't yet named	Clarifies exactly how the initiative connects to, and is funded through, the Kolding Tech City brand
Oulu	The literacy robot works, but factory versions are too costly to scale	Redirects the ambition into a Tool Camp design challenge — students building their own, rather than buying more
Aveiro	A families workshop proved real community demand for STEAM beyond schools	Replaces "ecosystem" language with three concrete commitments: programmes, spaces, systems
Plock	Five separate testing actions worked, but stood apart from each other	Reframes them as one systemic programme, timed to Poland's incoming national STEAM curriculum reform
Alytus	The testing period's clearest finding was fragmentation itself	Builds a single "Local Talent Programme" as the direct answer to that fragmentation

The expert consolidation pathway

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Future STEAM Cities drew on three ad-hoc experts alongside the Lead Expert to support cities through the final stage of developing their Investment and Continuity Plans: Liat Rogel, Jon Aguirre-Such, Ian Graham, and Mónica Nagore-Santandreu coordinating the whole. Each brought a distinct form of expertise — testing evidence, narrative, technical robustness, and process design. The more common way networks like this work is for outside experts to arrive, deliver a session,

move on — each contributor's input sitting alongside the others rather than building on them. The risk isn't the quality of any single contribution; it's that cities are left to work out for themselves how testing evidence, narrative, and technical structure are supposed to fit together into one coherent Plan.

Future STEAM Cities set out to avoid that. Rather than delivering the three experts' contributions in parallel, the network built a single, sequenced pathway: each expert's input timed to build directly on what came immediately before it, reviewed together as one continuous process rather than four separate ones.

The four roles — a slide naming each contribution distinctly and concretely, so the reader sees non-overlapping expertise rather than a blur of "expert support": Liat on testing-to-logic, Jon on narrative, Ian on technical robustness (funding strategy, governance, implementation pathway), and your own dual role — sequencing the whole process for coherence, and delivering the F&R and M&E sessions yourself.

What experts said

Ian Graham
Structure and Content

"Building an investment plan is about stitching it all together. There are always different bits, and the job is to make them one thing."



Mónica Nagore Santandreu
Funding & Resourcing and M&E

"In Future STEAM Cities we are helping cities build the narrative behind their investment plans — the story that attracts funders and opens doors. But the narrative only works if it's held up by something with substance underneath: a robust plan, a clear logic, real evidence."



Jon Aguirre Such
Investment Narrative

"Sometimes we, experts, are like parachutes landing in a project, doing our work and leaving. It's creating a whole road map that is really helpful for us to understand the context and has a bigger impact in the cities we support.. This is not easy, and it's not very common"



Liat Rogel
Testing Action connection

"Even when I'm not focusing on narrative — when I'm working on translating testing actions into decisions — what you want to see, in the end, is a narrative. It's the story of the plan. It goes there somehow, even when it's not what I'm doing specifically."



Jon Aguirre Such
Investment Narrative

"Don't ask for money — ask for help. Leading with a funding request closes conversations; leading with a problem and inviting someone to be part of the solution opens them. The resources often follow from the relationship, not the other way around."



Ian Graham
Structure and Content

"If you can't say it in two sentences as a starting point to frame it, you're always going to struggle to make the narrative."



Capacity, reflection, and the road to final plans

Moments of stepping back

Shaping the final investment and continuity plans

This section traces the network's own capacity to pause, compare notes, and take stock — bookended by two webinars. The first, delivered on 2 December, was already flagged as upcoming in NQJ#3. The second, on 26 May, was the network's last: a fitting close, since it turned the conversation directly onto talent retention, the challenge the whole network exists to address.

Between these two moments sat further points of reflection — the Mid-Term Review's closure, a Network Meetings - online and during the transnational meetings - and the Paris ITN Re-use Kick-off — each testing, in a different way, how well the network understood its own progress before the harder work of consolidation began.

Webinar #2, "Exploring the 'A' in STEAM" brought 27 participants together with voices from museums, creative industries, neuroscience and sound design to ask what the arts actually contribute to STEAM learning. The clearest takeaway was that the "A" needs to live outside school walls entirely — in museums, clinics, public spaces and communities — a thread that would echo through Kolding's own micro credentials workshop three months later.

The Mid-Term Reflection process closed at the end of January: a report synthesizing the network survey, the in-person reflection session in Płock, and an online follow-up meeting, directly shaping how the Re-use phase roadmap was adjusted. An online Network Meeting in February brought all five cities together to compare notes and prepare jointly for Kolding. Shortly after, the ITN Re-use Kick-off in Paris (3–5 February) gave cities their first test of pitching draft plans to an outside audience — feedback that was clarifying rather than comfortable, confirming how unevenly matured the five plans still were and sharpening exactly what needed to change: a clearer logic connecting objectives, actions, governance and resourcing, the same thread that would run through every session in **Kolding and Oulu** Transnational Meetings.

WEBINAR

Talent Attraction

26th may 2026

10:00–12:00 CET

(UTC/GMT +01:00) Europe/Lisbon

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Moments of stepping back

Shaping the final investment and continuity plans

The network's third and final webinar turned from STEAM itself to the question underneath it: what does it actually take for a city to become a place young people choose to build their future in?

Mariana Guerreiro (Code for All_) showed two contrasting bootcamp models — one built with Aveiro's own tech companies, one reskilling Portugal's national postal service — arriving at the same conclusion: talent doesn't need to come from outside; it needs the conditions to grow where it already is.

Renata Walczak, from Warsaw University of Technology's Płock branch, spoke candidly from inside the problem: her institution has strong infrastructure and over 100 industry partnerships, yet half of local students surveyed don't want to study in Płock at all — a gap she argued only the city itself, not the university, can close.



**Béla
Kézi**

📍 Hungary



**Mariana
Guerreiro**

📍 Portugal



**Renata
Walczak**

Hab. DSc Eng.

📍 Poland

Moments of stepping back

Shaping the final investment and continuity plans

Béla Kézy, of the Cities4Talent URBACT network, reframed the question again: the issue isn't whether people want to come back, but whether a city is ready to receive them when they do — and that place branding isn't a logo, but an authentic identity a city has to understand and articulate for its own residents, not only for outsiders.

The session's icebreaker made the challenge's complexity visible before anyone spoke: asked whether young people in their city tend to leave for good or leave and return, participants from the same cities — Aveiro, Alytus — gave different answers. The takeaway drawn from that split was itself the point: how this challenge looks depends entirely on where you stand within a city, and surfacing those different vantage points is where any real strategy has to start.

What we're heading towards

From planning to impact

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Learning, reflecting and drafting plans

December 25 to May 2026

What we've done

- Adapt phase launched — Testing Loop, tools and ULGs activated
- Transnational Meeting in Alytus — June 2025
- First testing actions launched and reviewed across all cities
- Network and ULG Coordinators meeting — September
- 1-to-1 meetings with Ian Graham and Lead Expert on ICPs
- Transnational Meeting in Płock — 20–21 October
- FSC Testing Toolbox co-created
- Mid-Term Reflection process completed
- Webinar #2 prepared — launching 2 December
- Webinar #2 — "Exploring the 'A' in STEAM — where science, technology, and creativity meet" 2 December

Learning, reflecting and drafting plans

December 25 to May 2026

What we've done

- First ICP drafts — 21 January
- F&R session — 27 January
- MTR Final Report — end January
- ICP sessions with Ian Graham
- Ad-hoc experts Liat Rogel and Jon Aguirre join — Jan-Feb
- Paris ITN Re-use Kick-off — 3–5 February
- Kolding TM — 24–25 March
- Full ICP V1 submitted — mid April
- Oulu TM — 6–7 May (European Capital of Culture 2026)
- STEAM Summit – 8 May
- Webinar #3 — "Talent retention in STEAM cities: How can we attract, develop and keep skilled people in our territories?" – 26 May

What we're heading towards

After May 2026

- Investment and Continuity Plans finalized - June
- Animation - network final product presented - July
- Project close and Network Final Report - August 2026
- Network results presented at URBACT City Festival, Nicosia - end September 2026 - and the European Week of Regions and Cities - October.

Glossary

Understand phase

The first phase of the URBACT Innovation Transfer process, focused on building a shared understanding of the original innovation and its potential for adaptation in different city contexts.

Adapt phase

The second phase of the URBACT Innovation Transfer method, focused on testing and shaping local solutions inspired by the original innovation.

Re-use phase

The final phase of the URBACT transfer process, where cities finalise their plans and prepare for implementation and sustainability.

Investment Plan

A strategic document developed by each city, outlining how they will embed and fund the adapted innovation beyond the project.

Continuity Plan

A long-term plan developed by the Lead Partner (Aveiro) to sustain and scale its original innovation after the project ends.

Glossary

ULG

URBACT Local Group: A local multi-stakeholder group supporting the design and adaptation of the innovation in each partner city.

Testing loop

A practical framework used across the network to design, carry out, and reflect on small-scale tests of the innovation.

Topic Webinar

An online session bringing together all partners (and sometimes external speakers) to explore key themes relevant to the transfer process.

Test & Involve Worksheet / Testing Canvas / Investment Plan Canvas

Three interconnected tools developed within the network to help cities plan their testing actions, involve the right stakeholders, and connect their learning to long-term strategies.

Transnational meeting (TM)

An in-person meeting involving all project partners, used for peer learning, joint work on tools, and strategic exchange.