

VIHTI CHALLENGE

Perspectives into Sustainability
and Vitality in Nummela



Eds. Mari Vaattovaara, Jussi Jännes and Mikko Posti

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Helsinki Institute of Urban and Regional Studies (Urbaria)

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Introduction

What Makes neighbourhoods sustainable?

Sustainable neighbourhoods are residential areas where environmental responsibility, social justice and economic viability are realised. They have been designed to minimise the ecological footprint by saving energy and other resources. Practically speaking, municipalities can influence what is built and where but building and maintaining sustainable neighbourhoods is not an easy task within the city-regional area of Uusimaa. Different institutional needs and legislative changes together with low national fertility rates and economic scarcity make the decision-making processes even more complicated.

At the same time, the objective of our legislation guiding national land use and construction has been for quite some time “to ensure that the use of land and water areas and building activities on them create preconditions for a favourable living environment and promote ecologically, *economically, socially and culturally sustainable development*” (section 5 of the Land Use and Building Act 132/1999). However, it remains unclear what kinds of features should be nurtured in the local environment, or what kinds of changes should occur there on the way towards a more sustainable future.

This booklet contains three concrete case studies on sustainability in the neighbourhood of Nummela in Vihti. It is the first output of a 5-year strategic collaboration agreement between the University of Helsinki and the municipality of Vihti signed in September 2024. The agreement outlines ways of collaboration to incorporate scientific research produced in the field of urban and regional studies at the University of Helsinki into the decision-making process of the municipality of Vihti. Concrete forms of collaboration between the municipality of Vihti and researchers of the University of Helsinki will include, among other things, science sparring sessions, joint seminars, and coordinated master’s theses.

As an initial step in promoting collaboration between the Municipality of Vihti and the University of Helsinki, a course titled *Urban Geography: Growth, Housing, and Planning* was organized for master’s students of geography and urban studies and planning in November–December 2024. The course and the majority of teaching were largely centered around the “Vihti Challenge” that required the students to take a closer look to sustainability and vitality challenges that Vihti faces. As part of the course, the students familiarized themselves with selected sustainability indicators from the book *Towards More Sustainable Residential Areas: Sustainability Indicators for Neighborhoods and Blocks*, recently published by Urbaria (Vaattovaara, Jännes & Posti, 2024). The indicators were selected on the basis that the data they provided aligned with the strategic interests of Vihti.

The students were divided into three groups, two of which conducted field research in Nummela, Vihti, and one in the Helsinki metropolitan area. Each group analyzed their research results and wrote comprehensive reports based on them. The students’ research results were presented to the Mayor and Director of Vitality of the Municipality of Vihti in a seminar at the University of Helsinki on December 9, 2024, and the written results are now available for everyone to read in this publication.

The first chapter, **Perspectives on Progress: Quality of Life in Nummela, Vihti** examines Nummela residents’ perceptions of their living environment and identifies factors influencing their satisfaction. Data were collected through interviews covering four key dimensions of livability. The

findings suggest that to enhance the area's appeal and attract newcomers, policymakers should focus on developing a more compact, self-sufficient urban core, fostering community participation and cultural growth, creating economic opportunities, and supporting residents.

The second chapter, **Experienced Neighbourhood Cohesion in Vihti** is based on door-to-door interviews and explores residents' perceptions of neighbourhood cohesion in Nummela. According to the authors, to address the stagnation in population growth, Vihti's policymakers should pursue a more integrated development strategy, focusing on physical and social factors that enhance citizens' well-being and strengthen community ties. The study highlights three key areas for improvement: the quantity and quality of public spaces, neighbourhood walkability, and resident-driven development initiatives.

The third chapter, **Views on Vihti: Why is Helsinki attracting young highly skilled workers?** explores the factors that attract highly educated students to Helsinki and how these factors could be applied to make smaller municipalities, such as Vihti, more attractive to them. Using a questionnaire, the authors assessed students' preferences and their knowledge of Vihti. The study identifies key factors influencing students' decisions, including housing affordability, proximity to friends, and access to educational institutions. The paper concludes with recommendations for policymakers to enhance Vihti's appeal to international students.

With this publication, it is our aim to enhance a dialogue about development perspectives and possibilities within the Uusimaa region. By focusing on the experiences of the residents, we follow the thinking of John Friedmann (2000, 471) the father of urban planning theory who argued that in a 'good city', the key actor is 'an autonomous, self-organizing civil society, active in making claims, resisting and struggling on behalf of the good city within a framework of democratic institutions'. We are also looking to foster creative thinking and dialogue. Borrowing the words of one of world's leading urban planning researchers, Professor Simin Davoudi (2023), "amid the uncertainties and despairs, this utopian impulse, as a key function of hope, helps us to see the existing conditions not as how things are, but as how they are made to be, and how they might be unmade."

By working with the students and discussing with municipal actors and residents, we hope that we can foster opening our imaginations and envision transformative possibilities that challenge the status quo and inspire collective action towards creating vibrant, equitable and inspiring places and spaces.

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Perspectives on Progress:
Quality of Life in Nummela, Vihti

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Background

Our research is based on Marketta Kyttä's article 'Perceived quality of the living environment and accessibility of everyday services', featured in the publication *Towards More Sustainable Residential Areas: Indicators of Neighbourhood and Block Sustainability* by Vaattovaara et al. (2024). This indicator serves as a baseline to assess the interaction between residents' subjective environmental experiences and the concrete accessibility of key services in the urban area of Nummela, Vihti.

Social sustainability within a community can be assessed through two main indicators: residents' perception of the quality of their living environment and the ease of accessing essential services. By relating these indicators to specific locations, we can identify characteristics of the physical environment that influence perceptions of quality, service accessibility, sustainable living practices, and health outcomes (Kyttä 2024). This aligns with the findings of Kyttä et al. (2011), who define the perceived quality of the living environment as consisting of individual, place-dependent factors. These quality factors were formulated into 32 experiences, which could be either positive or negative, and grouped into four main categories: physical appearance, functional quality, quality of social environment and atmosphere (see Table 1).

This essay explores the intersection of scientific and practical perspectives on community living, focusing on the town of Nummela, located in the municipality of Vihti, Finland. It aims to explore how different residents perceive the physical appearance, functional quality, social environment, and overall atmosphere of living in Nummela, with data collected through interviews conducted in various areas of the town. The primary objective is to understand how residents of Nummela perceive the quality of their living environment, what factors influence satisfaction, what aspirations for improvement exist and what actions are necessary to attract more people to the area.

The research is grounded in broader themes of municipal growth and vitality, which are crucial for understanding how communities can adapt to changes in demographics, urban planning, and societal shifts. This aligns with the work of Laatikainen et al. (2018), who discuss the importance of shaping urban environments that promote health and well-being. By analysing resident's feedback, we can identify the town's strengths and areas for development, contributing to Vihti's goals of attracting population growth and improving quality of life.

Additionally, this essay is motivated by the course's focus on relational space and changing urban landscapes, especially those at the crossroads of major towns in Finland. The theoretical framework of governance and the impact of infrastructure changes, such as the construction of the Microsoft data centre, which promises to dramatically alter the landscape of Nummela, are also considered. This is in line with the research of Kyttä (2021), which emphasises the need for integrating resident's perspectives in urban planning to ensure sustainable development.

By examining the interplay between the physical, functional, and social aspects of urban living in Nummela, we aim to provide insights into how residents envision their future and offer recommendations for further improvement. This approach not only contributes to the academic discourse on urban sustainability but also serves as a practical guide for local policymakers and planners in Vihti.

Since many municipalities in Finland are concerned about their decreasing number of residents and thus their ability to maintain services through entrepreneurship and tax revenues, this report will hopefully be beneficial to other smaller cities or municipalities that are located further away from growing urban cores such as Helsinki Metropolitan area or Tampere. The focus on the quality of life inside of the town might be beneficial in uplifting the image and awareness of Vihti among prospective movers. The image of Vihti is especially important among highly skilled, educated workers, who might be looking for an area to buy their first house with a family after graduation. They are used to the amenities of urban cores such as Helsinki and therefore the city of Vihti needs to assess how to improve its shortcomings or emphasize its strengths against these urban cores.

Table 1: Quality factors of the perceived quality of the living environment (Kytta et al. 2011)

Physical appearance		Functional quality		Quality of the social environment		Atmosphere	
Positive	Negative	Positive	Negative	Positive	Negative	Positive	Negative
You can sense the history	No history elements	Good opportunities for recreation and activities	Poor opportunities for recreation and activities	Residents take good care of the environment	Residents do not take care of the environment	The place is inviting	The place is uninviting
The price-quality ratio of housing is good	The price-quality ratio of housing is poor	Getting around by walking or cycling is easy	Getting around by walking or cycling is difficult	People important to me are close	People close to me are far away	The place has a lively atmosphere	The place has a lifeless atmosphere
Density of development/sparse development is fine	The buildings are too densely/sparsely built	Getting around with public transport is easy	Getting around with public transport is difficult	Neighbours live together in harmony	Neighbour relations here are quarrelsome	The place is relaxing	The place is stressful
The environment is polished	The environment is unpolished	Getting around with a car is easy	Getting around with a car is difficult	Social life is vibrant	Social life is too quiet	The place is close to nature	The place is far from nature
The environment is clean	The environment is unclean	Traffic safety is poor	Traffic safety is good	The variety of residents is appropriate	The variety of residents is excessive or insufficient	The place is noise-free	The place is noisy
The buildings are beautiful	The buildings are ugly	Cultural life is vibrant	Cultural life is quiet	The neighbourhood has a good reputation	The neighbourhood has a bad reputation	The place is appropriately surprising	The place is too predictable
You can influence the appearance of the place	You can not influence the appearance of the place	It is easy to lead your own lifestyle	It is difficult to lead your own lifestyle	The residents care about one another	The residents do not care about each other	The place is peaceful	The place is restless
The landscape is beautiful	The landscape is ugly	The services are good	The services are poor	Social safety is good	Social safety is poor	The place is child-friendly	The place is negative towards children

A similar survey template has been applied in some previous studies of Marketta Kyttä as well, which have aimed to assess quality of life and accessibility to everyday services. The first one (Kyttä & Kahila 2006) was conducted in Järvenpää, which is one of the KUUMA-municipalities, in which Vihti is included. KUUMA municipalities are located around the Helsinki metropolitan area: Hyvinkää, Järvenpää, Kirkkonummi, Kerava, Mäntsälä, Nurmijärvi, Pornainen, Sipoo, Tuusula and Vihti (Figure 1).

This survey asked respondents to name quality attributes of their municipality, and it was conducted as a SoftGIS -survey. Since our survey had given attributes and the respondents could not choose them, the two surveys are not straightforwardly comparable. In addition, the categories were slightly different and the number of respondents higher. However, according to the summary of the survey results in Järvenpää (Kyttä & Kahila 2006, s. 106-107), most neighborhoods in Nummela got more positive answers than negative, with the exception of some areas with only apartment blocks. Considering that Nummela has generally more apartment blocks than the rest of Vihti, the results of our research were more positive than in Järvenpää.

The Urban Happiness survey by Kyttä et al. (2016) is a long lasting PPGIS data collection project in the Helsinki Metropolitan Area and was conducted in a similar way to the KUUMAA -surveys. The latest survey, conducted in 2016, concentrated on the Helsinki Metropolitan area, instead. This study had an interesting outcome, as it indicated differences in experience between urban and suburban areas. For example, the closeness of services was connected to perceived environmental quality in urban areas, but it did not have a positive correlation in the suburban areas in those cases, where the environmental quality was overall considered lower. They concluded that, in Finland, achieving improved accessibility and other experiential outcomes in a suburban context is trickier than in urban ones and each neighborhood should be evaluated in its own context. (Kyttä et al. 2016; 37, 51).



Figure 1. KUUMA-municipalities. Source: www.kuuma.fi

Interviews, data

This research aimed to evaluate the quality of the living environment and accessibility of everyday services in Nummela, Vihti using insights from residents across various dimensions. The fieldwork took place on Tuesday, November 5th, 2024, in two sessions at different locations from 10:00-12:00 and 14:00-15:00. The research group consisted of nine students in four pairs, each conducting structured interviews with the town's residents. Each pair was assigned a different list of questions focusing on four main aspects: Nummela's physical appearance, functional quality, quality of the social environment, and atmosphere, guided by Kyttä's (2024) sustainable indicator.

The interviews were conducted at four locations in Nummela: Prisma, K-Citymarket, Tokmanni and ViaDia senior Home (Figure 2). The pairs stood at the entrances of these places (Figure 3).

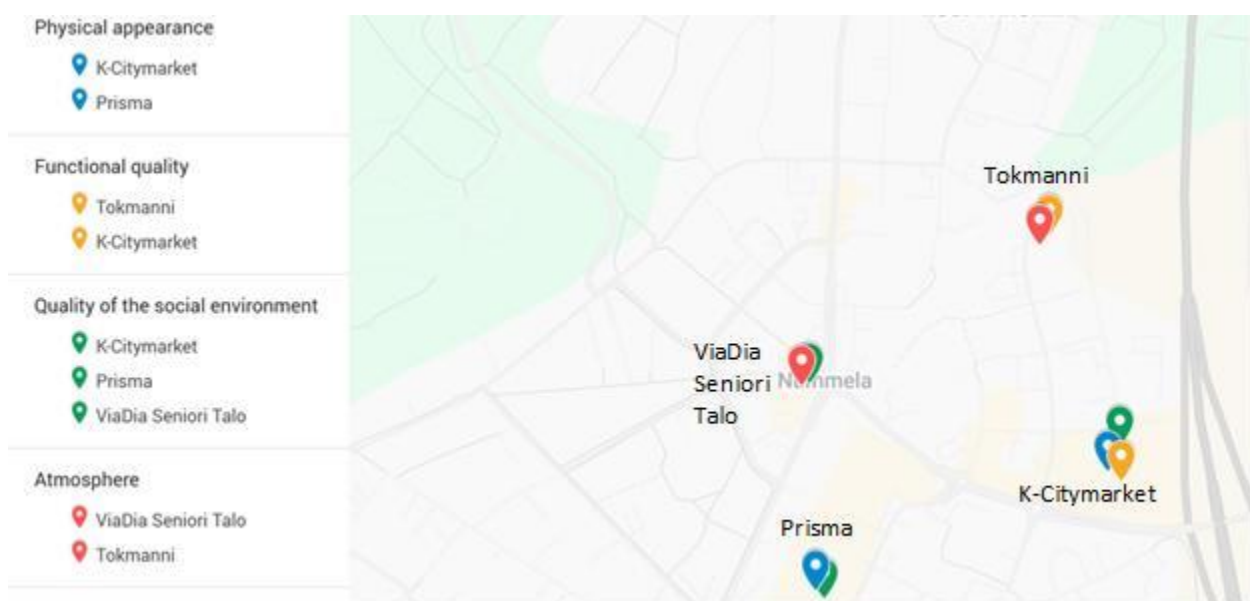


Figure 2. Locations of conducted interviews in Nummela, Vihti (map made by authors).



Figure 3. Tokmanni, K-Citymarket, Prisma and ViaDia senior home.

ViaDia elderly home is a community centre where elderly people can come together, drink coffee, chat and knit. According to the staff, there are more than 1600 encounters every day in ViaDia, which makes it an important community-building space for seniors of Nummela and the whole of Vihti. People in the community centre were helpful and everyone we asked wanted to be part of the research. Many were also interested in the research project and asked more questions about it.

All pairs asked residents to confirm their residency in Nummela. Non-residents were excluded from the research as the goal was to get responses from current residents and ensure the data accurately reflected local perspectives. After demographic questions on age and gender, participants were asked to choose either the positive or negative statements from each category (see Table 1). All groups found a sufficient number of respondents.

A total of 70 interviews were conducted. The average age of respondents was approximately 60 years, with most of them being between 60-79 years old (Figure 4). This is not a problem, since seniors are a core target group of possible new residents for Vihti. Therefore, the opinions of seniors are valuable in this context. The age distribution might be explained by the timing of the interviews: We conducted the interviews on a Tuesday during daytime, which means that most working adults or children in school could not be reached. Secondly, the younger residents we encountered, seemed busier and more suspicious of our motives. We noticed for example, that when we mentioned being from the University of Helsinki from the start, more people seemed engaged.

The gender distribution leaned heavily towards women, with 68% of the respondents being female (Figure 5). The bigger number of female respondents likely follows from the visitors of ViaDia being mostly older women and possibly also that the interviewers were mostly female, which might have attracted more female respondents, but this is only an educated guess. However, the gender distribution is good to keep in mind in addition to the age distribution. These might also be connected to an issue with sampling style, since opportunistic sampling by nature favours the voices of people who are at the location at the right time (in our case shops in the middle of a weekday) and who appear friendly or approachable, which in our experience was far likelier to be women.

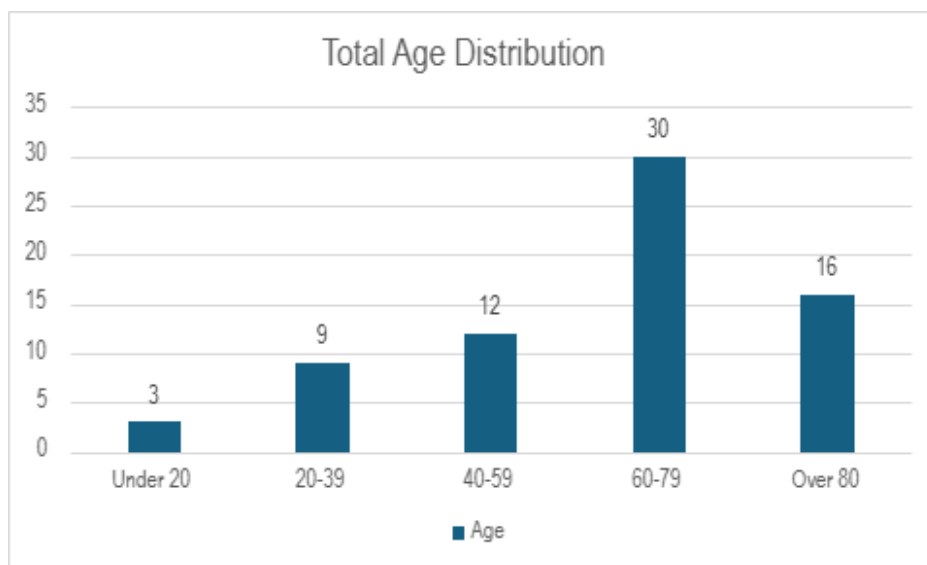


Figure 4: Age distribution of all 70 respondents.

Total Gender Distribution

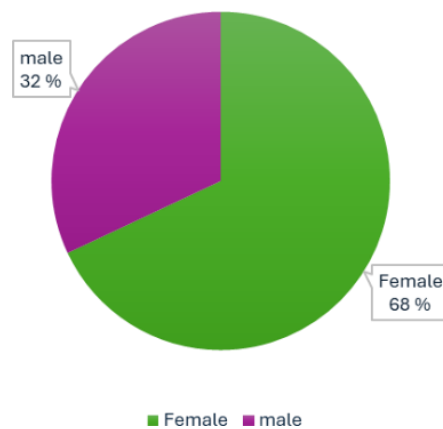


Figure 5: Gender distribution of all 70 respondents

2.1 Physical Appearance

The assessment of the physical appearance of Nummela focused on various key elements, including the perceived cleanliness of the area, the quality of its architecture, the density of buildings, and the historical presence that residents feel in the locality. Interviews were conducted at two prominent locations in Nummela: K-Citymarket during the morning hours and Prisma in the afternoon. These two locations were chosen for their high foot traffic and diverse customer base, providing a broader opportunity to engage with residents from different age groups and backgrounds.

In total, 19 responses were collected, offering valuable insights into how the physical aspects of the town are perceived by its residents. The age range of the interviewees spanned from 43 to 88 years old, with a notable concentration of participants over the age of 60. This is an important factor to consider, as older age groups may have different expectations and sensitivities regarding the visual and structural characteristics of their environment compared to younger individuals. The gender distribution was also somewhat imbalanced, with 15 respondents (70%) being female and only four respondents (30%) being male. This asymmetry may have influenced the overall feedback, as previous studies have suggested that men and women sometimes have differing priorities when assessing urban environments, with women often placing a greater emphasis on cleanliness and safety.

The majority of respondents conveyed generally positive attitudes towards the physical appearance of Nummela. A significant number reported a strong sense of the historical presence in the area, describing it as a positive characteristic that contributes to the town's charm. This was particularly true for respondents over the age of 60, who seemed to value the continuity of historical elements and traditional aesthetics more than younger participants. Moreover, most interviewees expressed satisfaction with the current building density in Nummela, stating that it strikes a reasonable balance between open space and developed areas. The density was not perceived as overcrowded, and there were no widespread complaints about excessive urban

sprawl.

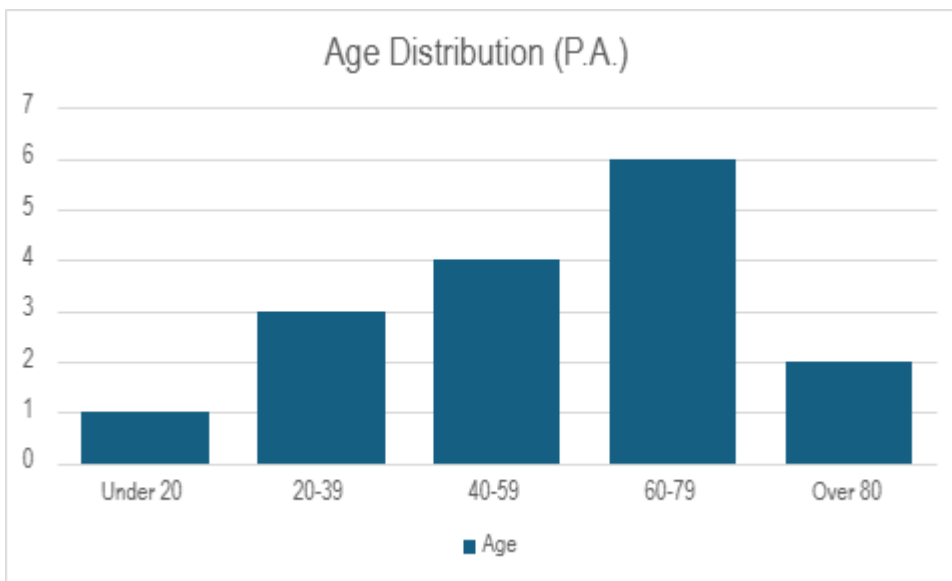


Figure 6: Age distribution of all 19 respondents.

Cleanliness emerged as one of the most frequently praised aspects of Nummela's physical environment. Many participants highlighted that the town is well-maintained, with clean streets, tidy public spaces, and minimal signs of litter or neglect. This is an essential factor in contributing to the overall satisfaction of residents, as cleanliness is often closely linked to perceptions of safety, pride, and quality of life. The surrounding landscape also received overwhelmingly positive feedback, with almost all respondents describing the natural environment as aesthetically pleasing. The presence of nature in and around Nummela, including green spaces, forests, and open fields, was often mentioned as a significant advantage that enhances the town's visual appeal and contributes to a sense of tranquillity.

However, while the general feedback on physical appearance was positive, there were some recurring concerns raised by residents. One notable issue was the lack of perceived influence or co-determination in shaping the aesthetics of the area. A slight majority of respondents indicated that they felt they had no voice or influence when it came to decisions affecting the town's physical appearance, such as building designs, urban renewal projects, or zoning changes. This sense of exclusion was particularly pronounced among older respondents, who expressed a greater desire for opportunities to participate in community planning and decision-making processes. This finding underscores a potential need for local authorities to improve transparency and communication around urban development projects while providing more accessible channels for public participation.

Interestingly, differences in responses were also observed between age groups. Respondents aged 60 and younger were notably less likely to perceive a strong historical presence in Nummela. This could reflect a generational shift in priorities, with younger individuals placing greater importance on modern infrastructure, contemporary architecture, and functional urban design. Furthermore, respondents under 60 were more critical of the buildings' appearance, with several describing them as unattractive or outdated. This sentiment highlights a gap in how different age groups perceive the aesthetics of the built environment, suggesting that efforts to modernize certain areas could appeal to younger demographics while preserving historical elements to meet the

expectations of older residents.

Another recurring concern related to the aesthetics of buildings and the density of development. While most respondents were content with the overall building density, there were a few conflicting opinions on whether certain areas are too densely built or, conversely, too sparsely developed. A significant number of interviewees also criticized the architectural design of buildings, describing them as lacking visual appeal. These critiques point to the importance of incorporating diverse design elements and architectural innovation in future urban development projects to enhance the overall attractiveness of Nummela.

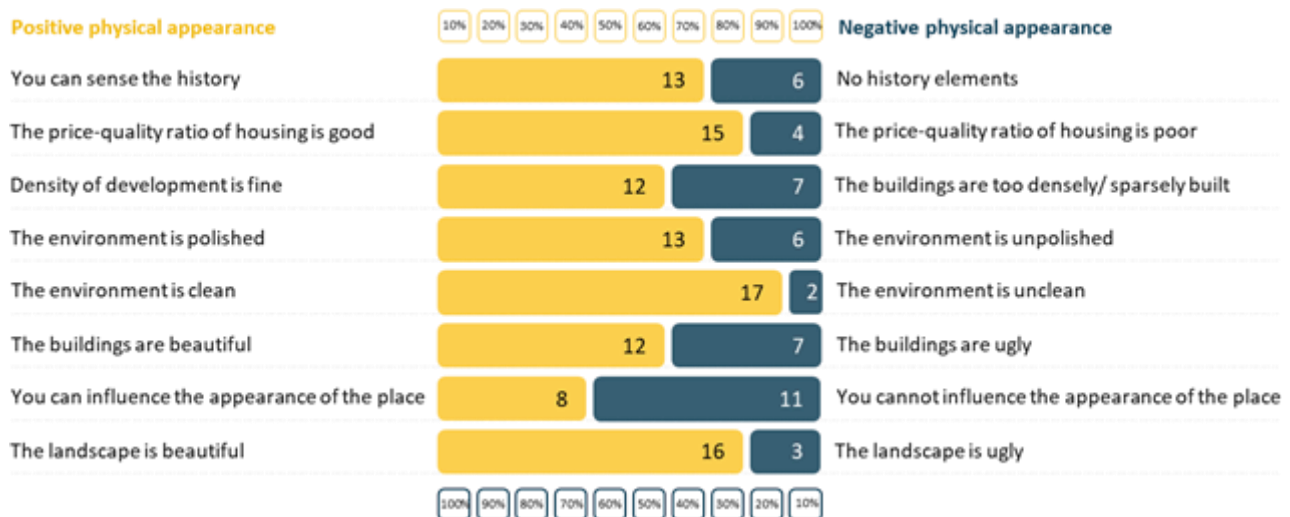


Figure 7: Responses to statements about the physical appearance. Total responses: 19.

Despite these concerns, the most positively received aspects of Nummela's physical environment were the favourable price-quality ratio of housing, the cleanliness of public spaces, and the town's beautiful natural surroundings. Many respondents emphasized how these features contribute to their overall satisfaction with living in Nummela. The combination of affordability and quality, coupled with access to clean and scenic environments, makes the town an appealing place to reside, particularly for families and older adults.

In conclusion, the results of the interviews reflect a generally positive perception of Nummela's physical appearance, with several strengths identified, including cleanliness, natural beauty, and an acceptable balance of building density. However, the findings also highlight areas for improvement, such as the need for greater resident participation in urban planning and the modernization of building aesthetics to address the concerns of younger residents. By fostering more inclusive planning processes and striking a balance between preserving historical elements and embracing contemporary design, Nummela can continue to enhance its physical environment and meet the needs of its diverse population.

2.2 Functional Quality

The evaluation of functional quality in Nummela focused on several key aspects, including accessibility to everyday services, the availability of necessary infrastructure, and the usability of

these facilities for residents of different age groups and needs. By understanding the functional aspects of Nummela, we aimed to identify how well the town serves its residents' practical requirements and where potential gaps exist. The interviews for this part of the study were conducted at two strategic locations: the Tokmanni homeware store and the K-Citymarket shopping centre. These sites were chosen due to their high foot traffic and their role as key points of interaction for the community.

At the Tokmanni homeware store, the team found it relatively easy to engage with people due to the nature of shopping activities there. Homeware shopping, unlike grocery shopping, tends to be a slower and more leisurely process, which meant that people were less rushed and more willing to take the time to answer our questions. Exceptions to this were individuals clearly involved in work-related tasks, such as those in construction, who were on tight schedules. Despite this advantage, our team faced a recurring challenge: the language barrier. With only one fluent Finnish speaker among us, conducting interviews proved to be time-consuming, as many respondents were either unwilling or unable to communicate in English. This slowed down the data collection process and limited the amount of in-depth information we could gather. Nevertheless, the respondents we did speak to were generally cooperative and interested in contributing to the research.

We successfully collected a total of 16 responses at Tokmanni, with the gender distribution leaning heavily towards women: 12 female respondents (75%) and only four male respondents (25%). The average age of participants at this location was 56 years old, aligning with the overall project demographic. A significant portion of the interviewees were in the 50-70 age group, which suggests that middle-aged and older adults make up a core part of Tokmanni's customer base during daytime hours.

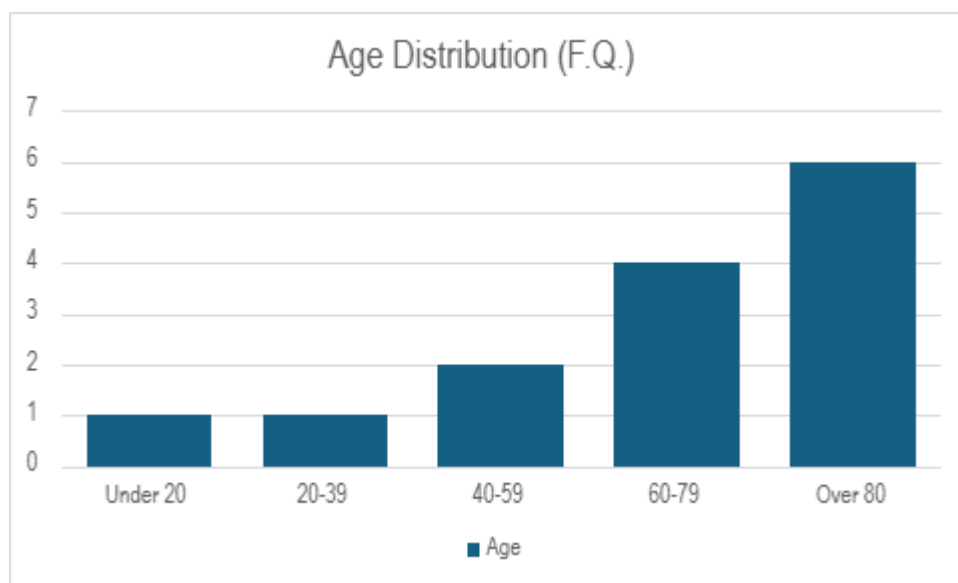


Figure 8: Age distribution of Functional Quality. Total responses: 16.

The second interview location, K-Citymarket, presented a slightly different scenario. As one of the busiest shopping centres in Nummela, the foot traffic was higher and more diverse in terms of age. However, the bustling environment also posed challenges. Many people were on tight

schedules and less willing to stop for an interview, likely because they were engaged in routine grocery shopping or other urgent tasks. The presence of multiple groups soliciting attention—including businesses, charities, and marketing representatives—also made it more difficult to capture people’s interest. Furthermore, we encountered a higher number of individuals who were not residents of Nummela but were visiting for shopping purposes, which meant they could not participate in the study. Despite these hurdles, K-Citymarket offered us an important advantage: the nearby bus stop allowed us to interact with people who relied on public transport. This gave us an opportunity to gather more diverse perspectives on transportation infrastructure in Vihti, particularly in comparison to the car-centric respondents at Tokmanni.

Overall, the responses regarding functional quality were overwhelmingly positive. An impressive 82% of respondents expressed satisfaction with the functional aspects of Nummela, emphasizing the town’s accessibility and the usability of its infrastructure. Notably, 100% of respondents reported positive experiences with car travel in Nummela, stating that it is relatively easy and convenient to navigate the town by car. Similarly, 100% of participants agreed that Nummela offers the freedom to lead their preferred lifestyle, which reflects positively on the town’s ability to meet the daily needs of its residents.

However, several critical concerns emerged, particularly in relation to public transport, cultural activities, and recreational opportunities. Public transport, while functional for some, was consistently flagged as inadequate by younger respondents. Many highlighted the limited frequency and coverage of bus services, which makes it difficult for those without personal vehicles to travel efficiently within Nummela and to neighboring towns. This aligns with the findings at K-Citymarket, where bus users emphasized the importance of improved connections to larger urban areas, such as Helsinki.

Cultural life and recreational activities were also major areas of concern. Respondents, particularly younger individuals, noted the lack of events, festivals, and recreational spaces that cater to diverse age groups and interests. Younger residents appeared particularly dissatisfied, forming a significant portion of the negative responses despite being a minority in our overall sample. This mirrors the findings from the physical appearance assessment, where younger participants expressed more critical views compared to older respondents. Their dissatisfaction highlights a potential disconnect between the current services and the expectations of younger age groups, who may desire a more dynamic and vibrant urban environment.

The differences in responses between younger and older residents are particularly noteworthy. While older participants, particularly those in the 50-70 age group, expressed high levels of satisfaction with Nummela’s functional quality, younger respondents were more vocal about its shortcomings. This generational divide underscores the need for targeted improvements that cater to younger demographics, such as enhanced public transport, recreational facilities, and cultural amenities. Addressing these gaps is crucial for retaining younger residents and attracting new families to the area.

The gender imbalance in the responses also warrants attention. With 75% of participants being women, the perspectives gathered may not fully represent the experiences and needs of men in Nummela. This skewed distribution could reflect the nature of the interview locations—Tokmanni and K-Citymarket—which may attract a higher proportion of female shoppers during daytime

hours.

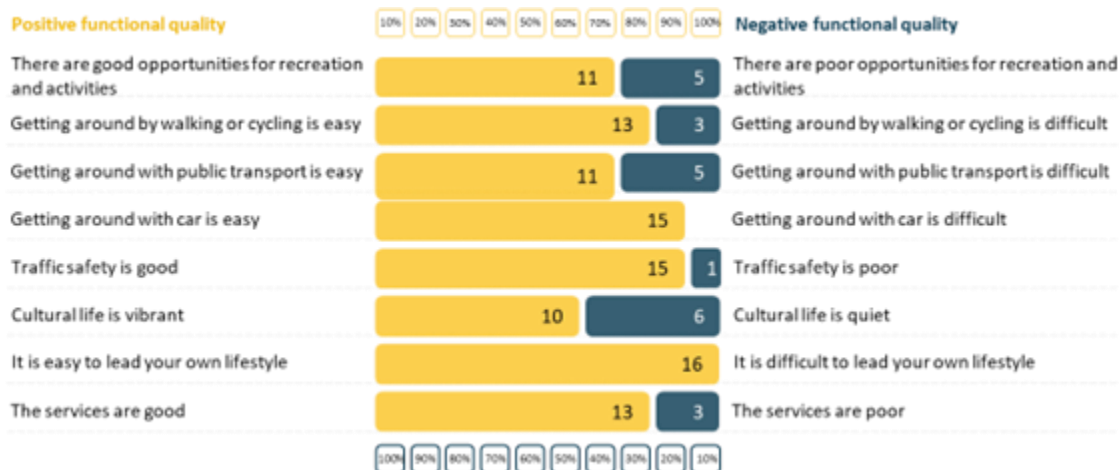


Figure 9. Responses to statements about the functional quality. Total responses: 16.

In summary, the evaluation of functional quality revealed that Nummela excels in providing a car-friendly environment and maintaining a functional infrastructure that allows residents to lead comfortable and independent lifestyles. The positive feedback on accessibility and usability reflects well on the town's ability to meet the practical needs of its residents. However, the persistent issues surrounding public transport, cultural opportunities, and recreational services highlight areas for improvement, particularly for younger demographics. By addressing these concerns, Nummela can enhance its functional quality, making the town more attractive to a wider range of residents and fostering long-term community growth and satisfaction.

2.3 Quality of the Social Environment

The examination of the social environment in Nummela aimed to explore residents' perceptions of community dynamics, the strength of social connections, and the overall reputation of their neighborhoods. A strong and positive social environment is a key component of quality of life, as it contributes to social cohesion, trust, and feelings of safety among residents. Understanding how people interact with their neighbors and how they perceive the social fabric of the area is particularly important for municipalities like Vihti, which seek to attract and retain a diverse population.

To gather relevant data, interviews were conducted in two distinct settings: the ViaDia senior home and two shopping centers in Nummela. The selection of these locations was intended to capture diverse perspectives across age groups and social dynamics. At the ViaDia senior home, we observed a highly welcoming environment, as every person we approached agreed to be interviewed. This setting provided a particularly rich source of information because the interviewees were eager to share not only their answers to the survey statements but also personal stories and detailed reflections on their social experiences in Nummela. The atmosphere at ViaDia was notably friendly and communal, underscoring the importance of such spaces in fostering social bonds among the elderly population. Several respondents even mentioned the senior home as a vital hub for interaction, support, and community building in their daily lives. At the shopping centers, the approach differed slightly. To maximize the response rate, we positioned ourselves at the entry and exit points of the shopping centers, where foot traffic was

highest. While this strategy proved effective in reaching more people, the conversations were generally shorter and less detailed compared to those at ViaDia. Shoppers were often in a hurry or preoccupied, limiting the opportunity for extended discussions. Nonetheless, we were able to gather valuable insights about the social environment, particularly from residents who frequent public spaces as part of their daily routines.

In total, we collected 19 responses across both locations. Unlike other categories assessed in this study, the gender distribution in this group was relatively balanced, with 9 men (48%) and 10 women (52%) participating. This balance allowed us to capture a more representative range of perspectives. The average age of respondents was approximately 55 years, with the majority being over 60 years old (see Figure 10). This skew toward older age groups can be partly explained by the timing of the interviews, as many working-age adults and younger residents were less available during the daytime hours when the fieldwork was conducted.

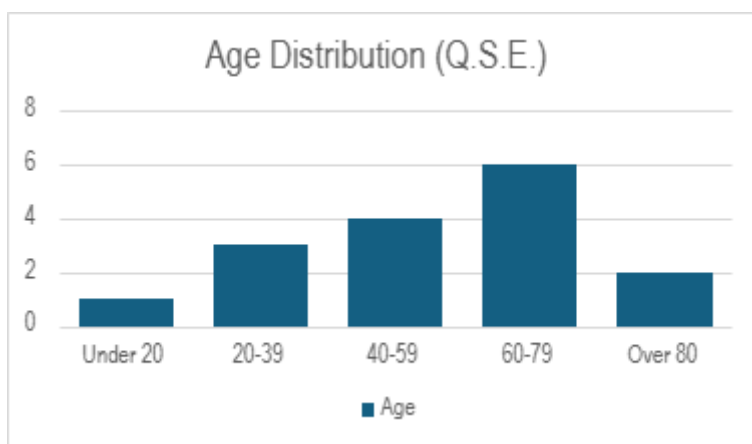


Figure 10. Age distribution of Quality of the Social Environment. Total responses: 19.

Overall, respondents shared positive views regarding the quality of the social environment in Nummela. A significant majority expressed satisfaction with their neighborhoods, emphasizing the sense of care, safety, and community within the town. Every single respondent agreed that Nummela has a good reputation, which speaks to the general trust and pride that residents feel toward their local environment. This positive reputation is an important asset for Nummela, as it reflects a high level of satisfaction and stability among the population.

Another widely shared sentiment was the perception that residents take good care of the environment. Nearly all participants agreed that the local community values cleanliness, maintenance, and the upkeep of shared spaces, contributing to a positive and well-cared-for appearance of Nummela. This aligns with the findings from the physical appearance assessment, where cleanliness was identified as a major strength of the town.

The interviews also revealed that social safety is perceived to be very high in Nummela. Respondents consistently emphasized the low levels of crime and the general feeling of security within their neighborhoods. For older respondents, in particular, this sense of safety was a crucial factor in their satisfaction with the social environment. Several participants mentioned that they felt comfortable walking alone in their neighborhoods at any time of day, which is a strong indicator of perceived safety and trust within the community.

When asked about their social connections, most respondents indicated that people important to them—such as family members or close friends—lived nearby. This proximity to loved ones was often cited as a key factor contributing to their happiness and overall satisfaction with life in Nummela. However, approximately 25% of respondents reported that important people in their lives lived far away. This highlights a potential challenge for some residents, particularly seniors or individuals who may feel socially isolated due to distance from family members.

While the overall feedback was positive, a few recurring concerns emerged during the interviews. Some respondents noted that the social life in Nummela can feel too quiet at times, particularly in the evenings and on weekends. They described the lack of events, gatherings, or community-driven activities that would make the town feel more vibrant and dynamic. This perception was especially common among younger respondents and those who had moved to Nummela from more urban areas, where social and cultural opportunities are more abundant.

Another observation was the perceived lack of diversity among residents. Some interviewees mentioned that Nummela’s population feels relatively homogenous, with limited variation in cultural backgrounds, lifestyles, or age groups. This perceived lack of variety could contribute to the town’s quieter social atmosphere and may impact efforts to attract younger families, professionals, or individuals from more diverse backgrounds.

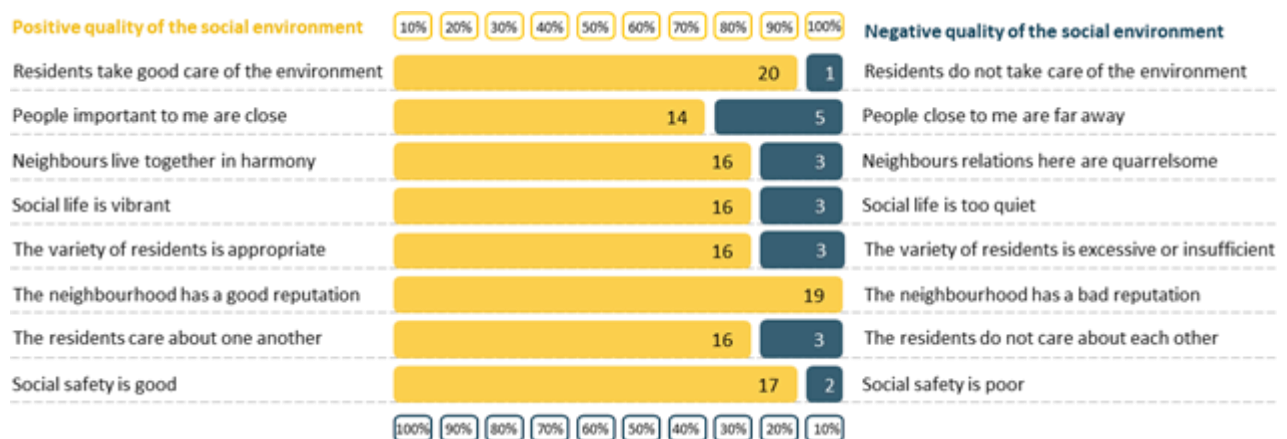


Figure 11. Responses to statements about the quality of the social environment.

In summary, the quality of the social environment in Nummela was largely praised by respondents, with key strengths including the town’s positive reputation, the sense of safety, and the care that residents show toward their neighborhoods. The importance of community spaces, such as the ViaDia senior home, was particularly evident in fostering strong social connections and a sense of belonging, especially among older residents.

However, there are opportunities for improvement, particularly in enhancing social vibrancy and fostering a more diverse and inclusive community. Addressing these challenges through initiatives like community events, cultural programs, and youth engagement could help strengthen the social fabric of Nummela while making it more appealing to a broader range of residents. By balancing the needs of different age groups and encouraging greater diversity, Nummela can continue to build on its strengths and create a thriving, connected, and resilient community (Figure 11).

2.4 Atmosphere

The investigation into Nummela's atmosphere aimed to understand residents' perceptions of tranquillity, liveliness, and the overall ambiance of the town. Atmosphere significantly impacts residents' sense of belonging, comfort, and satisfaction. By evaluating factors like noise, vibrancy, and predictability, we sought to identify what shapes Nummela's atmosphere and potential areas for improvement.

Interviews were conducted at two locations: ViaDia senior day center during noon hours and later at Tokmanni in the afternoon. These locations were selected to capture a mix of perspectives from community spaces and daily errands. However, the sample was skewed toward older adults, which likely influenced the responses.

We surveyed 14 residents, mostly pensioners above 65, with only two respondents under 30 (Figure 12). The gender distribution was 79% female and 21% male, influenced by the time and locations of the interviews, where older women were more present. Younger residents were harder to reach, particularly at Tokmanni, where shoppers appeared busier and less inclined to participate. Our first interview location was the ViaDia senior day center, a popular community hub for

Nummela's older residents. All participants were local and eager to share their experiences, reflecting the center's role in fostering a sense of community. The center provides a space for seniors to socialize, engage in activities, and stay connected with their neighbors. Some interviewees expressed concerns about ViaDia's financial limitations, as it is primarily run by volunteers and relies on community support. Several respondents requested that we forward their wishes for increased funding to the mayor of Vihti, emphasizing the importance of sustainable funding for these social spaces.

While the interviews at ViaDia were rich in qualitative data, they were often lengthy and conversational, resulting in fewer interviews overall. In hindsight, shorter, more structured interviews might have allowed for a larger sample of responses.

Our second spot was Tokmanni, which turned out to be a more challenging spot as people seemed busier and more hesitant to participate. Once again, older citizens were more willing to answer, making it difficult to find younger interviewees. The staff allowed us to conduct interviews inside. When we mentioned that we were from the University of Helsinki interview, people seemed more open to answering.

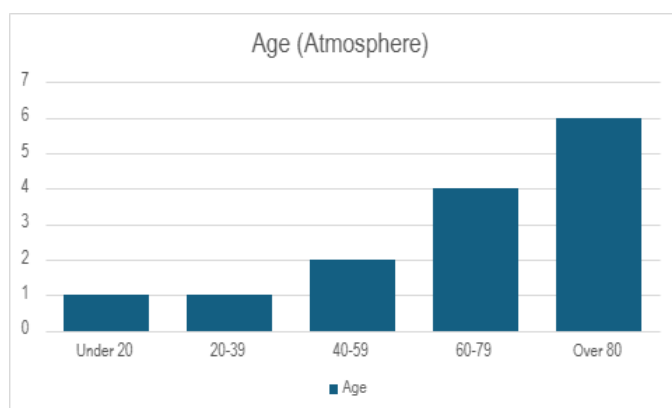


Figure 12. Age distribution of Atmosphere. Total responses: 14.

We asked how many years the respondents had lived in Nummela, elaborating by asking whether they were originally from Nummela or had moved from somewhere else, and if so, the reason for choosing Nummela. Only two people were originally from Nummela and had lived there for their entire life. The rest came from Hämeenlinna, Kirkkonummi, Helsinki, Spain and other areas. Notably, three elderly people moved to Nummela after their spouse passed away and their children's suggestions to live closer to family. Other reasons included accessible services, affordable land and property, and nearby jobs for children

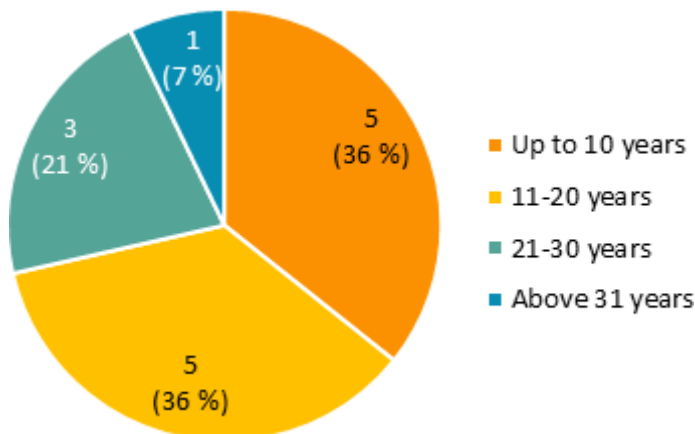


Figure 13. Additional statistics: Years of living in Nummela.

Overall, respondents held largely positive views about the atmosphere of Nummela (Figure 13). Many participants described the town as peaceful, calm, and inviting, emphasizing its suitability for a quiet and relaxed lifestyle. This perception aligns with the findings from other sections of our research, where tranquillity and a slower pace of life were frequently mentioned as key strengths of Nummela.

However, there were some notable criticisms, particularly regarding noise levels, restlessness, and the predictability of life in Nummela. Of the 14 respondents, six shared negative perceptions about these aspects:

1. **Noise Levels:** A 26-year-old woman mentioned that her house's proximity to a busy street made Nummela feel noisy. While this was an isolated complaint, it underscores the potential impact of traffic noise on residents' quality of life, particularly for those living near major roads.
2. **Predictability:** Four women, aged between 49 and 83, described Nummela as too predictable, with "not enough going on." They noted a lack of social and cultural activities that would bring variety and excitement to their daily lives. For these respondents, predictability was seen as a negative feature, contributing to a sense of monotony in the town.
3. **Restlessness:** One 80-year-old woman expressed concern about rumors that Nummela is becoming "restless" in the evenings and on weekends. While she did not experience this firsthand, the perception of increasing restlessness among residents suggests underlying concerns about changes in the town's social dynamics.

It is important to consider how age influenced respondents’ perceptions of Nummela’s atmosphere. Most of our feedback came from elderly residents at the ViaDia center, where the atmosphere was described as comfortable, predictable, and free of unwanted surprises. For many seniors, this predictability was seen as a positive attribute, offering a sense of security and stability in their daily lives. As one participant remarked, “We don’t need any more surprises at this age.” At the same time, some older respondents also expressed dissatisfaction with the lack of variety and liveliness in Nummela. This suggests that while predictability may be comforting for some, others perceive it as a limitation that hinders the town’s vibrancy and appeal. These conflicting views highlight the challenge of balancing tranquillity with opportunities for social and cultural engagement.

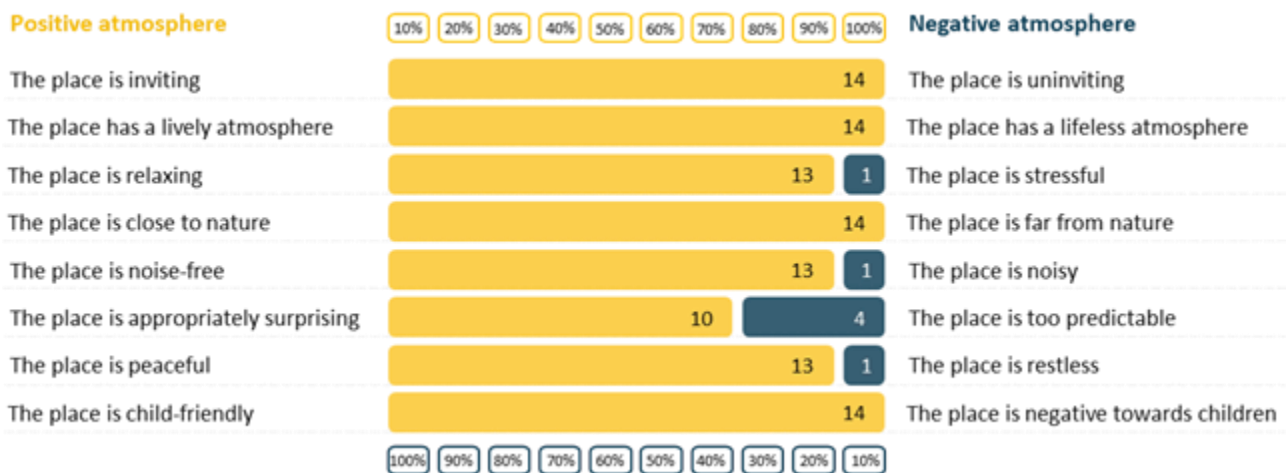


Figure 14. Responses to statements about the atmosphere of Nummela. Total responses: 16.

2.5 Open question

Each group asked respondents what they thought was better in Helsinki/Vihti or what they might want to import from Helsinki or Espoo to Vihti. This question aimed to uncover residents' comparisons between rural and urban environments, providing insight into their values and priorities regarding quality of life. According to the aggregated responses from all groups, the majority of participants expressed a clear preference for Vihti over Helsinki. Many simply stated that “everything is better” in Vihti, emphasizing their satisfaction with the local environment and lifestyle. While this sentiment reflects a strong sense of pride and contentment among respondents, it also highlights the unique appeal of Vihti as a small, tranquil community with an emphasis on nature and quality of life.

Interestingly, most people did not express a desire to import elements of urban atmosphere or infrastructure from Helsinki or Espoo. This lack of interest in replicating an urban feel speaks to the importance of Vihti’s identity as a quieter, more rural area. However, there was a general consensus that Nummela, as Vihti's primary town, could benefit from becoming livelier and offering more activities, services, and opportunities for social interaction. The respondents noted that while Vihti excels in certain areas, such as natural beauty and peacefulness, it sometimes lacks the vibrancy and amenities found in larger urban centers.

Vihti was consistently praised for its closeness to nature, calmness, and “countryside” feeling (Figure 15). Almost all respondents referenced these qualities across multiple categories, underlining the deep significance of Vihti’s rural character to its residents. Many participants

shared how they appreciated the opportunity to live surrounded by nature, forests, and open landscapes while still being relatively close to urban hubs like Helsinki. This balance was particularly important to those who had previously lived in more rural areas but desired proximity to family members, employment opportunities, and services. For these individuals, Vihti represented a compromise—offering a peaceful and safe environment without complete isolation from modern conveniences.

Several respondents highlighted how Vihti’s rural atmosphere promotes well-being, providing a sense of relaxation, safety, and harmony. The importance of maintaining this “countryside” quality was underscored repeatedly, as residents valued the slower pace of life and the opportunity to enjoy clean air, quiet surroundings, and natural beauty. For older respondents, especially pensioners, these attributes were particularly meaningful, contributing to their positive overall perceptions of Vihti as a place to live.



Figure 15. Things considered better in Vihti.

While respondents appreciated Vihti’s rural charm, they also pointed out areas where improvements could be made. The most common suggestions centered on practical concerns, such as transport connections, cultural amenities, and local services (Figure 16).



Figure 16. Things considered better in Helsinki.

1. **Transport Connections:** Respondents noted the lack of efficient public transport within Vihti and to nearby cities. Many rely heavily on personal vehicles, and better bus or train connections were requested to reduce this dependence.
2. **Cultural Amenities:** The town was described as too quiet, particularly in the evenings. Respondents suggested more events, festivals, and programs to make Nummela livelier and socially engaging.
3. **Specialized Shops:** Residents wished for smaller, locally owned shops in the center of Nummela rather than having larger stores on the outskirts. This would improve accessibility and create a more vibrant town center.
4. **Healthcare Services:** The lack of specialized medical facilities was raised as a concern, particularly for older residents who require more frequent healthcare visits.
5. **Programs for Different Age Groups:** Respondents called for more facilities and activities for seniors and youth, such as community spaces, sports programs, and playgrounds.

Analysis

Our general analysis would be, that people we interviewed were quite happy to live in Vihti. Nature, peacefulness, and the proximity of family members were the most appreciated values. The biggest concerns seemed to involve a lack of co-determination, a lack of transport connection and a lack of a lively Nummela centre with specialized shops and services.

The demographics of the interviewees consisted mostly of elderly women. This needs to be noted before continuing with the analysis, as we are lacking an important viewpoint of the youth in Vihti. Most of our answers about Vihti were quite positive, but this opinion might differ among younger people growing up there and seeking future opportunities and past-time activities, which are limited in Vihti. This means that more research is needed.

Additionally, many respondents had lived in Vihti their whole lives or moved there from less urban neighbouring counties; few respondents seemed to have moved there from metropolitan areas. This suggests that the answers come from people who might be happily settled and socially connected in a relatively small urban environment and are not seeking anything “more” from Vihti. This might be a different view from someone who is considering moving to Vihti from Helsinki metropolitan area. Therefore, further research and more accurate sampling are needed to answer the objectives of this essay.

3.1 Physical appearance

The responses indicate that the perceived living situation in Nummela is generally rated as very good. The majority of respondents are satisfied with the physical appearance of Nummela. The surrounding nature and landscape and the cleanliness of the town were highlighted as key contributors to the positive quality of life. These criteria stand out for their clear approval compared to other topics. With regard to the built environment, positive trends are less pronounced yet still receive most of the approval. Respondents under the age of 60 were

particularly dissatisfied with the physical cityscape. However, due to the small number of respondents, no general conclusions can be drawn for younger age groups.

Lynch (1960) emphasises that environments inevitably produce images and values. Every object has the potential to create a strong image, although some objects are more likely to do so than others. Homogeneous groups in terms of age, gender or cultural background tend to perceive and value similar images. For urban planning, this means designing an environment that creates a positive image for as many residents and users as possible, regardless of their background or social class. This image has a direct impact on well-being. The aim of sustainable urban planning should therefore be to create a physical environment that leaves room for free development of meaning, but at the same time conveys a strong and clear image (Lynch, 1960). Lynch (1960) also states that a well-designed city attracts attention and sharpens perception. Studies analysed by Nasar (1994) show that natural environments are preferred to man-made landscapes. The incorporation of natural elements into urban structures has been shown to improve mood and contribute to quality of life.

According to the interviewees, the issue of decision-making power over future developments is also viewed more critically, with many respondents indicating that they feel they are not adequately involved. In this context, Arnstein (1969) developed the concept of the 'ladder of participation', which depicts different levels of citizen participation. The sixth level, 'partnership', describes a partnership between city government and citizens in which decisions are made on an equal basis. Structures such as planning committees or joint boards enable both sides to develop viable solutions. The seventh level, 'delegated power', goes one step further and gives citizens a dominant negotiating position in certain processes. At this level, citizens take central responsibility and ensure that programs are accountable to them. To resolve conflicts, decision-makers must proactively seek dialogue rather than simply react to external pressure.

Older age also indicated a bigger willingness to participate in city planning. However, we do not know if the same respondents have had the chance to participate formerly but have not used the opportunity. We also do not know if the dissatisfaction is a lack of information on participation channels or if it is a dissatisfaction with already made decisions. One reason might be that information regarding planning decisions is offered through virtual channels, which are not accessible to elderly people. Once again, we suggest more research regarding this problem for Vihti city officials before jumping to conclusions.

Nasar (1994) points out that there are differences between the professional opinion of designers and the preferences of the population. However, this discrepancy is only part of the problem. When designs are reviewed, minor changes are often made without the involvement of a designer. Such adjustments, for example by institutions, homeowners or tenants, can sometimes be made in favour of individual benefits (e.g. lower costs or better views) at the expense of the common good.

In summary, it can be said that an extension of the right of participation of the population is necessary to promote sustainable and inclusive urban development. At the same time, it should be ensured that participation does not mean unrestricted freedom of choice, but that it is carried out in accordance with the common good. The different age groups have different priorities in their perceptions, but the validity of this finding is limited due to the small number of responses and the limited age distribution (no respondents between 15 and 25). Furthermore,

the highly asymmetrical gender distribution precludes any reliable statements being made about possible gender-specific differences.

In consideration of Vihti's clearly defined objectives, it can be stated that a solid foundation has already been established within the physical environment. No criterion was rated significantly inferior to others. However, circumstances may evolve with the construction of the Microsoft Data Center, which could notably impact the building density and the appeal of the buildings. Such a financially robust company could present both opportunities and risks. While the creation of new employment opportunities could assist in attracting highly qualified professionals to the region, there is also a risk that the price-performance ratio, which has been rated favourably to date, could lose its appeal.

3.2 Functional quality

The majority of the responses regarding functional quality were overwhelmingly positive. As discussed, the respondent demographics might play a significant role in these overwhelmingly positive responses. The main critiques were not about infrastructure as a whole but about cultural services and activities, although public transport was also mentioned as lacking. Additional answers to the open question support these conclusions to some extent, as activities and cultural amenities were mentioned several times.

However, responses also expressed a desire for more small practical businesses and cafes, which were not captured by our question responses. These aspects were mentioned more by the small number of younger people interviewed, who were also much more likely to express negative views about Nummela compared to the large number of older interviewees who answered positively to every question. Several responses mentioned having to drive to Espoo or other large cities in order to access services and leisure activities, which to some extent could be remedied by an increase in local and more diverse businesses within Vihti.

From our results, we can assess that older residents of Nummela are more likely to be satisfied with their quality of life than young people, with independent and car-centric lifestyles perceived most positively. Conversely, the lack of big-city amenities, like varied retail opportunities and cultural activities, was felt most acutely by young respondents. Although our sample size among young people remains too small to be truly significant, this might be a worrying conclusion for social sustainability. According to Kyttä's (2024) chapter, the functional quality of the environment is crucial for *social* sustainability, indicating that much work is still needed to attract and retain young residents in Nummela. A variety of age groups is an essential component of this social sustainability: if younger people are not persuaded to stay in Vihti, then population decline will only continue, and the quality of life for those remaining in Nummela will also decline, since residents strongly desire to live close to friends and family, which has been shown conclusively across this project. Cultural activities were most often critiqued in this regard, indicating that Vihti's planners should prioritise events and festivals as well as ongoing cultural programmes, or at least to better promote those that exist already.

The other main analytical point to pick up is the apparent car-dependent nature of Nummela's residents. All respondents found car travel to be relatively easy, but a significant minority couldn't say the same thing about public transport, and almost all respondents owned a car that they used regularly. Ramezani et al. (2021) provide insights and potential solutions here. Their research in Helsinki reveals gendered and age-related patterns of attitudes towards transport (e.g. women

less likely to use public transport) and simply shows that longer commutes to work and poor public transport encourage car ownership. They also describe the intimate interlinkages of income and public transport use – a car-dependent community like Nummela is likely to exclude certain social groups, especially less-affluent households reliant on public transport, which negatively impacts the diversity, and by extension social sustainability of the space. More obviously, an urban area with poor public transport is likely to be producing outside levels of air pollution and contributing to greenhouse gas emissions, which harms environmental sustainability at both the local and global levels in direct contradiction to the basic principles of sustainability on which Kytä's work is based. Ramezani et al. even link to car-dependency to reduced health of the population and fewer people leading active lifestyles. Overall, it is clear that Nummela is a predominantly car-centric community, which could be significantly harmful to its functional quality and quality of life in general – public transport improvements would be a massive leap forward in this regard, alongside the potential for densification measures to increase walkability within Vihti.

In light of our findings that Nummela residents view their community as car-centric and see public transport as needing improvement, there is potential for urban planners to create real change. However, if desired shops, cafes and restaurants do not materialise and residents continue to need to travel for them, car dependency is unlikely to change, which will continue to harm the community from the short-term into the future. If Nummela does not provide the businesses, leisure opportunities, transport and services that maintain a high standard of functional quality for residents, people are likely to move away, especially the young.

3.3 Quality of the social environment

Our interviews reveal that residents view the quality of the social environment positively. Over 90% of respondents agreed that residents take good care of the environment, and that the neighbourhood has a good reputation. Additionally, most respondents believe that neighbours live in harmony, the variety of residents is appropriate, residents care for one another, and the social life is vibrant. Over 80% also believe that social safety is good.

However, nearly 25% of respondents said that they felt distant from important people in their lives. Improving public transport and connections to larger cities, such as Helsinki, could make residents of Vihti feel closer to their important people. Making public transportation and connections better was also a main topic in the interviews, as the quickest way to travel to Vihti is currently by car. However, Vihti is currently working on making more efficient transport connections for smoother everyday life (Vihti, 2024). Residents also expressed a desire for more cultural and recreational opportunities in Vihti, such as theatres, concerts, more parks and public spaces, and more youth programs. These amenities of diverse events and social gatherings could enrich the social environment, making Vihti more appealing and aligning with the municipality's goals of fostering growth and vitality.

The quality of the social environment plays a crucial role in shaping the attractiveness and vitality of municipalities like Vihti. As Vihti aims to attract young working professionals, pensioners and highly skilled migrants, addressing certain perceptions of the social environment can support these efforts. For example, for young adults, improving vibrant social life and enhancing harmony among residents could appeal to young people looking for lively yet peaceful, and green communities. For pensioners ensuring safety and fostering community care would appeal to retirees who value security and friendly neighbourhoods. And for highly skilled migrants, a

positive social environment and a good reputation for the neighbourhood would attract professionals who seek a high quality of living and community involvement. Respondent demographics support these strategies, with six respondents under the age of 35 and nine over 67, indicating a range of community needs.

The findings align with the themes from Vaattovaara et al. (2024), which explore how neighbourhoods influence residential satisfaction and attract a diverse population. In Nummela, the harmony and social safety noted by residents reflect positive indicators of satisfaction. Respondents were mostly happy with the quality of the social environment of Nummela and liked living there. However, the desire for more social life and cultural activities highlights a need for improvements.

Similarly, Kepsu and Vaattovaara (2008) provide insights into urban and rural dynamics in Finnish municipalities, which are relevant for addressing Nummela's challenges in social diversity and connectivity. Improved transportation links, such as a tram or direct train access to Helsinki, could bridge the gap between Vihti's rural charm and urban convenience, making Nummela more appealing to both current and potential residents.

Based on Montanye's (2001) book review and Coleman's (1988) work on social capital, Nummela's community cohesion and trust can be seen as critical assets for the municipality today. These concepts emphasise the importance of fostering local networks and connections to enhance cooperation, social well-being and trust among residents. Additionally, Forrest and Kearns (2001) link social cohesion, capital and neighbourhood environments, supporting the idea that enhancing Nummela's social and recreational infrastructure could strengthen community ties. Lefebvre (1992) highlights how spatial characteristics influence social interactions, suggesting that investing in shared public spaces could play an important role in boosting cohesion and vitality in Nummela's social environment.

3.4 Atmosphere

Soft conditions such as an attractive living environment and atmosphere play a significant role in retaining residents in the city (Kepsu & Vaattovaara, 2008). Here, atmosphere is referred to as a soft condition because it connects objective factors and environmental constellations with bodily feelings in that environment (Böhme, 2016). Within this contextual framework, we analyse the survey conducted in Nummela, which explores how residents perceive the atmosphere and living environment, and their reasons for moving to or staying in Nummela, Vihti.

According to the respondents, Nummela is described as having a pleasant atmosphere. As Pallasmaa (2014) explained, atmosphere transcends visual qualities, encompassing sensory, emotional, and bodily perceptions. This perspective suggests that Nummela's atmosphere is not just about its physical appearance – presumed to have some negative features in the previous section – but also about how it evokes feelings of liveliness, relaxation and peace as respondents mentioned. Moreover, Nummela's lively, inviting and child-friendly atmosphere might be derived from resident's subjective feelings (Böhme, 2016) of safety and neighbourhood closeness, though they feel a lack of good opportunities for recreation and activities as noted in the functional quality section.

Respondents had quite positive perceptions of Nummela's atmosphere, which attracted them to

move to or stay in the area. However, some concerns were raised regarding the future growth and vitality of Vihti. For instance, some interviewees thought that Nummela could be livelier especially in the evening when it can feel lifeless. These statements imply that lifeless evenings might deter younger people which is a demographic that the municipality aims to attract. On the contrary, this livelier atmosphere for young people might contradict the seniors' preference for a 'peaceful, calm, countryside-like and noise-free' atmosphere.

Noise was not yet perceived negatively by respondents though several mentioned traffic noise close to their homes. However, potential noise issues may arise if the number of cars increases with the growing population while public transportation remains insufficient. This indicates also the importance of keeping residential buildings further away from busy streets.

Nature in Nummela was the biggest (pull) factor, which makes the respondents perceive the atmosphere as 'peaceful, relaxing, calmer and countryside-like'. There was also some variation in the perspectives people had about nature in Nummela. Some people thought that Nummela was not that natural compared with other areas in Vihti and some thought that Nummela was better than Helsinki because of its nature and low population density. Preserving the essence of attractions and atmosphere might be important for retaining current residents while creating an appealing environment for new residents.

The fact that the senior people move to Nummela might indicate that they find it a place for meaningful and active aging. From seniors' responses, it can be emphasized that the senior 'community' creates this attractive atmosphere for them. However, services were responded to as quite inadequate. Only ViaDia senior day centre plays an important role, hosting around 1,600 encounters annually according to the staff of ViaDia. The staff mentioned, that ViaDia's financial support is very limited, and human resources are insufficient, with only two staff members. In terms of physical needs, the staff wished for a larger space for cooking. This shows the need to improve the existing senior services and further increase the number of services with the growing elderly population.

Upcoming plans, such as Microsoft Data Center and prospective population growth, seemed to provoke a little fear and insecurity in the respondents about Nummela losing the attractiveness and atmosphere they value. For instance, some respondents preferred the new offices to be located farther from the city centre.

Conclusions

The overall answers we received from this research are positive. In terms of physical appearance, the majority of people were satisfied with the nature and landscape, cleanliness and overall living quality in Nummela. However, there was more controversy regarding building density and the aesthetics of the buildings. The most criticized aspect of the physical appearance was the lack of participation in decision-making processes concerning the area's aesthetics.

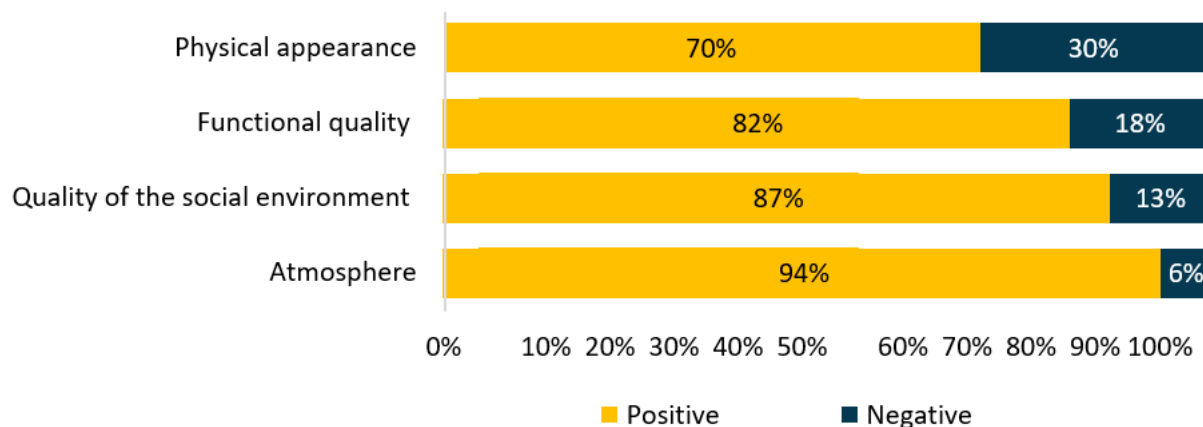
The functional quality of Nummela was also perceived very positively. The main criticism was related to infrastructure, public transport and cultural services and activities. Respondents mentioned the need for more opportunities for young people, such as skate parks, low-level sports clubs or community centres.

Responses regarding the quality of the social environment were also positive. Most respondents

believed that residents take good care of the environment, and that the neighbourhood has a good reputation. Many people thought social life was vibrant and social safety was good, although some felt that they didn't have important people living close to them.




Regarding the overall atmosphere of Nummela, respondents were mainly content. Most elderly people appreciated the countryside feeling and nature. All respondents agreed that Nummela is inviting, has a lively atmosphere and is child friendly.

The overall image of Nummela area, according to the interviewees, is generally positive. Only a few of the interviewees were young adults, who expressed a need for more opportunities, such as functional public transport to the capital region and within the whole Vihti area. Respondents desired more leisure places like inviting cafes, sports opportunities for young adults and shopping possibilities, as these were the reasons why they had to go to the capital region. However, as mentioned, Nummela was seen as a good place for families. Overall, according to the interviews, Vihti is a good place to live for people with a car, allowing movement inside and outside the region. Despite the majority of interviewees being pensioners, living in Nummela seems to be positive and ongoing lifestyle that fits their needs. Vihti is seeking more people to move in, and attracting pensioners could be a solution to the growth question.



When looking at these results we must remember that the demographics of our interviewees were biased towards elderly women and people who had lived in Vihti their whole lives or moved from smaller counties. When comparing the answers of younger people and elderly people we could see that in many cases older people were more likely to have positive views than younger people. This affects the results and that's why further research is needed to achieve the goals of this paper.

Table 2. Overlook of all responses. Negative answers from light to dark red and positive answers from light to dark green. Star indicates most popular answers.

Physical appearance		Functional quality		Quality of the social environment		Atmosphere	
Positive	Negative	Positive	Negative	Positive	Negative	Positive	Negative
You can sense the history	No history elements	Good opportunities for recreation and activities	Poor opportunities for recreation and activities	Residents take good care of the environment	Residents do not take care of the environment	The place is inviting 	The place is uninviting
The price-quality ratio of housing is good	The price-quality ratio of housing is poor	Getting around by walking or cycling is easy	Getting around by walking or cycling is difficult	People important to me are close	People close to me are far away	The place has a lively atmosphere 	The place has a lifeless atmosphere
Density of development/sparse development is fine	The buildings are too densely/sparingly built	Getting around with public transport is easy	Getting around with public transport is difficult	Neighbours live together in harmony	Neighbour relations here are quarrelsome	The place is relaxing	The place is stressful
The environment is polished	The environment is unpolished	Getting around with a car is easy	Getting around with a car is difficult	Social life is vibrant	Social life is too quiet	The place is close to nature 	The place is far from nature
The environment is clean	The environment is unclean	Traffic safety is good	Traffic safety is poor	The variety of residents is appropriate	The variety of residents is excessive or insufficient	The place is noise-free	The place is noisy
The buildings are beautiful	The buildings are ugly	Cultural life is vibrant	Cultural life is quiet	The neighborhood has a good reputation 	The neighbourhood has a bad reputation	The place is appropriately surprising	The place is too predictable
You can influence the appearance of the place	You cannot influence the appearance of the place	It is easy to lead your own lifestyle 	It is difficult to lead your own lifestyle	The residents care about one another	The residents do not care about each other	The place is peaceful	The place is restless
The landscape is beautiful	The landscape is ugly	The services are good	The services are poor	Social safety is good	Social safety is poor	The place is child-friendly 	The place is negative towards children

Ideas & recommendations for Vihti

Based on our interview research and relevant literature, we propose the following strategies for Vihti to support growth and attract a diverse population in Nummela.

Recommendation 1. Compact and Self-sufficient Urban Core

The core of Nummela can be denser and walkable with multi-functional spaces such as residential, commercial, cultural, and recreational areas. Many researchers suggested higher densities for a variety of social benefits. Higher density makes urban facilities more accessible and hence enhances urban equity (Burton et al., 2003; Dempsey et al., 2011; Lang et al., 2019), encourages people to meet each other frequently (Pahl-Weber, 2007), promotes a sense of community (Nasar & Julian, 1995), enables a more diverse, inclusive, and liveable urban environment (Aquino &

Gainza, 2014), contributes to a higher quality of life and liveability (Bardhan et al., 2015; Bay & Lehmann, 2017; Mouratidis, 2018), results in a higher sense of safety (Bay & Lehmann, 2017; Karuppannan & Sivam, 2011) and higher social interactions (Frey, 2003; Raman, 2010; Talen, 1999), reduces social segregation (Burton, 2000), offers a higher feeling of environmental quality (Kytta et al., 2016), and thus enhances social sustainability of communities (Shirazi, 2020).

Forming a denser urban core could provide not only social benefits but also significant gains in transportation efficiency. Establishing an efficient public transportation system in a sparsely populated town is challenging, given the current car-dependent culture and insufficient commercial services in Vihti. Our team is proposing several key improvements:

- Establish a demand responsive transport DRT (Dytckov et al., 2022): DRT will leverage the benefits of a denser urban core by efficiently connecting residents from peripheral areas to the city center, concentrating travel into the center instead of dispersing it randomly across the city, thereby improving transportation efficiency. Moreover, the DRT improves accessibility for all demographics, including those without access to private vehicles.
- Also, DRT can function effectively within a broader integrated transit network, connecting residents to other cities. To further improve transportation, Vihti can enhance connectivity to Helsinki and other urban centres through improved train, tram or bus services. This will shorten travel times and encourage more people to commute to and from Vihti. There is a need to collaborate with surrounding municipalities to develop a seamless transit network – this will encourage people to move to the area and link it up with major cities such as Helsinki and Turku.

Returning to Kytta's indicator, she argues that through changes in urban structure the accessibility of everyday services is enhanced. This happens for example with a walkable city centre and other pleasant transport options. Also, the appearance and maintenance of the built environment is important in this regard. According to the study by Kytta et al. (2016), denser urban structure is considered to improve accessibility, if the overall experience of the environment is positive. Enjoyment of one's surroundings might improve the well-being of residents altogether, and therefore make Vihti an attractive place to stay, regardless of age.



Figure 18. The conceptual model of social sustainability linking urban structural characteristics with accessibility and the experiential and health outcomes. (Kytta et al. 2016, 36).

Recommendation 2. Community and Cultural Development

Cultural development in Vihti can significantly enhance the municipality's social, economic, and environmental sustainability. It is important for attracting an educated workforce, economic diversification, branding for a city, creating an attractive environment for people to live in and visit, contributing to community cohesion, maintaining health and well-being, and developing valuable social networks (Tjarve & Zemite, 2017). Our team is proposing following recommendations for community and cultural development.

- Development of a more vibrant town centre: By fostering a vibrant town center with a diverse range of local businesses, such as cafes, restaurants, and shops, Vihti can strengthen its local economy and appeal to both residents and visitors. Also, it might be important to note that improving Vihti should be a collaborative task rather than solely being the municipality's responsibility. The municipality can play a key role in supporting local businesses by providing incentives, resources, and creating an attractive environment for investment. One great example is low-cost pop-up shop program in Muskegon, Michigan (Quednau, 2018). This program involved offering affordable temporary retail spaces to local entrepreneurs. These pop-up shops allowed businesses to test new ideas and create a dynamic atmosphere in the downtown area. The initiative aimed to revitalize the space by drawing foot traffic, which benefited both the small businesses and the local economy. Visitors were attracted to the unique shops and the fresh vibe, increasing engagement and creating a livelier community.
- Highlighting unique attractions, such as natural landmarks or cultural sites, would help brand the town and increase tourism. The cooperation of municipalities and local businesses could also play a crucial role in this part. The municipality can allow, or support nature- based local businesses such as extreme sports businesses, or adventure tourism.
- More festivals and community events. Host annual events that can celebrate local culture, art, and history to make it a destination for tourists – increasing the number of people who come to the area and may want to move there in the future. That can also promote the municipality's identity. Cultural opportunities were mentioned especially by younger respondents, indicating that cultural programmes could be instrumental in the municipality's aim of attracting and retaining younger residents.
- Moreover, promoting diversity through the inclusion of digital nomads, artists, and remote workers can foster creativity and economic resilience.

Recommendation 3. Providing Economic Opportunities

As mentioned above, providing good economic opportunities is pivotal to enhancing the attraction of Vihti. Therefore, we propose the following recommendations.

- Encourage startups and innovation hubs: If the area wants to attract the younger generation, of professionals, then there needs to be incentives for tech and green businesses to set up in Vihti – boosting job opportunities in the area.
- Support local agriculture and eco-tourism: To increase farm to table practices,

Vihti needs to promote the area's natural beauty.

- Smart city initiatives: Introduce smart lighting, waste management and energy efficient buildings with all new builds to really modernise the area – creating a hub for innovation and forward thinking.
- Increase electric vehicle charging stations: To support Finland's forward thinking green energy goals, increasing the use of charging stations – or making them compulsory in new constructions may help towards the region's green commitment – also drawing attention to the area as being innovative and conscious of the environment.

Recommendation 4. Supporting Current Residents and Attracting Newcomers

Though our previous recommendations are also supporting current residents and attracting newcomers, we are proposing the following measures in addition.

- Create spaces that evoke a pleasant atmosphere that is relaxing for seniors, and livelier for young adults and children by integrating sensory and physical features.
- Vihti can be an ideal destination for remote workers (digital nomads) who seek a tranquil and countryside-like atmosphere.
- Develop a wide range of different housing options – affordable for young professionals and families where it promotes green spaces and the outdoors – needs to be attractive housing to promote young families. Almost all respondents mentioned their appreciation for green space in Vihti, and the area's natural beauty – this must be safeguarded above all in the case of any new development.
- More specialized healthcare services, if elderly people are a target group.
- Vocational schools etc., if they want young people to stay in Vihti.

By implementing these recommendations, Vihti can foster a dynamic, inclusive and sustainable community that meets the needs of current residents while attracting a diverse and growing population, from young professionals and families to pensioners.



Figure 19. The conceptual model of social sustainability linking urban structural characteristics with accessibility and the experiential and health outcomes. (Kytä et al. 2016, 36)

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Experienced Neighbourhood Cohesion in Vihti

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Taru Mälkiä, Onni Pörhölä and Victoria Rumbin

1. Background

Population forecasts and public discussion in Finland often seem to revolve around the scenarios where most Finnish municipalities are doomed to decreasing population (e.g. MDI, 2024). This approach can diminish people as sheer numbers instead of focusing on what the actual everyday lives of people look like. Since every municipality cannot get its share of growth, it is important to also consider other indicators of well-being, such as vitality and quality of life that do not necessarily demand population growth.

Therefore, this essay will explore how the residents of Nummela, Vihti, view neighbourhood cohesion based on answers that we gathered using door-to-door interviews in four neighbourhoods of Nummela in November of 2024. Neighbourhood cohesion, i.e. sense of belonging, could be one of the above-mentioned aspects of vital residential areas. Paying attention to cohesion and enhancing it could retain residents and even increase attraction to the area. Thus, it is important to examine how citizens perceive cohesion in their neighbourhood.

In this essay, cohesion is operationalised through professor Arto O. Salonen's neighbourhood cohesion indicator, which is one of the neighbourhood sustainability indicators in the book *Towards more sustainable residential areas – Indicators of neighbourhood and block sustainability* (Vaattovaara et al., 2024). At the core of this essay is the analysis of interviews conducted in Nummela. The data provides insight into residents' perceptions of cohesion, offering valuable perspectives on shared values, diversity, and everyday interactions. By examining these themes, we aim to contribute to the broader discourse on sustainable and socially vibrant neighbourhoods, drawing connections between theoretical frameworks and the lived realities of residents, and seek to find answers on how important cohesion is for the residents of Nummela and what are the benefits of it.

In the introduction, we will first discuss Salonen's definition of cohesion, and how other scholars have characterized the concept. Next, we will cover the effects of cohesion on a neighbourhood level. Following that, we will provide a brief introduction to Nummela, Vihti and Vihti's strategy as well as the neighbourhoods where we conducted our survey. Then, we will analyse the results of our survey. Finally, we conclude our essay with our policy recommendations for enhancing cohesion that could lead to better vitality in the whole municipality of Vihti.

Definitions of neighbourhood cohesion

Salonen (2024) defines neighbourhood cohesion as a sense of belonging in the block in which the resident lives. In other words, there is a sense of solidarity within the neighbourhood which leads to cooperation and sharing of everyday matters. Compassion and trust between the residents are also concepts close to neighbourhood cohesion.

Similar descriptions of cohesion can also be seen in previous literature. Other dimensions of social cohesion include social order, control, and interaction as well as strong place identity (Forrest & Kearns, 2001). Smith (1975) highlights that neighbourhood cohesion can be seen as personal identification and social interaction with the area and other residents. Personal identification increases the sense of belonging and it also means that a person identifies with the area and his neighbours, feels that his neighbours are friendly and helpful, likes the area, and derives satisfaction from living there (Smith, 1975).

Social interaction mentioned by Damurski (2022) is also strongly related to Smith's concept of personal identification. According to Damurski (2022), social interaction is defined as people's networking within a neighbourhood that includes activities such as asking for help and informal visiting. It means that people are willing to help each other, trust their neighbours and one another, and that there are safe places for their children in the neighbourhood (Damurski, 2022). These factors together form the foundation for strong neighbourhood cohesion and a sense of strong informal social control that prevents conflicts and instead encourages civic engagement and associational activity. Lack of these aspects can lead to disorder, lack of solidarity, and passive communities.

Cohesion, however, does not suggest that the residents must be a homogeneous group in order to work towards shared goals. In a neighbourhood with strong cohesion, people's diversity is celebrated, and the sense of belonging allows the residents to retain their uniqueness (Salonen, 2024). What is crucial, instead, is agreement on fundamental values that can influence feelings of belonging, the sharing of emotions within the neighbourhood, closeness, and the consideration of neighbours. Highly conflicting worldviews can instead result in difficulties in finding common ground among the citizens.

In line with Salonen (2024), Smith (1975) also mentions the importance of values and specifically emphasizes that different approaches to reaching a common consensus on local decisions are suitable for each neighbourhood. Common consensus can enhance overall group spirit and behaviour patterns (Smith, 1975). Different neighbourhoods may require different approaches to enhancing a sense of belonging, and this does not mean that all residential areas should follow the same formula for increasing cohesion. Therefore, it is important to consider the specific needs of the residents in each neighbourhood when developing strategies to strengthen belonging.

Even though Salonen (2024) emphasises that diversity does not stand in the way of unity, previous studies present a more mixed view of the relationship between heterogeneity and cohesion. In the Netherlands, residential mobility and economic and ethnic heterogeneity do not have a consistent negative effect on neighbourhood cohesion, but affluent residential areas are more socially cohesive (Tolsma et al., 2009). However, Koopmans and Schaeffer (2015) find that perceived ethno-cultural diversity is negatively connected to, for example, lower levels of trust and connection to neighbours. A meta study by van der Meer and Tolsma (2014) reveals that the negative link between ethnic diversity and social cohesion depends on what aspects of cohesion are measured, and that the phenomenon is stronger in the United States than in other countries.

According to previous studies, social cohesion may thus be harder to attain in heterogeneous residential areas. In Salonen's (2024) definition, diversity is not a prerequisite, but a circumstance of cohesive neighbourhoods. Shared experiences are thus more important than a shared background in bringing the neighbours together. Often it is easier to agree on commonly accepted attitudes, such as preventing crimes. As we approach more concrete issues, more variance in opinions is inevitable.

This, perhaps, could raise a potential threat to neighbourhood cohesion. Even though the majority of people would most likely agree with, for example, helping those in need, the issues handled in neighbourhoods are usually very concrete. People can view something as unfair if someone never participates in communal work and others have to carry a bigger workload. Sharing casual matters

may begin in everyday settings where disagreements are also prone to emerge. Being unable to look past the quarrels may pose a challenge to neighbourhood cohesion.

Social cohesion on the scale of a neighbourhood and its effects on well-being

Why is, then, a neighbourhood a relevant level of cohesion? Creating networks on even a global level has never been easier. Services are more clustered in shopping centres, and many people have to leave their neighbourhood to run errands. However, these may be the reasons why there is a need for neighbourhood cohesion. As the level of interaction shifts towards the macro scale, local networks and familiar places may be more important sources of comfort and security (Forrest & Kearns, 2001).

Furthermore, when the neighbourhood does not provide all the necessary services, its role as a place of leisure time or an extension of the home increases (Forrest & Kearns, 2001). Remote work can also raise the significance of home and neighbourhood – the place where we spend the most time becomes a more salient part of our identity. Thus, neighbourhood cohesion, or lack thereof, can have a stronger influence on the residents' well-being.

Previous research shows that good neighbourhood cohesion carries multiple benefits to its residents' health and well-being (De Vries et al., 2013; Hartig et al., 2024; Jennings & Bamkole, 2019), for example through decreased isolation and loneliness, as well as increased physical activity (Zahnow, 2024). Beyond general health, neighbourhood cohesion also plays a role in promoting mental health. For instance, a study by Elliott et al. (2014) examining adults over 50 years old found a moderate link between neighbourhood cohesion and mental well-being. This connection was particularly pronounced among older age groups, suggesting that a sense of belonging becomes increasingly important for those less likely to relocate in the future. Furthermore, perceived neighbourhood cohesion and safety are associated with better health outcomes, even when individual-level factors are accounted for. While cohesion and safety are partly overlapping concepts, cohesion may also enhance the perceived safety of an area (Baum et al., 2009).

Nevertheless, Forrest and Kearns (2001) remark that strong social cohesion in a neighbourhood is not solely a positive thing. If neighbourhoods form tight, exclusive communities, the outcome may be a highly fragmented city. The effects of social cohesion should thus be examined on different levels. The challenge is then to find a good balance of cohesion – that is, that neighbourhood cohesion is not so strong that it is detrimental to overall cohesion on a city level. In other words, strong place attachment and solidarity should not be too exclusive in a neighbourhood.

Introduction to Nummela, Vihti

Nummela is the economic and administrative centre of Vihti, a municipality in the Uusimaa region of southern Finland. Vihti is located approximately 45 kilometres northwest of Helsinki, making it an area with significant potential for growth, attracting both residents and businesses seeking access to urban opportunities while enjoying a more suburban or rural setting, while maintaining easy connections to the Helsinki Metropolitan Area.

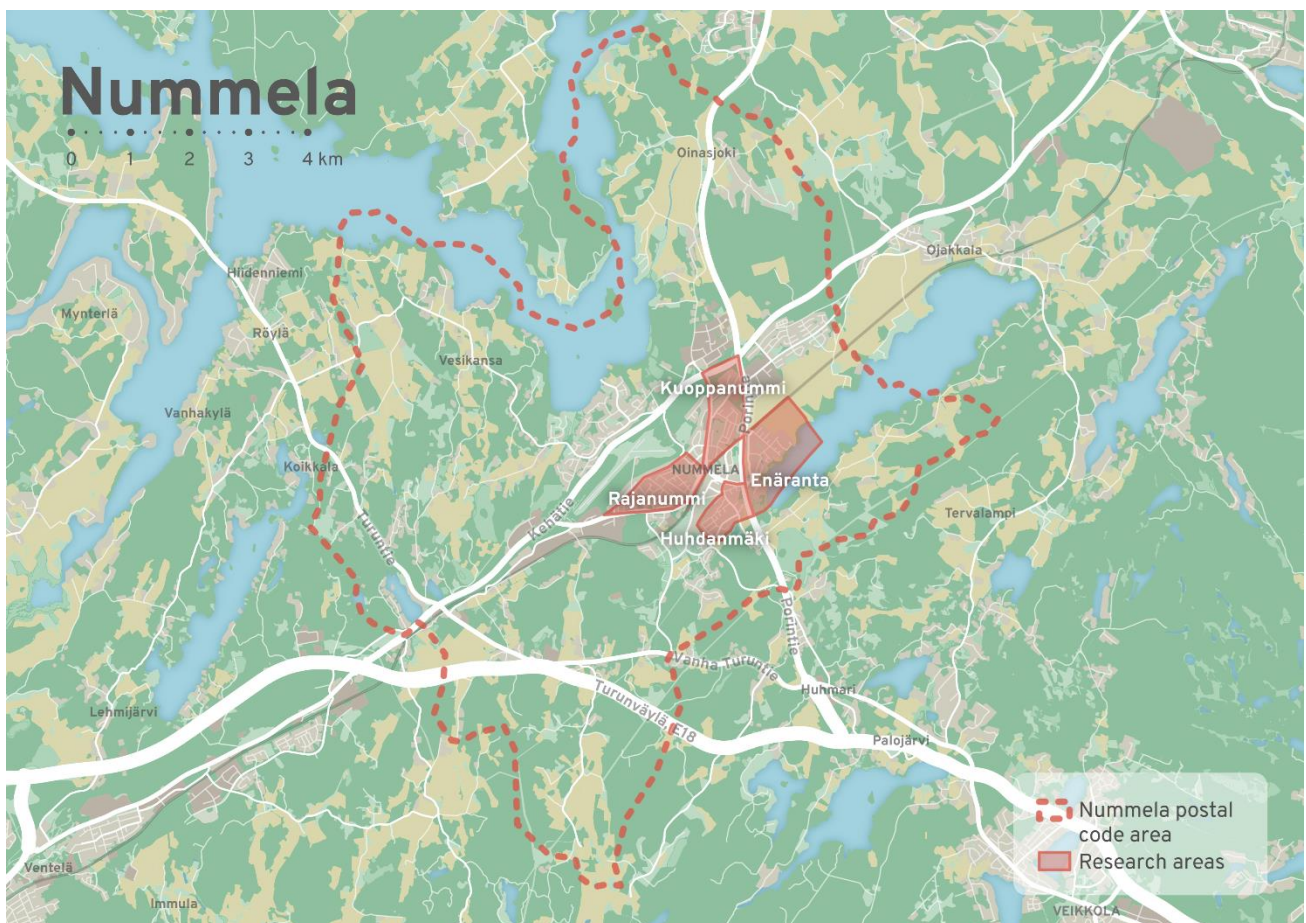
Vihti is a municipality of around 28,000 residents, of which roughly 15,000 live in Nummela. Nummela serves as a focal point for commerce, municipal services, and administration. It houses a

variety of public institutions, schools, and businesses that support the surrounding rural and suburban areas. Over recent decades, Nummela has grown into a suburban town, reflecting the broader trends of urbanization in Finland.

The town's residential areas feature a mix of housing types, including detached houses, terraced homes, and apartments. Nummela retains close ties to its natural surroundings, with landmarks like the Nuuksio National Park and Lake Enäjärvi offering recreational opportunities for residents and visitors.

The Vihti Municipal Strategy 2022–2025 has growth goals and aims to have a population of at least 30,000 residents by 2025. This growth will be supported by planned residential developments, improved infrastructure, and an emphasis on creating a balanced lifestyle that combines access to urban amenities with the benefits of nature. The municipality is focused on strengthening its position within the Helsinki region by enhancing transportation connections, including significant investments in a high-speed rail to Turku, and improving digital services.

Sustainability is a key priority in Vihti's development strategy. The municipality is committed to reducing its environmental impact by promoting climate-friendly transportation options, maintaining biodiversity, and ensuring sustainable growth practices in all aspects of development. This commitment to sustainability, combined with a focus on innovation and community engagement, is central to Vihti's vision of fostering a vibrant and resilient community.



Nummela postal code area and research areas.

Vihti also values community well-being, offering services that support families, early childhood education, and a range of health and social services. The town's strategic focus includes creating opportunities for business growth, ensuring that entrepreneurs have the support they need to thrive, and fostering a vibrant local economy.

Since communality is one of Vihti's key values, promoting neighbourhood cohesion fits well with the municipality's strategic goals. As was mentioned before, neighbourhood cohesion is also connected to the well-being of residents, which is also one of Vihti's priorities. Thus, strong neighbourhood cohesion could increase residents' satisfaction with the municipality. When cohesion is fostered, it can become one of Vihti's trump cards for retaining happy residents and attracting new people to the municipality.

2. Interviews, data



Nummela research areas.

We conducted interviews on a November weekday in Nummela, Vihti, in four different residential areas: Enäranta, Huhdanmäki, Kuoppanummi, and Rajanummi. The residential areas had a variety of housing types, such as small apartment buildings, row houses, and detached houses. However, the areas also differed from each other; for example, Rajanummi, known as the "old Nummela", was predominantly an area of detached houses with relatively few residents moving around during the day. In contrast, Kuoppanummi, located on the other side of Nummela, had a much more diverse housing stock and significantly more people seen moving around the area. This can

be explained by the fact that Kuoppanummi had more amenities, such as a school, grocery store, and sports fields, and it was also slightly closer to the centre of Nummela, making its services within walking distance.

The interviews were conducted in the morning and afternoon as a door-to-door survey and by interviewing people moving around the residential areas. Our target group was all the residents living permanently in these four residential areas. We conducted the interviews in pairs to seamlessly present the questions and record the responses.

Our interview study included six different statements about neighbourhood cohesion. The neighbourhood cohesion indicator used was from Salonen's (2024) article in the book *Towards more sustainable residential areas – Indicators of neighbourhood and block sustainability* (Vaattovaara et al., 2024). The article presented the statements as examples of how such a complex phenomenon could be approached through research. Our task was to test how these statements would work in practice as part of an interview study. This neighbourhood cohesion indicator has not been tested before, so our interview survey is the first in which these statements by Salonen were tested in practice. The six statements were:

1. The city block I live in forms a community whose membership means a lot to me.
2. I can influence matters related to our block.
3. I actively contribute to maintaining cohesion among the residents of my block, for example by greeting them.
4. In our city block, it is natural to share the joys and sorrows of everyday life.
5. The residents of our block are close to each other in a way that allows each of them to retain their uniqueness.
6. The residents of our block are considerate of one another.

We asked residents to evaluate the statements about their residential area on a scale from 1 to 10, where 1 does not describe the area at all and 10 describes it perfectly. We supplemented these statements with one open-ended question to gain a better understanding of the significance of neighbourhood cohesion for the residents. We asked whether residents consider neighbourhood cohesion important and why or why not. The survey also included necessary background information about the respondents, such as age, gender, and whether the respondent lives in the specified residential area. We also included information about which residential area the questions concern, so that we can compare answers between different residential areas in Nummela.

We received a total of 60 responses to our survey, which were quite evenly distributed among the different residential areas (Figure 1). The background information collected also included data on age and gender. Since we conducted the survey on a weekday between 10 AM and 3 PM, the responses were primarily from residents who were at home during that time, such as retirees and remote workers (Figure 2). Therefore, conducting the survey in the evening or on a weekend could yield a more diverse range of respondents from different age groups, as it would also reach more working individuals. The gender distribution of the survey was balanced, although slightly more women responded than men (Figure 3).

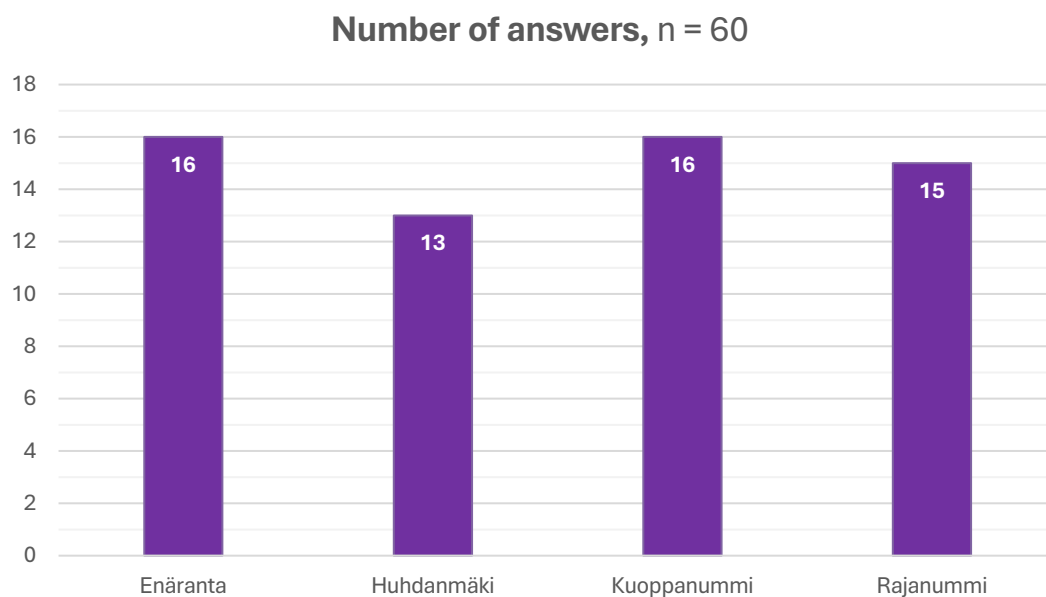


Figure 1. The distribution of responses among different neighbourhoods.

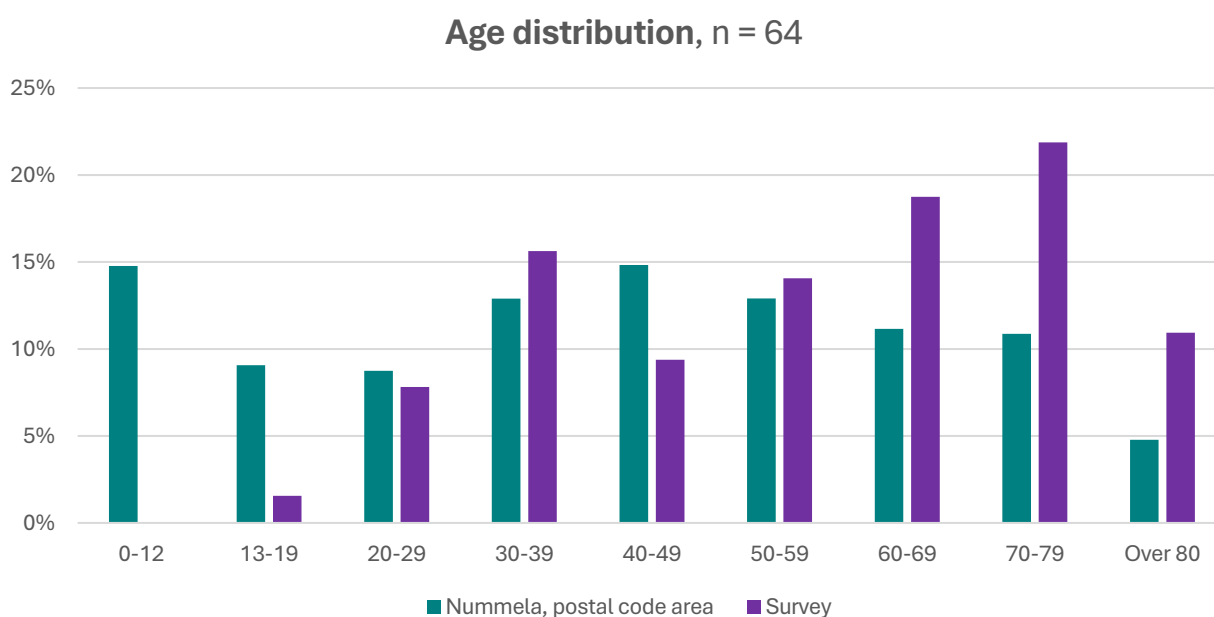


Figure 2. Age distribution of the survey.

Mean age
Nummela: 42

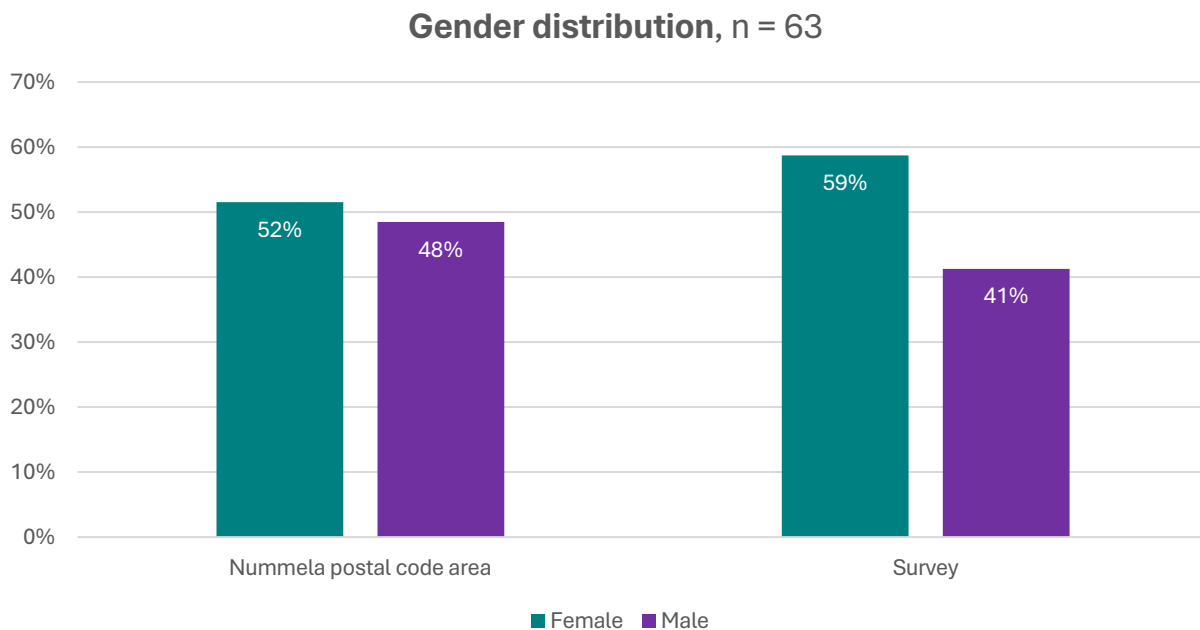


Figure 3. Gender distribution of the survey.

We received grades ranging from 1 to 10 for the statements. This proved challenging for some respondents, as many clearly wanted to answer verbally rather than with a numerical grade. For example, one statement that asked about a resident's influence over their own neighbourhood evoked many personal experiences in the residents, which would certainly be valuable information in addition to grades. However, our final open-ended question allowed respondents to express their thoughts on neighbourhood cohesion in their own words, beyond just the numerical scores. We will present the results of the statements and the open-ended question in more detail in the following analysis section.

3. Analysis

The response results to all the statements we asked about related to perceived neighbourhood cohesion are shown below (figure 4). A general glance indicates that the results are weighted above number 5 in statements 4.1 and 4.3–4.6. Statement 4.2, which assesses residents' opportunities to influence matters related to their block, differs from the others because it has a higher number of responses to option 1 compared to the others. Additionally, it has significantly fewer responses to option 10 than the other statements. It therefore seems that there may be some shortcomings in opportunities for influence, while the sense of belonging, helping others, greeting others, openness, and consideration for others seem to be at a relatively good level. Next, we will consider the responses to the statements in more detail, considering the responses from each area we have studied.

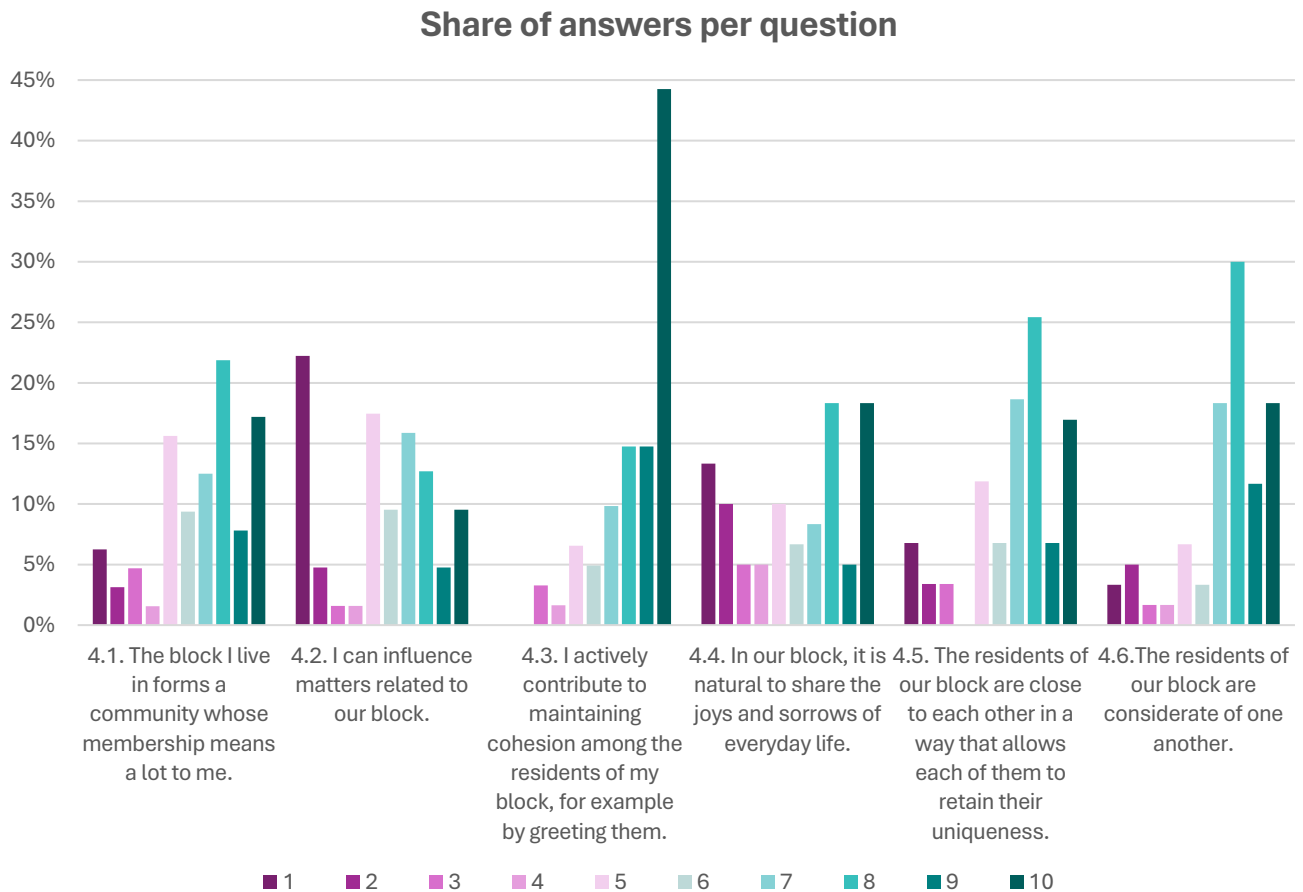


Figure 4. The distribution of answers regarding the neighbourhood cohesion statements.

As we stated earlier, a shared value system has a significant impact on social cohesion (Salonen, 2024; Smith, 1975). A shared neighbourhood value system is not directly addressed in our survey, but it generally influences, for example, feelings of belonging, the sharing of emotions within the neighbourhood, closeness, and the consideration of neighbours. Therefore, it also creates a foundation for the responses. A shared value system may influence the underlying factors, as illustrated in statement 4.1 (figure 5), where we inquired about the importance of a sense of belonging. Additionally, the personal identification mentioned earlier by Smith (1975) is strongly related to question 4.1. Personal identification increases the feeling of belonging, as individuals identify with themselves and their neighbours, feel that their neighbours are friendly and helpful, like the area, and derive satisfaction from living there (Smith, 1975).

According to the results of the mentioned survey question 4.1 (The block I live in forms a community whose membership means a lot to me), the statement seems to hold mostly true in the areas we studied. The results were largely above the number 5, indicating that most respondents feel some level of connection and community with their neighbourhood and consider it important. Generally, the largest group of respondents (about 23%) selected the number 8, which indicates a strong sense of the importance of belonging. Also, nearly 17% of respondents chose the number 10. The fewest responses were in the range of 1–4, with a total of just over 13%. It is important to remember that everyone is unique and has their individual needs and as such we can't directly extrapolate that the people answering 1–4 don't feel like they belong in a community, because it could also mean that they don't feel the need to belong to it. Looking at the answers to question 5.1, we can see that a couple of people replied they had not felt a need

for a community. One person replied they just had not felt the need, another that it is not important for them because they are introvert, and a third that they would prefer to live alone in the middle of the forest. However, for the most part, we can state that neighbourhood cohesion is something that the respondents value.

The image below (figure 5) shows detailed responses to statement 4.1. The results are presented as averages by area and gender. The results are fairly consistent across areas, although there are some differences between genders. The average for the entire statement is 6.7 for both men and women in all areas. In general, men have answered this question with a slightly higher number than women. In the Rajanummi area, women have experienced a slightly stronger sense of belonging and membership than men, according to the results. However, the difference is not very large in this area. In the Kuoppanummi and Enäranta areas, the differences between genders are somewhat larger. Men have experienced a stronger sense of belonging, and the sense of membership experienced by men differs from that of women by 1.5 in Kuoppanummi and 1.7 in Enäranta. In the Huhdanmäki area, women have answered with an average of 7.5, while men have answered about one point lower, with an average of 6.4. According to these results, the sense of belonging in the areas we studied is generally strong, and it is considered important among neighbours.

4.1. The block I live in forms a community whose membership means a lot to me.



Figure 5. Results for statement 4.1, categorized by area and gender.

It is also vital for residents' sense of cohesion to be able to influence the decisions around them (Salonen, 2024). Building a functioning community with good neighbourhood cohesion relies on the residents' perceived ability to advocate for themselves and have actual effects on the

decisions affecting them and their neighbourhood (Salonen, 2024). In our questionnaire, we asked if the residents felt they could influence matters related to their block (statement 4.2). Though a large portion of the replies felt they could somewhat influence matters related to their block, nearly a fifth of the people replying felt they had little to no influence on matters relating to their neighbourhood.

When the results are examined in more detail by area and gender, some differences can be observed between the studied areas (figure 6). For example, in the Kuoppanummi area, men have rated the opportunities to influence with an average of 7, while women have rated it only 3.5. Similarly, in the Rajanummi and Huhdanmäki areas, the participation opportunities experienced by women are below 5, while the average for men in the Rajanummi area is 5.6, just above the midpoint, and in the Huhdanmäki area 6.6. In the Enäranta area, the gender differences in the responses are slightly smaller, and both averages exceed the midpoint. The differences between men and women in these results were not surprising, as previous studies at the national level have also shown that women's opportunities for participation and confidence in their own influence are inadequate (see Ortiz Escalante & Gutiérrez Valdivia, 2015).

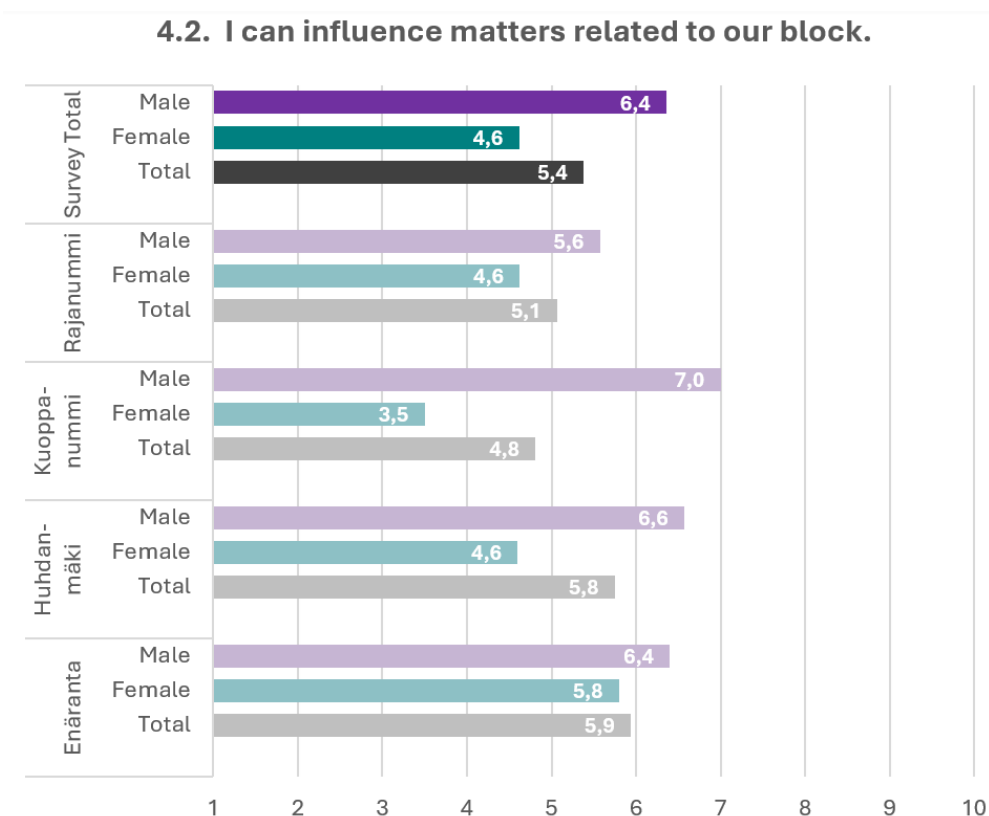


Figure 6. Results for statement 4.2, categorized by area and gender.

Overall, the average response to the statement is 5.4. Even though the most common response is number 1, there is enough variation among the respondents that the average is relatively high compared to the most frequent response. It is also possible that, for example, personal characteristics may influence residents' participation. Some people may be naturally more active and seek situations where they can influence things, while others prefer to stay in the background and would like more information about participation opportunities. Therefore, it would be

important to inform residents about potential opportunities to participate, so that the barrier to participation would be lower, and increase opportunities for influence, which also supports the goals of Vihti municipality. This is something that the decision-makers in Vihti could give some consideration to. Increasing residents' perceived ability to influence their living area might not be enough to attract new residents, but it could help decrease moving away among existing residents. Damurski (2022) states that neighbourhood cohesion is indicative of how attracted residents are to live in that area and to remain as residents.

Statement 4.3 (figure 7) assessed residents' maintenance of cohesion, such as greeting neighbours. The results show that over 90% of residents maintain a good atmosphere, for example, by greeting each other. In the table below, it can also be observed that the average results are high and quite consistent across areas and genders. The combined average for all areas and both genders is 8.4, with minor variation between genders. The highest average among the respondents was in Enäranta, where men responded with an average of 9.4, while the lowest average was in Rajanummi, where both genders responded with an average of 7.4, which is still a high result. The results suggest that, for example, the social interaction mentioned by Damurski (2022) would be at a good level in each of the areas we studied. Active social interaction strengthens the general atmosphere and a certain sense of connection to the area, which also makes life more enjoyable.

4.3. I actively contribute to maintaining cohesion among the residents of my block, for example by greeting them.

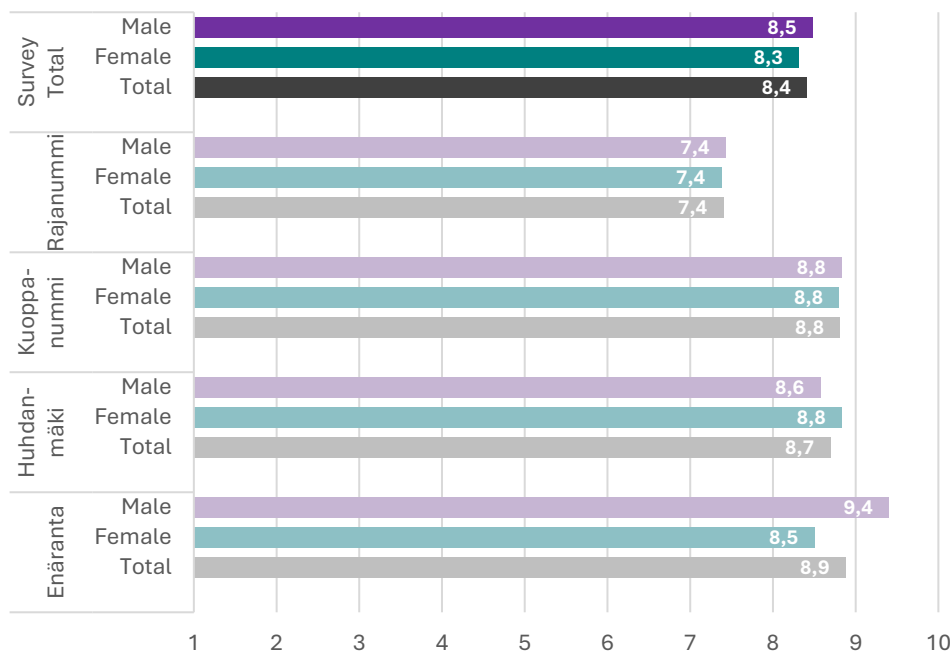


Figure 7. Results for statement 4.3, categorized by area and gender.

The survey results in statement 4.4 (In our block, it is natural to share the joys and sorrows of everyday life) show that the responses are not only concentrated on one side of the response scale but are distributed unevenly across the entire range of the scale (see figure 4). However, the

most frequent responses are 10 and 8 (both slightly over 18%), which suggests that a significant portion of respondents perceive their neighbourhood as receptive to sharing life's joys and sorrows. On the other hand, 13% have chosen option 1, indicating that they do not find it natural to share their joys and sorrows at all. If we take a closer look at Figure 8, where the results are categorized by region and gender, we can observe that the average for Rajanummi is significantly lower compared to the other areas. The result was unexpected and requires further examination. In Huhdanmäki, the results are roughly around the general average, with not much difference between men and women. In the Enäranta and Kuoppanummi areas, the combined average for both genders is around the general average, but there are clear differences between the genders, with men's responses being higher than women's.

4.4. In our block, it is natural to share the joys and sorrows of everyday life.

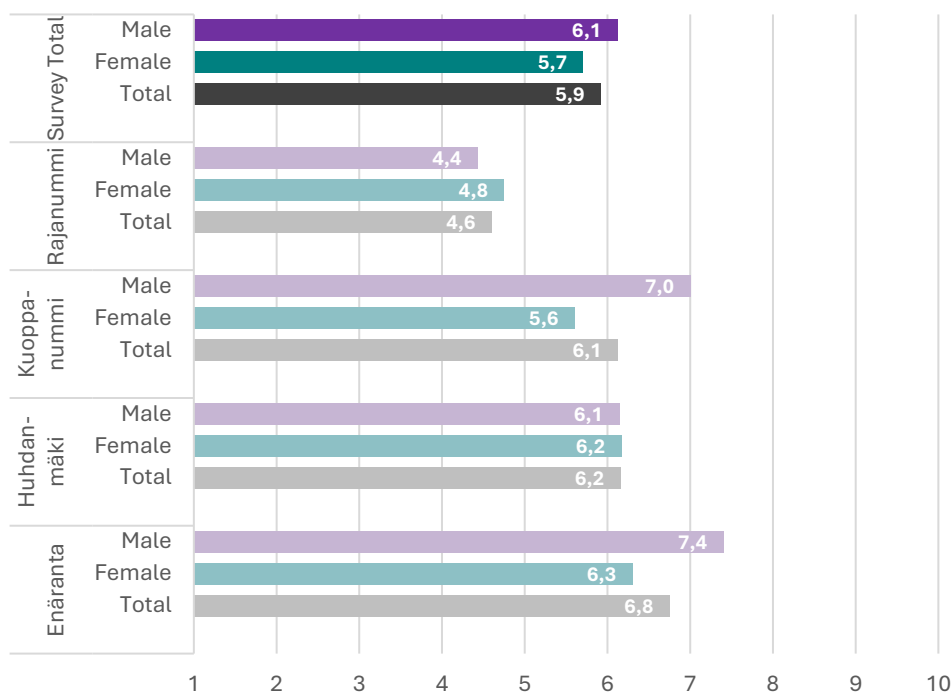


Figure 8. Results for statement 4.4, categorized by area and gender.

Statements 4.5 and 4.6 (Figures 9 & 10) can be considered complementary to each other. The responses are also relatively similar in terms of their levels (the average for statement 4.5 is 6.9, while for statement 4.6 it is 7.4). Both statements relate, to some extent, to the proximity and consideration of neighbours, which is why the results are likely similar by gender and region. In both statements, the lowest combined average is found in the Rajanummi area. Additionally, the results for women in statement 4.5 in the Kuoppanummi area is only 6, and in statement 4.6 in the Enäranta area, 6.6. Based on these statements, the proximity of neighbours and the consideration of everyone is at a good level in the areas we studied, although in some areas the average is slightly lower.

4.5. The residents of our block are close to each other in a way that allows each of them to retain their uniqueness.

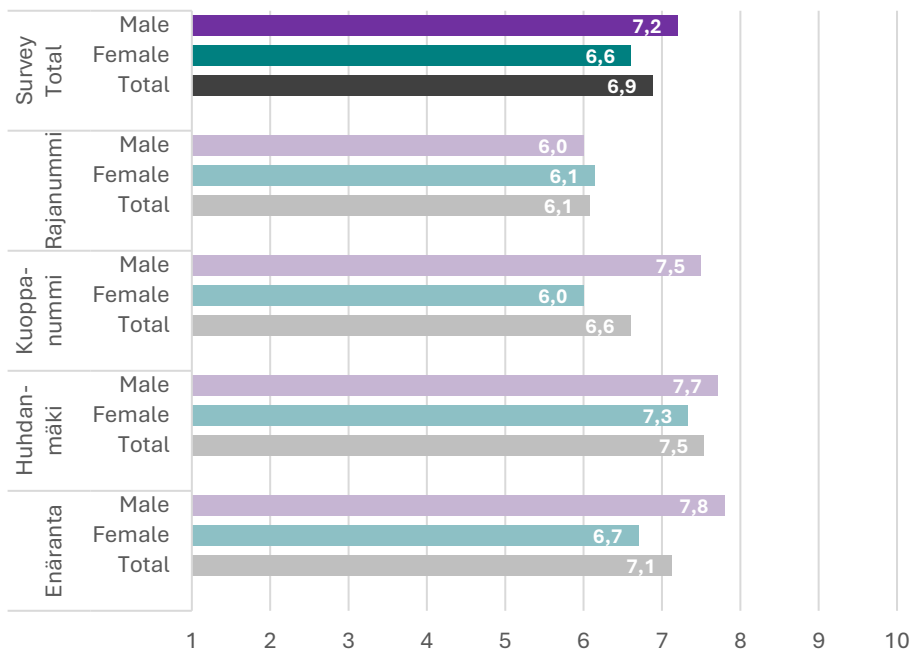


Figure 9. Results for statement 4.5, categorized by area and gender.

4.6. The residents of our block are considerate of one another.

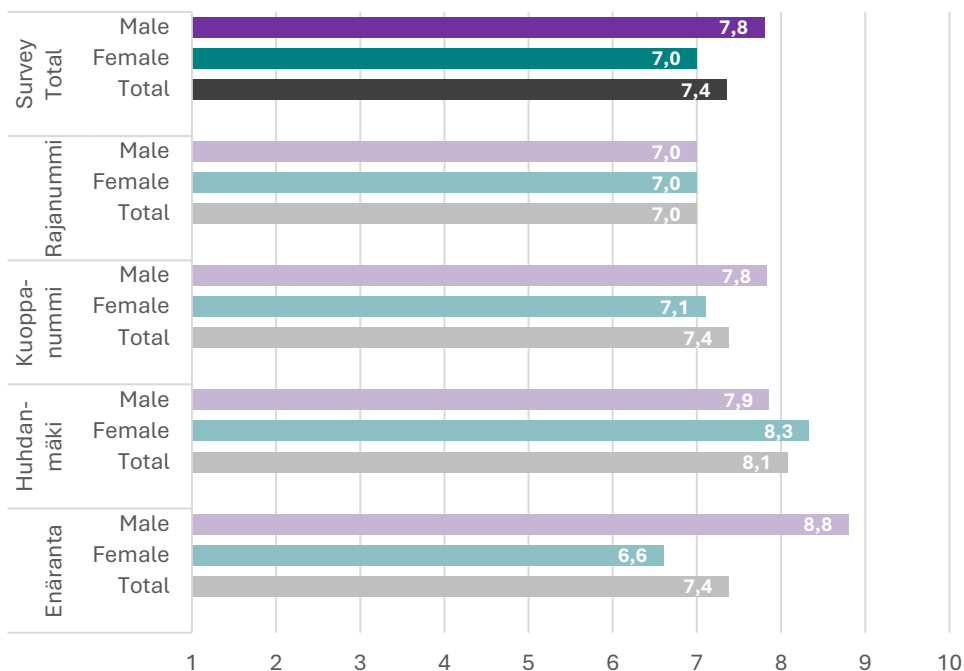


Figure 10. Results for statement 4.6, categorized by area and gender.

The results of statements 4.4–4.6 somewhat support Smith’s (1975) concept of personal identification and Damurski’s (2022) view on social interaction. However, the outcome could be

more favourable in terms of these perspectives, as well as neighbourhood cohesion. On the other hand, the results, for example, in question 4.4 may also be influenced by respondents' general comfort level in sharing personal matters with semi-familiar or familiar neighbours. Not everyone may consider it necessary, and this may not necessarily reflect poor neighbourhood cohesion. For example, based on responses to questions regarding proximity, personal uniqueness, and consideration of others, the results suggest that neighbours are generally considerate of one another (see Figures 9 & 10).

In our questionnaire, more than 90% of the respondents answered that neighbourhood community cohesion is important (questions 5 & 5.1). A lot of the justifications people gave for this were things that might not be easily improved by means of political or administrative decisions. Most of the replies highlighted very community-led reasons such as looking after each other's children, helping each other when needed and just having conversations with neighbours. However, we also had replies stating that they do not really feel like they belong in the community or that there is a small community of long-time residents that is difficult to break into. This situation could perhaps be helped by decision-makers by creating communal spaces.

5. Do you consider the cohesion of community in your neighborhood important?

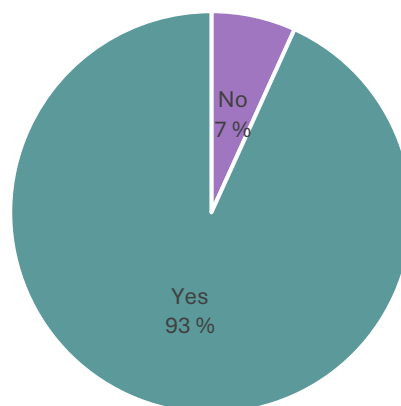


Figure 11. Results for question 5.

Communal spaces are important in making everyday connections possible. Seeing familiar people, interacting with others, and having specific places to go to help create a sense of cohesion and belonging (Zahnow, 2024). These communal areas can be privately owned, such as grocery stores, retailers, and other everyday services, but public spaces also play a big part (Zahnow, 2024). Areas such as public parks and libraries are places of connection (Zahnow, 2024). The Vihti municipal strategy 2022–2025 is aiming to promote a balanced lifestyle combining access to both green spaces and urban amenities. Placing a focus on creating areas of encountering could increase the attractiveness and appeal of certain areas. Having communal spaces that are free to use for anyone could also attract frequent visitors from nearby areas creating a feeling of togetherness with a wider population. This could also potentially help mitigate the more negative effects of overtly tight communities such as fracturing. This fracturing was seen in some of the replies to our questionnaire where residents felt that there were tight communities that they could not break into and as such felt excluded from the community (question 5.1).

Based on the results from Huhdanmäki many interviewees said that the yearly block party is an important part of belonging to the community (question 5.1). Also having same-aged kids was an important part of feeling togetherness and safety when the whole neighbourhood knew that many parents are watching when there are kids from many families playing together (question 5.1). Mouratidis & Poortinga (2020) argue that social activity could be linked to higher social cohesion, and this could be proved by these above-mentioned answers in Nummela. Overall, neighbourhood cohesion was an important part of feeling safe and not feeling lonely in the answers (question 5.1).

Bäcklund (2024) argues that vitality of neighbourhoods is affected by many different indicators. However, based on our interview questions about neighbourhood cohesion, the most suitable terms that describe the vitality of neighbourhoods, also mentioned by Bäcklund (2024), are: perceived community spirit and tolerant atmosphere, peer support, hobbies, awareness of local events, active residential activities, and a sense of inclusion. These all could be linked to different answers to our questions, like the block party mentioned above (question 5.1). These indicators are also linked to Bäcklund's (2024) current neighbourhood and regional development factors to be considered, which are diversity, disparity, and inequality. Bäcklund (2024) writes that, unlike disparity and inequality, diversity is not a negative factor because, for example, It can help build a strong local identity and present a positive image of the neighbourhood to people living elsewhere. This positive image of neighbourhoods is of course linked to potential population growth in the area if people are moving from elsewhere because of this positive image they have of the neighbourhood. For example, Kepsu & Vaattovaara (2008) argue that high-income creative knowledge workers most likely live in owner-occupied homes in attractive neighbourhoods even though their workplaces are not often permanent. For them, the closeness of their job site is not important, but a permanent home is (Kepsu & Vaattovaara, 2008).

We argue that in Nummela the social cohesion was also dependent on how and when the neighbourhood was built based on questions (5.1). The type of housing was based on our own overall observations. For example, in Enäranta the social cohesion was in our answers much better in an area with townhouses than in a small area with small terrace house apartments. Maybe this could be linked to the fact that people living in townhouses are probably more likely to have achieved their housing goals, making them more socially active with their neighbours, because they have probably lived there longer or are planning to stay longer. Mouratidis & Poortinga (2020) found out in their studies that urban areas with a similarly built environment tend to have high social cohesion when the urban vitality is high. In some parts of Enäranta, Huhdanmäki and Rajanummi people did answer that the houses were built at the same time, so many people had lived and socialized there with their neighbours ever since, and this could also be a very valid reason for good neighbourhood cohesion (question 5.1). In Rajanummi, many of the now elderly inhabitants that moved into the neighbourhood a long time ago were still living there, and one middle aged resident who had moved there later, also said that it's hard to become a part of the neighbourhood community, because the neighbourhood had already developed into compact community long before she moved there (question 5.1). In Enäranta also, some people told us that it was hard to integrate into the community because of this already compact community (question 5.1). Kuoppanummi was not as community oriented compared to the other areas, and we felt that the emphasis on neighbours' help, or the sense of security was not as prominent, but still there were quite different opinions in certain blocks (question 5.1).

Overall, the answers to our questionnaire show the importance of community cohesion to residents. Nearly all of our respondents feel that community cohesion is important and makes

everyday life better and more social. The biggest discrepancy we noticed was with question 4.2. Though nearly all of our respondents replied that community cohesion is important to them, many felt that they had no control over things related to their neighbourhood. We cannot, however, be sure that the results we got are truly representative of the whole of Nummela or even the neighbourhoods where we conducted the questionnaires. Since we administered the questionnaires in the middle of the day on a weekday, the people replying were mostly either elderly people or those working from home. As such, our data pool is quite narrow, and this could very well skew the results.

4. Conclusions

The purpose of this survey was to examine neighbourhood cohesion and its perceived importance among residents in four residential areas of Nummela in the municipality of Vihti: Huhdanmäki, Kuoppanummi, Rajanummi, and Enäranta. These neighbourhood areas consisted of mainly low-rise residential buildings and were located one to two kilometres away from the centre. Differences in social cohesion were noted across neighbourhoods and genders. Areas with shared histories, such as those where residents had developed buildings simultaneously, tended to exhibit stronger bonds. Conversely, residents in newer or loosely built areas often reported weaker neighbour connections. Gender differences appear in all the statement grade averages; females gave lower grades to all cohesion statements.

The survey results clearly convey that the majority of neighbourhood residents feel that cohesion is very important. Cohesion appears, for example, by greeting neighbours and talking. In addition, in a cohesive neighbourhood, nearby residents can serve as a support network; if their own family does not live nearby, they can provide, for instance, childcare help. Cohesion can also provide a feeling of safety.

In their responses, residents were generally satisfied with the closeness with their neighbours. This experience is very subjective. The experience of being close to neighbours can vary considerably between individuals and depends on many factors, such as the form of housing, the compactness of the neighbourhood, and the resident's own expectations and personality. For some, intimacy can mean a sense of security and community, while for others it may cause discomfort or a lack of privacy.

Many residents felt in their responses that their opportunities to influence the neighbourhood were weak. The claim of influence opportunities generated the most number one response, meaning that respondents were in complete disagreement. Encouraging community involvement in decision-making and creating opportunities for meaningful input could not only empower individuals but also reinforce the bonds between residents and their local environment. Such efforts would ensure that cohesion is not only valued but actively nurtured, aligning with the unique needs and aspirations of the community. In practice, these could be actualized by communal spaces and resident-led development such as participatory budgeting. These will be discussed in the next section.

One of the goals of Vihti is to grow, but currently, Vihti's population growth has almost stopped. One of the most impactful challenges for Vihti is accessibility. The municipality seems to trust that the Länsirata project would most likely boost Vihti's growth. As migration in Finland is projected to be increasingly directed towards southern Finland in the future, Vihti has the realistic potential to grow. As a municipality, Vihti is located in a strategically good location relatively close to Helsinki

and Turku. On the other hand, for municipalities where population growth is stagnating, focusing on social cohesion can enhance attractiveness and prevent emigration. Enhancing cohesion may also benefit ageing populations by promoting mental well-being and reducing isolation.

Study reflection

The age distribution of the study sample was focused on older people, which may have affected the results of the study. The age distribution is most likely explained by the time of day, in the middle of a weekday, when people of the working and studying age are not usually at home. To remedy this, research could be carried out in the evening hours or in places where, for example, students are, such as in high school or vocational school.

The setting of research questions could also be changed in hindsight. As a group, we added information to the survey form about the neighbourhood location, and we saw that it was a good addition to this particular study, so that we could estimate the coverage of the sample of response locations. In retrospect, the scale of assessment of claims from one to ten was also challenging for respondents, so in future studies, the scale could be adjusted, for example, to be from one to five and try how it works in practice.

A limitation of the questionnaire was also that we did not note which type of residence the respondents lived in. Talking about the answers afterwards within our group we noticed that people living in detached houses tended to give higher numbers than those living in terraced houses. We discussed that this could partially be due to the fact that many of our respondents from detached houses replied that they had all moved in at similar times and built their houses together, which created strong bonds and friendships. This is however not reflected in the actual answers, since we cannot differentiate between types of residence.

Another problem we were faced with was the actual questions themselves. Many respondents struggled with picking a number and would rather have answered verbally. Similarly, from the way people reacted to questions, we felt that some of them were too similar. We had several answers where the respondent would give the exact same number to nearly all questions. Some respondents also chuckled about our questions, saying things such as “Yes, it’s the same number once again”. These reactions made us think that the questions were not perhaps different enough to truly differentiate between them.

Some respondents also felt that the questions were too vague or difficult to answer, for example, question 4.4 “In our block, it is natural to share the joys and sorrows of everyday life” and question 4.5 “The residents of our block are close to each other in a way that allows each of them to retain their uniqueness”. Also, question 4.3 “I actively contribute to maintaining cohesion among the residents of my block, for example by greeting them” posed some issues. Because of the note “for example by greeting them,” many people seemed to answer higher than they otherwise would have. We had several respondents who answered the question along the lines of “Yes, I greet my neighbours, so 10”, without considering other ways of contributing to cohesion.

5. Ideas & recommendations for Vihti

One of the most important challenges the decision-makers of Vihti are facing is the stagnation of population growth. To tackle this demographic challenge, Vihti hopes to encourage internal migration in the form of returning citizens, such as pensioners, and new citizens, such as families with young children and highly skilled workers. However, previous studies have noted that replacement migration shouldn't be the only policy tool for addressing demographic change, instead, policy solutions should be more grounded in tackling and considering broader economic, social, and institutional dimensions, as well as the interaction of these elements (Newbold, 2018, cited in Makkonen & Kahila, 2020). Therefore, a shift is recommended from policies focusing solely on hard factors (competitiveness, enterprise, and industrial policy, etc.) towards a more holistic development approach that includes soft factors related to citizens' well-being and community, such as supporting and enhancing neighbourhood cohesion (Makkonen & Kahila, 2020).

As discussed earlier in this essay, neighbourhood cohesion has been identified as an important factor in strengthening residents' sense of belonging and well-being, as well as associated with preventing outward migration and reinforcing instead a cycle that leads to in-migration and economic development (Makkonen & Kahila, 2020). To strengthen the vitality and success of Vihti, this chapter will suggest three future practices for Vihti: Quantity and quality of public spaces, Neighbourhood walkability and Resident-led development. These suggestions place emphasis on supporting neighbourhood social cohesion that can provide multiple benefits to the municipality.

Quantity and quality of public spaces

When discussing fostering neighbourhood cohesion, multiple previous studies have highlighted the role of built environment characteristics in fostering residents' social interactions and cohesion in a multitude of ways. It has been stated that certain physical aspects of the built environment afford their use and as a result can facilitate or inhibit social interactions (Jacobs, 1961; Newman, 1972 cited in Mouratidis & Poortinga, 2020). This makes built environment a key aspect of what can be considered a vibrant, safe and healthy neighbourhood as it provides opportunities for social interactions and thus may strengthen social ties at the community level.

Different public spaces, such as parks, plazas, sidewalks, shopping malls, community centres and schoolyards, have in previous studies identified as elements of the built environment that may foster a sense of community by facilitating chance encounters between neighbours (Talen, 2000). Public spaces can be described as the meeting or gathering places that exist outside the home and workplace that are generally accessible by members of the public, and which foster resident interaction and opportunities for contact and proximity (Altman & Zube, 1989; Carr et al., 1992, cited in Francis et al., 2012).

Additionally, particularly green spaces have in previous studies shown to play a vital role in fostering social cohesion by encouraging positive social interactions and enhancing social ties or the sense of community which contribute also to improved health and well-being outcomes. (Jennings & Bamkole, 2019; Kaźmierczak, 2013; Sugiyama et al., 2008.) Sugiyama et al. (2008) for example, found perceived social coherence and local social interaction to be associated with the greenness of the neighbourhood. Also, urban parks have been viewed as an important part of urban and community development rather than just as settings for recreation and leisure (Konijnendijk et al., 2013). Different green open spaces are suggested to facilitate social cohesion

by creating space for social interactions and strengthening the sense of community via place attachment and place identity of its residents (Maas et al., 2009).

Different public spaces are especially important in facilitating chance encounters between neighbours (Talen, 2000). It has been argued that when strengthening social interactions and solidarity decision makers should especially focus on promoting what is called "public familiarity," which means that residents of a neighbourhood recognize each other in public spaces, even if they have no personal contact. It is assumed that people who cross paths regularly develop a form of "passing acquaintance," even though they are otherwise complete strangers with no personal connection, and this promotes, for example, sense of social safety. (Jennissen et al., 2023.)

Even though most of the respondents in our survey stated that they are quite satisfied with the level of neighbourhood cohesion when it comes to supporting and strengthening the vitality and attractiveness of the neighbourhoods, we recommend that Vihti recognize especially the importance of public spaces that can provide opportunities for everyday social interactions and connections for residents of different age and background. To gain a better understanding of the quantity and quality of different public recreational spaces in different neighbourhood areas, as well as residents' satisfaction with them, we recommend conducting a survey focused on these aspects. They were not specifically examined in this study, which focused on residents' experience of neighbourhood cohesion. Based on the additional study findings, Vihti could then make improvements to existing recreational facilities and consider building new low-threshold meeting



In the left image, an abandoned terraced house complex in Kuoppanummi. In the right image, the yard area of a housing company located in Kuoppanummi.

places, such as outdoor gyms, skate parks, playgrounds, or dog parks, that could serve as places for chance encounters for residents of all ages and backgrounds, thereby fostering community interaction and cohesion. We recommend involving residents in the planning of these areas, and we will further discuss community-driven decision-making later in this essay.

As a final mark, when planning the development of public spaces in the Vihti municipality to enhance resident interactions, it should be noted that research has identified cleanliness and safety as one of the most important factors determining the use of public spaces. For neighbourhoods to realise their full potential in supporting social interactions and developing social ties, they need to be well-maintained and provide good recreational facilities. (Francis et al., 2012; Kaźmierczak, 2013.) In our interview, one of the residents of Kuoppanummi told us about an abandoned and vacant terraced house complex in the area, which has become the target of vandalism. The run-down property located in the residential area also caught the attention of our group during our visit. Various visible signs of neglect or decay in public spaces, such as littering, have been linked in previous studies to weaken social norms, decline in social cohesion, and lead to the spread of further delinquency (Jennissen et al., 2023; Welsh et al., 2015). The condition and safety of the residential area and its public spaces are significant factors in determining residents' satisfaction with them. Therefore, to support and maintain neighbourhood vitality and cohesion we underscore the importance of early intervention by Vihti authorities when signs of deterioration appear, like damaged public property or graffiti (Jennissen et al., 2023).

Neighbourhood walkability

As mentioned earlier, there is growing recognition that various aspects of the neighbourhood's built environment may account for differences in social cohesion and, additionally, residents' health and well-being (Mendes de Leon et al., 2009). Social conditions such as cohesion and increased social contacts have, for example, been associated with health benefits like decreased isolation and loneliness, as well as increased physical activity and quality of life (Zahnow, 2024).

To promote social encounters in neighbourhoods, previous research has highlighted not only the existence of various public spaces and land use mix but also the importance for residents to be able to reach these locations by walking or biking rather than driving. In contrast, car dependency, destination unavailability, and inaccessibility can reduce opportunities for informal social interaction and discourage formal interactions (Mazumdar et al., 2018). Neighbourhood walkability has been recognized as one of the factors supporting social cohesion (Mazumdar et al., 2018; Wickes et al., 2019). Mazumdar et al. (2018), for example, identify a significant positive relationship between social cohesion and destination accessibility/walkability. Layden (2003) concluded in his research that respondents living in walkable neighbourhoods were more likely to know their neighbours, participate politically, trust others, and be socially engaged. Empirical evidence also shows that increased trip-making in general reduces the risk of social exclusion and indirectly increases individuals' well-being (Stanley et al., 2011).

These previous findings highlight the importance of having a physical neighbourhood structure that promotes walkability, such as sidewalks, good lighting, and low traffic speeds (Knapskog et al., 2019), in facilitating encounters between neighbours and supporting residents' health and well-being (Wickes et al., 2019). The walkability of neighbourhoods also enables social interactions that are spontaneous, of short duration, and involve weak ties. Our interview responses revealed that there is a difference in individuals' personal need for social interaction and the fact that not

everyone feels the need to maintain intensive contact with the people living around them. Walkable and pedestrian-friendly neighbourhoods can, nevertheless, stimulate trust and a sense of connection among neighbours enabling residents to interact even if encounters are not planned or are only brief (Leyden, 2003). It has been previously theorized that these casual everyday contacts are of great importance for fostering a web of public respect and trust, and a resource for support in time of personal or neighbourhood need (Leyden, 2003). As in our survey responses, security and getting help from neighbours in time of need was mentioned often as an important aspect of social cohesion across all age groups. So, these seemingly everyday encounters like greeting or waving hello are an important part of creating a sense of trust and solidarity.

When considering the relationship between neighbourhood walkability and residents' well-being, neighbourhood design has been found to be a significant factor, especially for older adults as they tend to limit most of their daily activities to the area surrounding their homes, and for whom especially walking in their neighbourhood is seen as a critical factor in maintaining health and functional abilities (Mendes de Leon et al., 2009). As Vihti's population is predicted to age faster than the national average (Suomen virallinen tilasto, 2024), paying attention to neighbourhood walkability and social cohesion is also an important aspect of keeping older people active and maintaining their well-being. In our survey, older respondents highlighted the importance of having company from other people and friendly faces with whom to socialize which improves their quality of life.

Since the covid-19 pandemic, remote work has also become more common and more accessible to workers (Zahnow, 2024). The option of remote work has enabled workers, especially in creative and knowledge fields, to live further away from their place of work. This is a notion that Vihti municipality is hoping to utilize in its aims to increase its population. Though remote work can broaden work opportunities when a person's place of living is not necessarily tied to their place of work and vice versa, it does remove or at least diminish an important part of a person's social circle. Doing work remotely does not allow for the same amount and the same quality of encounters in everyday life as working from the office. Due to this, the area of residence and the neighbourhood play an even greater role than before in personal well-being, community building, and social cohesion. The physical environment and social cohesion of the neighbourhood can be seen to support positive health, psychological, and social outcomes for different age groups. (Mazumdar et al., 2018.)

As social cohesion is associated with multiple health and well-being benefits, it is relevant for decision-makers in Vihti to also consider how to maintain and support trust, social interactions, connections, and solidarity among its residents by paying attention to neighbourhood designs that enable or encourage social ties and community connections (Leyden, 2003). The municipality of Vihti has already previously recognized the need to promote walking and cycling, and in early 2024, it published its first sustainable mobility strategy. The goal of this strategy is to create guidelines for the systematic and long-term promotion of walking and cycling in Vihti. The program includes a total of 19 action points focusing on improving infrastructure, addressing attitudes and habits related to mobility, calming traffic, and ensuring resources. The formation of these action points was based on feedback from a resident survey conducted in spring 2023, identifying the need for improvements in the walking and cycling network, as well as other development suggestions. (Vihti municipality, 2024.) The action plan created by Vihti provides an excellent foundation for developing the municipality's walking and cycling network in the future,

to better support neighbourhood cohesion and maximize opportunities for social interaction through the creation of pedestrian-friendly, walkable neighbourhoods.

Resident-led development

As our research showed, nearly a fifth of the respondents felt they had little to no influence on matters relating to their neighbourhood. This highlights the need for resident-led development initiatives to foster neighbourhood social cohesion and for residents to take the lead in identifying and addressing local priorities so that neighbourhood development solutions reflect their unique needs and strengths (Maas et al., 2009). For example, a resident-led neighbourhood development plan implemented in Rotterdam was able to successfully overcome residents' reluctance to take responsibility for the living environment beyond their own front doors, increase mutual trust among neighbours, reduce feelings of insecurity, and encourage residents to engage with the community. Neighbours also become more likely to interact with each other and their trust in professionals and organizations improved. (Jennissen et al., 2023.) As neighbourhood social cohesion has been linked also to residents' willingness to live in a particular area and remain there, resident-led initiatives for neighbourhood development could be an important consideration for decision-makers in Vihti to enhance neighbourhood attractiveness and prevent the outmigration of current residents (Damurski, 2022).

As Vihti has already previously utilized participatory budgeting as part of open and participatory decision-making we propose that Vihti continue this practice, as it has proven to be an effective way to give municipal residents the opportunity to decide for themselves how a portion of public funds are allocated and used (Vihti municipality, 2020). Participatory budgeting can be a way to enhance democratic participation in Vihti's local planning and to improve accountability and transparency in local administration while opening new avenues for community engagement and co-governance. Previous research findings suggest that participatory budgeting has great potential to nurture more engaged and caring citizens, healthier democracies, and a better quality of life and that participatory processes increase community trust, empathy, and positive social development. Moreover, when these processes address community needs and residents can exercise their voice, they tend to have a positive impact on social empowerment, social capital, and community wellbeing. (Schugurensky & Mook, 2024.)

However, it is important to note the significance of inclusion in participatory budgeting. In our survey, some respondents mentioned feeling that certain residential areas form such tight-knit communities that it is difficult to become part of them. While participatory budgeting is inherently more inclusive than traditional forms of public engagement, it has still been recognized that ensuring broad and diverse participation can be challenging. Although achieving full representation of the entire community is practically impossible, we recommend that Vihti maximize engagement opportunities through proactive outreach strategies that reduce the barriers to participation. (Schugurensky & Mook, 2024.)

As participatory budgeting has previously been implemented across the entire Vihti area, we recommend that in the future, budgeting be divided by neighbourhoods. This would provide more residents with the opportunity to influence the development of their own neighbourhoods. Considering the suggestions of residents from different areas in participatory budgeting can also foster a stronger sense of identity and place attachment within those areas. Few respondents in Rajanummi indicated that the Vanha Nummela area, for instance, is already recognized as a valued

residential area, with living there seen as a value in itself. However, efforts should also be made to develop pride and a distinct identity in other neighbourhoods. Participatory budgeting could serve as a means to initiate resident-led projects that encourage social connection and belonging, as well as social and place identity and expression (Anders-Morawska & Hereźniak, 2019).

While mapping out residents' views on neighbourhood cohesion in a survey, we received several responses supporting the idea that influencing one's own residential area increases satisfaction, a sense of security, and interaction with neighbours. One respondent highlighted, for example, that detached houses in a Huhdanmäki were built at the same time, which fostered interaction and a sense of community among the residents. Therefore, we propose that when planning new residential areas in Vihti, decision-makers consider the possibility of supporting various cohousing projects in these areas. Cohousing is a set of collaborative housing where residents actively participate in the design and management of their environment. Cohousing can be implemented as part of single-family or apartment living and has been found to facilitate social interaction and support an active community life when shared communal areas co-exist alongside private dwellings and residents collaborate in the establishment and ongoing management of the community. (Campillo Almajano & Llorca Ponce, 2022).

Supporting a strong sense of community can be seen as an important part of Vihti's future as social cohesion has been associated with residents improved well-being, increased feelings of safety and security, participation in community affairs, and civic responsibility (Francis et al., 2012). Therefore, in Vihti's future municipal development plans, it is essential to focus on the physical features of neighbourhoods – such as the availability and quality of public spaces and neighbourhood walking and biking possibilities – while also involving residents in decision-making concerning their own residential areas.

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Views on Vihti:

Why is Helsinki attracting young highly skilled workers?

Heidi Färm, Anastasiia Grekova, Jeanette Hatanpää, Lauri Silvennoinen, Olivia Roberts

1. Introduction

Helsinki, including its surrounding metropolitan area, is the hub of economic, cultural and social development in Finland. Especially knowledge capital in terms of highly skilled specialized workforce seems to congregate in the three big cities of Helsinki, Espoo and Vantaa. This is also aided by the fact that the region has two of the top-ranking universities in Finland – Aalto University and University of Helsinki (QS Top Universities, 2024). In the study by Kepsu & Vaattovaara (2008), Helsinki is explored through the lens of creative knowledge workers; why is the region attractive specifically for this group of people? Our aim is to expand upon this research with our own questionnaire study following a similar structure to Kepsu & Vaattovaara and reflect how the individual preferences of highly educated students could be used to direct policies and urban planning in smaller municipalities or areas looking to (re)vitalize their urban areas. We are interested in both the preferences of these individuals and their more general knowledge of Vihti. As we will see, simply making visible and creating knowledge of places can make a difference in future population development. While Helsinki and Espoo already benefit from a strong socio-spatial infrastructure and visibility not just in national but global markets, small municipalities may need to jump into unexpected and innovative ventures to build identity.

In this chapter, we explore the municipality of Vihti from the perspective of how its urban growth could be developed by policies aimed at attracting new population in terms of highly skilled (international) workers. Vihti is particularly interesting in this regard, as it does not fall clearly into the 'urban-rural' divide. Instead, it is located quite close to the Helsinki metropolitan area and thus is in competition but dependent on the economy of the larger cities on whose fringes it is located. How to then stay within the competition, while keeping a unique identity to remain relevant?

As mentioned, places like Vihti are constantly looking for new ways to brand and appeal to certain population groups that are seen as potential residents. This is clear in Vihti's marketing; in addition to quite common selling points for smaller towns such as nature and quietness some more specialized services, such as horseback riding, of the municipality are showcased in marketing material (Vihti, 2022). It also seems that Vihti is looking to attract workers who would possibly commute to the nearby cities while living a quieter and nature-oriented family life in the municipality. For example, the Länsirata initiative, looking to develop faster train commute from Helsinki to Turku is developed and financed jointly by many cities and municipalities, including Vihti (Länsirata.fi, 2024). This project is seen as an opportunity to make Vihti more connected and thus possibly more attractive from the perspective of new residents.

In our questionnaire study presented here we map out how highly educated individuals living in Helsinki and Espoo choose their place to live and if they'd be willing to move to a smaller city or municipality such as Vihti. Individual interviews were conducted in multiple university campuses in the region, with a specific focus on young students and workers who spend time around these campuses. It must be stated that our intentions are not to "sell" people on Vihti as a potential place to live, but rather to map out knowledge and interest in the municipality on a more general level and apply it to discussion on urban growth and its drivers.

This chapter is divided into five sections. First, we start by exploring our questionnaire data collected in Helsinki and Espoo. This section outlines how our living indicators have been

determined and when and where the interviews were conducted. Descriptions and illustrative graphs of the data will be provided and discussed. After this, we move on to analyzing our results and findings. Here we will attempt to connect some of our findings to wider discussions of urban growth through the wants and needs of urban dwellers. Additionally, and perhaps most importantly, these remarks will be applied to the case of Vihti as we seek to answer but also raise questions on how urban growth and attractiveness are fostered and built by municipalities in competitive urban markets. In our conclusions we present some ideas and imaginations that could be applicable to Vihti and similar municipalities tackling these questions.

This chapter thus serves as a potential “conversation piece” into what seeking and developing certain growth targets while attracting certain (sub)populace might look like, what challenges this presents and what socio-spatial, economic and political phenomena are driving urban growth and perhaps what is yet to be considered.

2. Interviews, data

2.1 Introduction

Our role within the Vihti Challenge was to determine why young, educated, international students or workers wanted to live in the Helsinki metropolitan area, with the aim of supporting the work of the Vihti Challenge by providing insight into what attracts such people to live in certain areas. We conducted questionnaires during the week commencing the 4th November 2024, in areas of higher education, specifically in Espoo on the Aalto University Campus, and in Helsinki, on the Kumpula and City Centre Campuses and the Metropolia Arabia Campus, to reach valuable conclusions.

2.2 Methodology

We collected primary data in the form of questionnaire responses, questioning a range of participants at each site. We used two questionnaires, one for the site in Espoo and another for the Helsinki locations, and these were pre-written and provided to us by Urbaria, the Helsinki Institute of Urban and Regional Studies. We split into groups, and each group conducted these questionnaires at one of the previously disclosed locations, spending five hours at each site to collect as many responses as possible.

2.3 Sampling

After deciding our locations, we had to choose a sampling method. We chose opportunity sampling at each location as we determined potential participants in these geographical areas would be those highly educated individuals we were looking for.

Selecting the ideal sampling method depends on a range of criteria, including how representative of the population we wanted the data to be, how large we wanted our sample to be, and how much time and money we had to complete the fieldwork (Kitchin & Tate, 1999). Opportunity

sampling sees participants who reach a practical criterion, meaning they are in the right place at the right time, which creates participants who are easily accessible (Etikan et al, 2016). Opportunity sampling is inexpensive and requires minimal planning, making it an extremely convenient approach for projects conducted over a short time scale with minimal funding (Taherdoost, 2016).

As we assigned only five hours to collect data in each location to conduct research, we had limited time to complete questionnaires, so we required a quick and efficient sampling approach. In addition to this, we had minimal planning time between the lecture and having to undertake the research, therefore we required a sampling approach that was straight forward, easy to implicate, and would work consistently across our sites of data collection. As no pilot study had been conducted, we were unable to determine the desired number of samples as we were unsure of how many people would be willing to participate.

After assessing our situation against the proposed criteria by Kitchen and Tate (1999), we therefore needed a sampling method that wouldn't be hindered by people not wanting to participate or our lack of time, and we determined opportunity sampling would be the best method to achieve this whilst collecting as many responses as possible.

However, with this said, limitations of opportunity sampling include unconscious biases when selecting participants, as there is no way to ensure a fair selection (Etikan et al, 2016). As a consequence, the findings may not be generalised to the entire population, which could significantly affect the results (Etikan et al, 2016). Finally, it also must be acknowledged how certain populations may have been over or under-represented because of the sampling (Etikan et al, 2016) but, despite this, opportunity sampling remains the most suitable in this case.

2.4 Data Collection Procedure

As previously discussed, we used questionnaires to collect our data. We had a paper copy of the questionnaire to hand over to potential participants as we introduced ourselves, where we were coming from and what the purpose of the study was, discussing this completely in English. This was to provide the potential participants with an entire understanding of the questionnaire, providing them with the opportunity to see all the questions before they consented to participate. We then took note of their responses on our mobile phones, recording their answers with detail and care. The questionnaires (figures 1 & 2) were provided to us by Urbaria, but we were also instructed to add our own open-ended question to the end of the questionnaire, which was:

'If not Helsinki, which other municipality in the province of Uusima would you consider moving to?'

Figure 1 (Helsinki Questionnaire):

University of Helsinki questionnaire on reasons for living in Helsinki

1. Age
2. Gender
3. Do you live in Helsinki? If yes:
4. From the list below, choose four of the most important reasons for living in Helsinki. Number them from 1–4. in order of importance.

Personal Reasons:

- Family lives here
- Proximity to friends
- Born here
- Studied in City

Job Related Reasons:

- Good employment opportunities
- Moved because of my job
- Moved because of partner's job
- Higher wages

Hard Factors:

- Size of city
- Good transport links
- Presence of good universities
- Housing affordability
- Housing availability

Soft Factors:

- Diversity of leisure and entertainment
- Housing quality
- Open minded and tolerant
- Diversity of built environment
- Cultural diversity
- Safe for children
- Proximity to natural environment
- Overall friendliness

- Open to different people
- Weather/climate
- LGBTQIA+ friendly
- Language

Other

5. Have you ever heard of the Municipality of Vihti?
6. If yes, could you ever see yourself moving there?
7. If yes/no, why?

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Figure 2 (Espoo Questionnaire):

This questionnaire was the same as Figure 1 used in Helsinki but replaced any mention of Helsinki with Espoo.

2.5 Timeline and Location

Our data was collected at four locations; Aalto University Campus in Espoo, specifically in the buildings surrounding the Metro station, City Centre Campus of the University of Helsinki, specifically in areas surrounding Porthania, the Kumpula Campus of the University of Helsinki, specifically in the surrounding areas of the Physicum and Chemicum buildings, and finally the Metropolia Arabia Campus. The data was collected by one group at each location, for 5 hours during the working week commencing the 4th November 2024.

It is possible that the time or location where the data was collected could implicate the results. An example of this could be how certain students or young professionals would be in one area at a certain time in between classes, or how those in the areas surrounding the metro would be more likely to be commuters.

2.6 Ethical Considerations

When conducting any form of research, it is essential to have ethical considerations (Manandhar & Joshi, 2020). The ones we considered to be most important for this specific project were the issues of informed consent, privacy and confidentiality. To ensure complete informed consent, we fully explained the purpose of the study to our consenting participants, fully disclosing how their data would be used, and for what purpose. Informed consent is a legal requirement for all studies involving human participants, involving informing participants about all processes of the research, how and why their data will be used (Nijhawan et al., 2013).

It was also important for us to ensure complete privacy and confidentiality of our participants, something that is essential for ethical practices for reasons of legal responsibility (Siegel, 1979), which we achieved by not requesting any personal details or information.

2.7 Results

Figure 3 – Ages of Participants

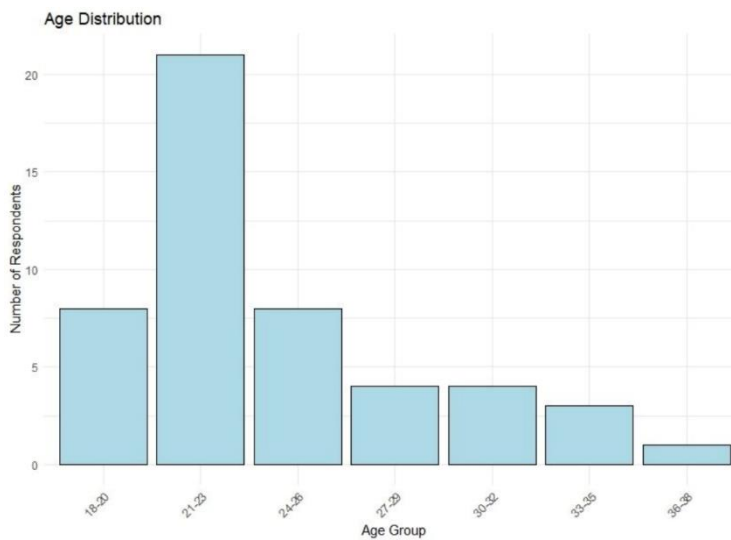


Figure 4 – Gender of Participants

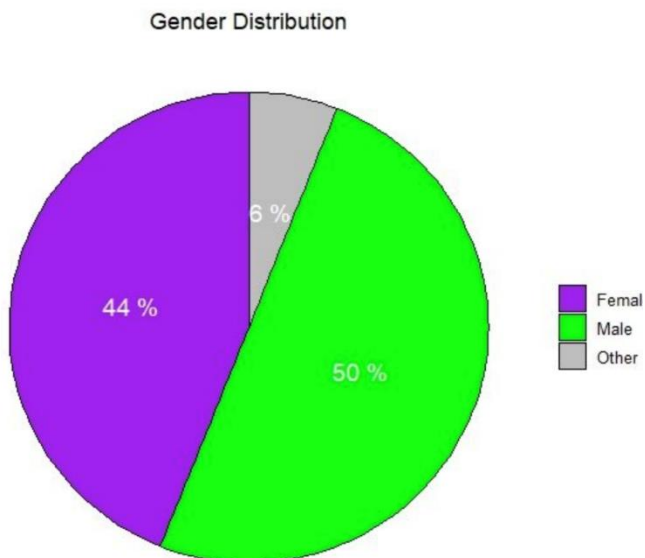


Figure 5 – Where our Participants Live

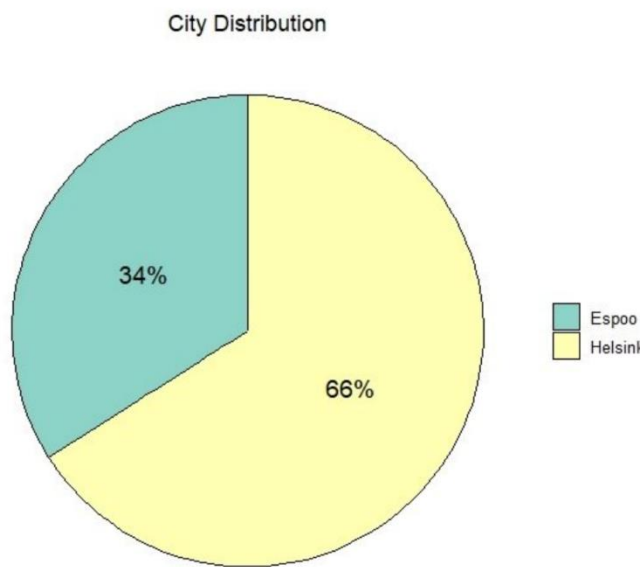


Figure 6 - Top 5 reasons to live in Helsinki (weighted)

Studied in City	48
Proximity to friends	39
Presence of good universities	37
Good employment opportunities	36
Family lives here	23

Figure 7 - Top 5 reasons to live in Espoo (weighted)

Housing affordability	22
Studied in City	22
Good transport links	19
Family lives here	17
Proximity to friends 16	16

To make this calculation, we assigned weights to reasons according to their priority (the 1st reason with the highest priority got the weight of 4, and the 4th reason with the lowest priority rank got the weight of 1). For each reason, the frequency of appearing in data was calculated and subsequently assigned weight was multiplied with this frequency. The sum of these multiplications is the final score.

Figure 8 – How Many of our Participants Have Heard About Vihti?

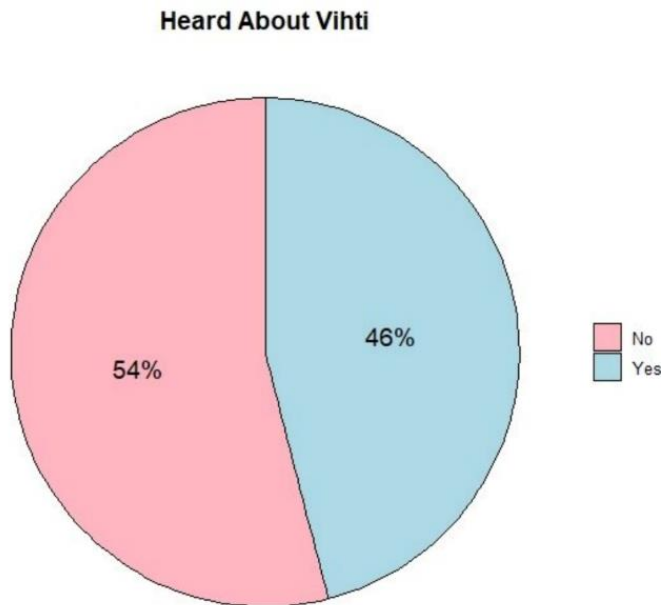


Figure 9 – How Many of Our Participants Would Consider Moving to Vihti?

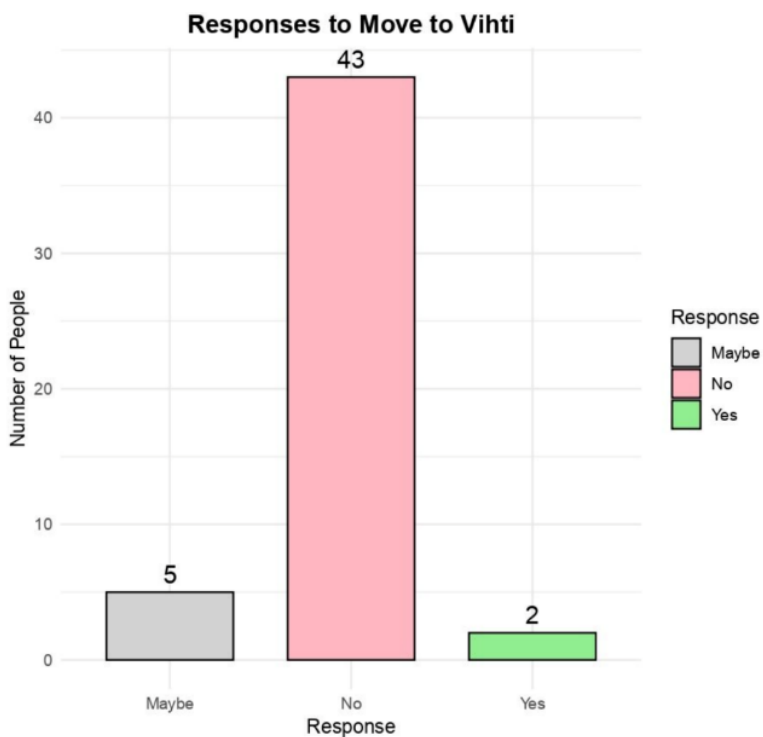


Figure 10 – How Many of Our Participants Would Consider Moving Elsewhere in Uusimaa from Helsinki or Espoo, apart from Vihti?

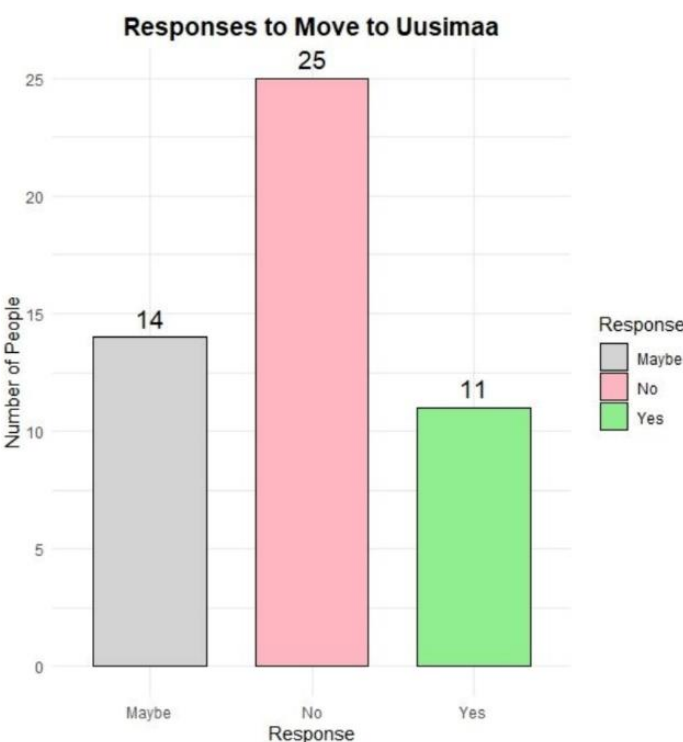


Figure 11 – Why Do Our Participants Like Uusima?



2.8 Summary of Results & Data

Figure 3 shows the ages of our participants, the majority of which were of student age as they were under 30, meaning we reached our target population. Figure 4 displays the gender of our

participants, half of whom were male, 44% female and 6% identified as other. Figure 5 displays where our participants resided, 34% in Espoo and 66% in Helsinki. This is what we expected, as we conducted more questionnaires in Helsinki academic sites than the equivalent in Espoo. Figures 6 and 7 display the most common reasons for living in either Helsinki (figure 6) or Espoo (figure 7). In Helsinki, the most common reason for living there was due to participants studying in the city, which was also the second most common reason for participants in Espoo. The fifth most common response in Helsinki was due to family being close by or living in the area, which was the fourth most common answer for participants from Espoo. Helsinki residents also stressed the importance of proximity to friends, presence of good universities and good opportunities, whereas Espoo residents stressed the importance of housing affordability as a top priority, in addition to good transport links, and proximity to friends. Figure 8 displays how many of our participants have heard about Vihti, where 54% said they had never heard of the municipality. Figure 9 then goes on to display how many of our participants would be willing to move to Vihti in the future, where 43/50 participants would not be willing to move to Vihti. This could potentially be a result of how very few participants were aware of Vihti. Figure 10 shows how many participants were willing to move to other municipalities in Uusima in the future, with 25/50 saying they plan to remain in the Helsinki region, and only 11/50 saying they would be willing to move in the future.

3. Analysis

The results of our questionnaire show that there are multiple factors that attract young people to move to and stay in the Helsinki and Espoo regions. The things that people appreciate and value in their environment affect the way they feel in the said environment. This is also known as quality of life (Kepsu & Vaattovaara, 2008; Kyttä, 2024). The quality of life is affected by numerous things, such as the cleanliness of the environment, accessibility of public transport and services, community and various others (Kepsu & Vaattovaara, 2008; Kyttä, 2024). The experience of quality of life is highly personal, and some things that other people consider negative, some might feel as positive aspects of their environment, thus raising their quality of life (Cramer, Torgensen & Kringlen, 2004). Thus, it is difficult to define what quality of life indefinitely means. For example, as Cramer et. al. (2004) state, dense urban environments can be a stressor: often large cities are noisy, overcrowded and busy. However, for some this means more opportunities for social interaction and greater amenities. This phenomenon is especially seen in younger people, who tend to report greater satisfaction and higher quality of life in cities as seen in the study conducted by Carlsen and Leknes (2022). However, higher quality of life in large cities is a phenomenon specific to rich, developed countries, whereas in poorer, developing countries things seem to be the opposite (Carlsen & Leknes, 2022). Also, the varying in experiences is not only seen on global levels, but on local levels as well: well-educated people with high wages benefit from the busy urban environment more in terms of tertiary services than low-educated and low-waged people, who often provide these services (Carlsen & Leknes, 2022). In the case of our questionnaire, we need to account for the fact that the interviews were conducted in higher education areas, and most of the participants were highly educated individuals. Were the sample different, our results might look different as well.

Most of the participants were of the ages 20-23, which was to be expected as the interviews were conducted on or near higher education facilities. The age of the participants is an important factor

in determining what they value and appreciate in their living environment. According to our questionnaire, the most answered reasons for living in Helsinki were studies in the city, proximity to friends, presence of good universities, good employment opportunities and the proximity of family, which all raise the perception of quality of life according to Kyttä (2024). Similar reasons were found in the Espoo questionnaire, them being housing affordability, studies in the city, good transport links and proximity to friends and family. These results could be expected since the interviewees were mostly well-educated young adults, who largely appreciate the education opportunities and social aspects of urban environments (Carlsen & Leknes, 2022; Kepsu & Vaattovaara, 2008). Carlsen and Leknes (2022) also mention that older people and families with small children tend to appreciate aspects of rural environments, such as quietness, peace and nature. Often women are more attracted to the qualities of bustling cities (Carlsen & Leknes, 2022; Cramer et. al., 2004) but, in our questionnaire results, there was no significant difference between genders.

In recent years, the housing structure of large cities, such as Helsinki and Espoo, has started to shift (Vaattovaara, 2024). Smaller studio and one-bedroom apartments are built largely to accommodate the growing population of the city. Small rental apartments are especially attractive to young people and students due to their affordable price and central location in relation to transport, services, educational institutions and social interactions. However, Vaattovaara (2024) mentions that often these apartments end up being inhabited by low-educated, low-income individuals. Perhaps this could be explained by highly educated young people finding higher wage jobs, which consequently leads to them having a greater choice to choose where they live. This should be taken into consideration when analysing our results, since like Kepsu and Vaattovaara (2008) mention, people who can choose their environment are highly likely to prefer an attractive environment, which might skew our results. Housing affordability was an important factor in staying in the Helsinki and Espoo regions according to our interviews, but as supported by the claims by Vaattovaara (2024), Kepsu and Vaattovaara (2008) and Carlsen and Leknes (2022), other qualities might be even more crucial. The theme that stood out from the results was related to possibilities of social interactions. Proximity to friends and family, good transport links, culture and multiple educational centers provide the possibility for social interaction, which is one of the principal positives in determining quality of life (Cramer et. al., 2004). According to Cramer et. al. (2004) contact with friends was dictated to strongly relate to good somatic health and self-realization. As Kepsu and Vaattovaara (2008) state, personal reasons are often weighed heavily when determining the place one chooses to reside in.

Over half of the participants of the questionnaire had not heard about Vihti before, and the majority would not want to move there. It might be argued that perhaps the people who did not know about Vihti are also more likely to want to stay in Helsinki and Espoo, since it is familiar to them, and they might not know what Vihti offers. This should possibly be looked at through data analysis to support the claim. As we discussed earlier, highly educated young people often prefer busy urban environments with access to social interactions, high wages and culture. These are qualities that people living in Espoo and Helsinki responded as qualities keeping them in the area. Approximately half of the people who responded to the question “Would you consider moving somewhere else in Uusimaa” responded no, and the overwhelming majority responded negatively to moving to Vihti. Many of the people who responded positively to moving in the Uusimaa region wanted to move inside the Helsinki Metropolitan area, especially inside the city of Helsinki. Some people wanted to move out of the Uusimaa region. Even though a comprehensive analysis as to

why people are not willing to move to Vihti is hard to get due to a lack of responses, many of the participants said that they would consider it at a later time in life. A few responded that Vihti could serve them better when they were retired or in the workforce if the connections to Helsinki were good. These responses reflect the results of previous theories and studies (Carlsen & Leknes, 2022; Cramer et. Al., 2004; Kepsu & Vaattovaara, 2008; Vaattovaara, 2024), that bustling cities often offer young people in higher education better opportunities for a good quality of life. In a later lifetime, the values affecting quality of life are possibly bound to change, which might affect the way the participants view Vihti, Helsinki or Espoo as an environment later in their life. These results are something the municipality of Vihti could utilize to attract more population.

4. Conclusion

Overall, the response of young highly educated individuals in moving to Vihti was negative. However, this was likely due to low levels of knowledge about the municipality. Most of the people had not heard about Vihti before, or their knowledge was limited. The main features people answered to be pulling factors in their current area of residence were proximity to friends and family, transportation links, studies and leisure activities. In Helsinki, young highly educated people seemed to value proximity to social life and their studies highly, while in Espoo the cost of housing was also identified as a key factor. As discussed previously throughout literature, young students often prefer busier cities, while families and older people appreciate peace and quietness. In the case of our questionnaire, almost none of the people were willing to move to Vihti. This might be due to pushing factors, such as bad transportation links, distance to friends and family and the lack of cultural life. A slightly larger amount of people were willing to move to somewhere else in the Uusimaa region. Those areas might be their home cities or municipalities, or just have other pulling qualities. However, we did entertain the idea that after graduation the values and needs of young highly educated people might change, and in that case Vihti might provide a great place for living. There are still a lot of things the municipality could do to improve their competitiveness and attractiveness, as they do have some competitive qualities not found in Helsinki.

5. Ideas and recommendations for Vihti

“A Home close to everything” is a promise the slogan of municipality of Vihti makes in their municipal strategy (2022) for its future and current residents. The slogan captures the essence of their objectives by implying connectivity Vihti is attempting to enhance, by establishing itself as a vital city that is accessible and connected to the Helsinki metropolitan area. We feel it is important to challenge, where people are spending time on a weekly scale: which grocery stores they are using, where are their hobbies, where are they working? The assumption on people using services of Helsinki metropolitan area could prove false, which could result in developing the municipality to not answer the needs of the future and current residents of Vihti.

Article by Kepsu & Vaattovaara (2008) analyses creative knowledge workers' reasons for living in the Helsinki metropolitan area. The article states that merely walking in the city and visiting parks is the most apparent leisure activity done weekly by over 50% of the respondents. The results on

how respondents spend their leisure time highlight two additional factors. Firstly, 40 percent of highly educated people working in Helsinki metropolitan area visit their friends on a weekly basis and 50% eat out at least once a week.

These activities would be easily executed from Vihti, by ensuring good connectivity and unique businesses, which could emerge by further supporting urban planning to take innovative steps to ensure possibilities for unique neighborhoods, where residents would feel a sense of belonging. Pol (2002) found that the characteristics of a place can facilitate appropriation and attachment, this way a person and a group can integrate the space into their own selves to form an identity and differentiate from others.

The livelihood strategy for the municipality of Vihti (2021) aims to enhance nature activities and direct economic activity by steering land use and by planning business districts that contribute to the local economy. Mixing industrial businesses together with housing could negatively affect the attraction of a neighborhood. Soft factors that were most highlighted in the research article by Kepsu and Vaattovaara (2008) were diversity of leisure and entertainment, housing quality, open-mindedness, tolerance and diversity of built environment.

As addressed, more than 50% want to spend leisure time enjoying nature, which Vihti has plenty to offer. Housing quality could be addressed by focusing on building attractive housing and unique neighborhoods with varying characteristics that would allow for local identity to develop. As stated in the analysis chapter, older people and families with small children tend to appreciate aspects of rural environments, such as quietness, peace and nature (Carlsen & Leknes, 2022). For urban areas to be experienced as open-minded and tolerant, a sense of community and acceptance must be formed. Urban planning could allow and create different neighborhoods that could foster the feeling of belonging. The call for unique neighborhoods does not come as a surprise in larger cities. According to Helsinki city strategy (2021) the aim is to keep neighborhoods from detaching by allowing people to live a safe and comfortable life in positively unique neighborhoods. Vihti could draw inspiration and act as a creator of such unique neighborhoods that could possibly attract highly educated workers of the Helsinki metropolitan area.

Talen ym. (2015) analyzed what characteristics a great neighborhood has, and they ended up with seven factors: functional attributes that contribute to every-day life, accommodates multiple forms of transportation, visually interesting environment, environment that encourages human contact and social activities, promotes community involvement, promotes sustainability and has a memorable character. Functional attributes of a neighborhood could be resident-organized farmers markets, commercial Christmas markets, stores or events made together with an organization, to point a few examples.

Transportation and connectivity have come up multiple times, and Vihti should not only focus on connectivity from the perspective of connectivity away from Vihti, but simultaneously develop inter-city connection, which could mean adding and maintaining bicycle lanes or incorporating possibilities of a more walkable city center for example. Architectural aspects and the condition of physical appearance were important factors in creating a lively and attractive neighborhood. Lastly, we feel that memorable character is born from advertising one's strong suits, what Vihti

has that others are lacking, and bringing that or developing it to raise awareness and foster feeling of togetherness among residents.

A large investment to Länsirata initiative is made by the city in hopes to increase attractiveness and accessibility to places other than Helsinki metropolitan area. Affordable housing in the Helsinki metropolitan area was stated as a concern for 9/10 respondents (Kepsu & Vaattovaara, 2008). With lower housing prices and viable unique neighborhoods, easy access to nature, Vihti could present itself as an appealing place to live for highly skilled international workers of the Helsinki metropolitan area. The narrative from growth numbers should be turned to existing characteristics of Vihti, its advances and uniqueness, which would highlight how the municipality could hold on and attract new residents.

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