

Do cities come out better off when the experts supporting them are teaming up?

**A reflection on coordinated expert support
in URBACT networks**

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Last January, during a session I ran for my partners from Future STEAM Cities network, I introduced the experts' support with this picture and a very first sketch of how the experts' work could be coordinated. The picture provoked some laughs but also pointed towards a specific approach and the expert's collaborative journey.



Later on, in July, I published the [seven-lessons article](#) where I said that how the group of experts worked together was substantial enough to deserve its own account. Now, after a summer break that provided some distance — yes, and heat — to think, I would like to invite you to reflect with me about this question:

Do cities come out better off when the experts supporting them are teaming up, not just alongside each other — or is it enough that each one does their job well on their own?

Actually, any partnership coordinator or leader in a European funded project runs into this question sooner or later - URBACT networks are no exception. You bring in a group of experts to help a city work through something complex, and at some point you have to decide what alignment is needed between them, if any. Here's what I found when I looked closely at our own experience in Future STEAM Cities.

Future STEAM Cities is an Innovation Transfer Network: partner cities working to adapt the STEAM City innovation that Aveiro, the Lead Partner, had already piloted. The shared task ahead of every partner was an Investment Plan — a document that had to be fundable, grounded in evidence from testing, and genuinely owned by the city.

Building the expert support around that task meant sitting down early, with Aveiro as Lead Partner, and asking four questions: What gaps had the network identified? What areas of expertise could fill those gaps? Were these areas of expertise connected in any way? And how could we enhance the expert support experience for both the city partners and the experts themselves?

The answers took us to four experts: Liat Rogel, on translating what cities learned through testing into investment logic; Jon Aguirre-Such, on the narrative and positioning of each plan; Ian Graham, working across the whole plan on technical robustness, governance and implementation readiness; and me, on monitoring, evaluation and funding opportunities. On the third question — was this expertise connected — the answer for Future STEAM Cities was a clear yes: all four contributions were directly shaping one key output: the investment plan that would define each city's future actions.

What external experts bring

URBACT networks work with two kinds of experts: a Lead Expert, who supports the whole partnership from start to finish, and Ad-hoc Experts, brought in later for shorter, more specific pieces of work as the network identifies a need for them.

When Ad-hoc experts join the network they bring a clean pair of eyes, paired with deep expertise in one area. They arrive without the accumulated assumptions of the network journey — they haven't sat through the previous transnational meetings, they haven't watched a city's plan evolve through stakeholder meetings and team members' changes. That distance is exactly what makes their perspective useful. Applied at the right moment, it can surface something that has been said many times but never quite heard, or reframe something a city has been stuck on for months, or just uncover some obvious element no one was seeing because we were too close to have a whole picture.

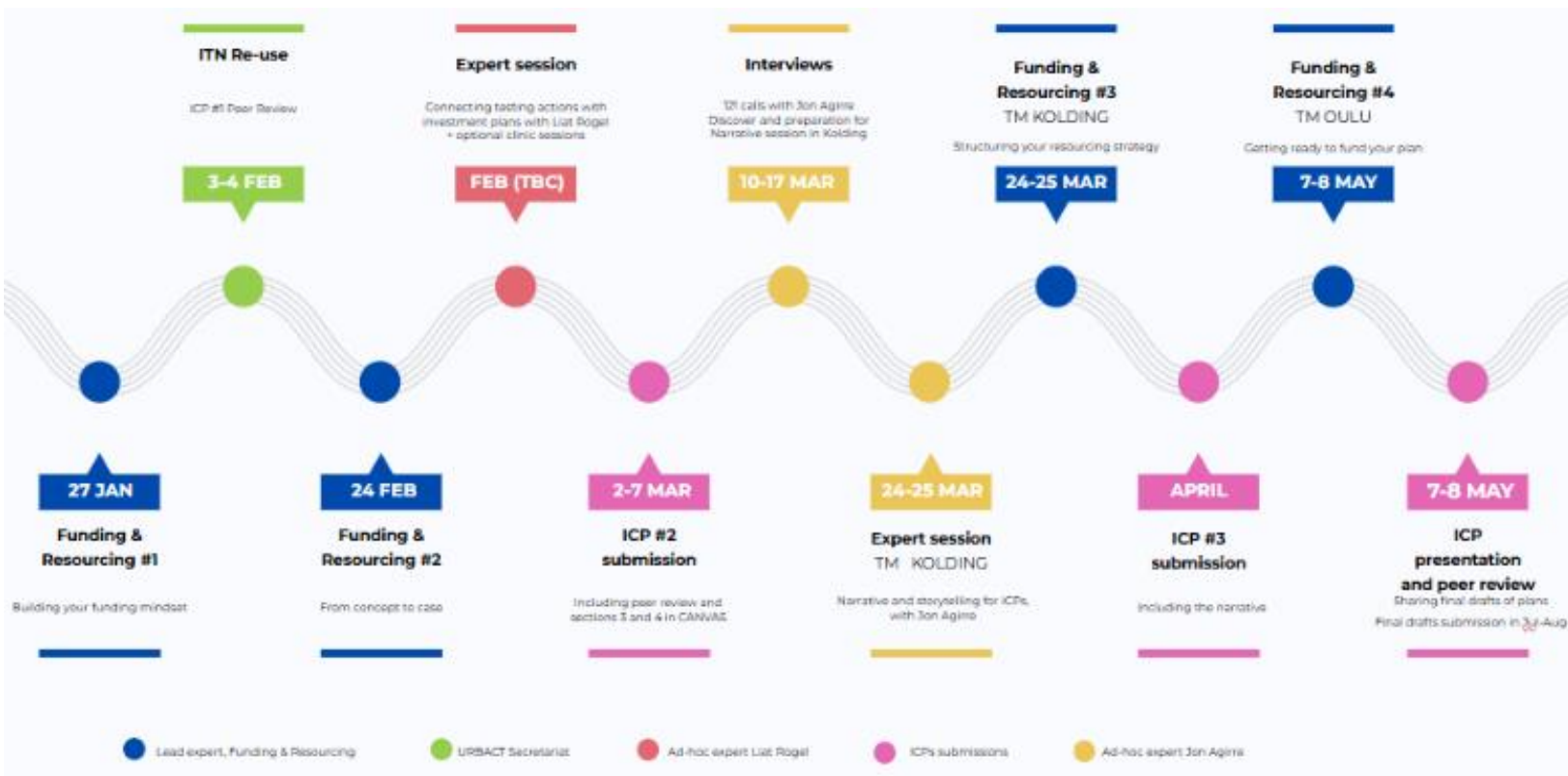
But that outsider position also creates a risk. If our three experts were each working from their own domain — investment logic, narrative, technical and funding readiness — without visibility of what the others were doing, the city could end up at the centre of separate conversations. At best, city partners would have to repeat themselves. At worst, they would have got contradictory signals, or work that wouldn't have reinforced itself.

What alignment looked like in practice

Alignment wasn't a fixed handover from one expert to the next. It meant experts had a space to share how each city's plan was actually going, and to act on it.

When Liat noticed a city didn't yet have a clear grasp of how to translate its testing into plan actions, Ian could step in directly with the logic model to support that city. When she helped cities think through how to group their actions into something that could stand as a coherent programme, that idea was shared with the other experts so Jon already knew the direction a city was heading before his narrative session and could check a few weeks later, at Kolding, whether it still made sense to the city.

The same happened the other way round. When I spotted an opportunity — Poland's Ministry of Education introducing STEAM elements into the national curriculum, in Płock's case — I shared it with Jon and Ian, so both could reflect it in the plan's content and its narrative, rather than the city having to make that case separately to each of us.



That kind of exchange wasn't limited to experts. The Oulu Transnational Meeting did the same at city level: partners reviewed each other's plan pitches before the network's closing event, the STEAM Summit, held in Oulu as part of its year as European Capital of Culture 2026.

The Lead Expert's role: holding the thread with Aveiro

The Lead Expert's role in this model isn't to direct what each expert does. Liat's clinic method is open and unstructured; Ian's feedback is rigorous and technical; Jon works to hold each city's story as a whole. Their approaches stay distinct — that's the point. What I coordinate instead is defining with Aveiro the how and the when: which city needs what kind of support, at which moment, and how each expert's input connects to the others and to the network's own calendar.

In practice, that means designing spaces for exchange at several levels at once — between experts, between experts and cities, and between cities themselves — and giving each expert enough visibility

into the others' work to see where their own contribution connects. It also means co-designing the consolidation pathway with the experts themselves, rather than handing it down as a fixed schedule.

Future STEAM Cities felt supported throughout the development of their investment plans. As Leendert Bjerg from Kolding put it, the experts "complemented each other very nicely," with someone clearly coordinating that support, and Veronika from Alytus said that "every one of you were so helpful," specifically praising how the assignments were structured to make her think through the plan herself rather than just receive advice.

That is, in a sense, the point. When it works, cities experience it as coherence rather than coordination.

Aveiro sat in a different position from the other four cities. As Lead Partner, it was custodian of the innovation the others were adapting, and it carried a mandate the other cities didn't have: to support them directly, not just learn alongside them, while also developing its own investment plan. That dual position started early — Aveiro helped identify the network's gap areas, took part in selecting the experts, and worked with me on designing the consolidation pathway itself.

This isn't a guaranteed formula, and it isn't universal. It worked in Future STEAM Cities partly because the plan created a natural point everything had to converge on. In a network with more diffuse outputs, that condition might not hold in the same way — and parallel support, without this kind of design, may be perfectly fine. **The point isn't that alignment is always necessary. It's that it's always worth asking.**

In Future STEAM Cities, asking that question — and designing for the answer — made a real difference. Cities got support that built on itself, rather than three separate conversations they had to reconcile on their own. So: do cities come out better off? In our case, yes.

Whether that holds in your network, I don't know — and I'd like to. If you're a city coordinator or partner, an expert, or anyone else working through coordinated support in an URBACT network:

What does alignment look like for you?

