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# **Resident and Stakeholder Participation in the Strategy Process of a Wellbeing Services County**

A Strategy as Practice Perspective: A case study of the Wellbeing Services  
County of Ostrobothnia

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**ABSTRACT:**

Tämän tutkimuksen tarkoituksena on tarkastella asukkaiden ja ulkoisten sidosryhmien osallistumista hyvinvointialueen strategiaprosessiin. Hyvinvointialueet ovat Suomessa uusi julkisen sektorin toimija, joiden tehtävänä on vastata sosiaali- ja terveyspalveluiden sekä pelastustoimen järjestämisestä. Näin ollen niiden strategiatyöhön kohdistuu erityisiä odotuksia avoimuuden, osallistavuuden ja demokraattisen legitimitietin näkökulmasta. Aiempi tutkimus on kuitenkin keskittynyt pääasiassa organisaation sisäisiin toimijoihin, minkä vuoksi ulkoisten sidosryhmien ja asukkaiden rooli strategiaprosessissa on jäänyt vähemmälle huomiolle.

Tutkimus toteutettiin tapaustutkimuksena Pohjanmaan hyvinvointialueella, ja ilmiötä tarkasteltiin Strategy as Practice -lähestymistavan kautta, joka korostaa strategian tekemistä käytännön toimijoiden, käytäntöjen ja toiminnan näkökulmasta. Tutkimus on luonteeltaan monimenetelmällinen. Aineisto koostuu johtoryhmän haastatteluista sekä asukas- ja sidosryhmäkyselyistä. Haastatteluaineisto analysoitiin laadullisesti hyödyntäen Gioia-metodologiaa, kun taas kyselyaineistoa tarkasteltiin kaavioiden avulla. Analyysi nojaa kuitenkin laadullisiin menetelmiin.

Tulokset osoittavat, että asukkaiden ja sidosryhmien osallistuminen strategiaprosessiin on tunnistettu tärkeäksi, mutta osallistuminen toteutuu pääasiassa yksisuuntaisina osallistamiskkeinoina, kuten kyselyinä ja kuulemisina. Osallistumiseen liittyy myös useita haasteita, kuten strategian abstraktius, viestinnän puutteet sekä kokemus rajallisista vaikutusmahdollisuuksista. Tulokset tuovat esiin jännitteen laajan osallistamisen ja strategiatyön tehokkuuden välillä sekä sen, että osallistuminen jää usein konsultatiiviselle tasolle. Strategy as Practice -näkökulmasta tarkasteltuna osallistuminen konkretisoituu erilaisina käytäntöinä, joiden kautta eri toimijat osallistuvat strategian tekemiseen vaihtelevin mahdollisuuksin.

Tutkimus tuottaa uutta tietoa julkisen sektorin strategiaprosessien osallistavuudesta erityisesti hyvinvointialueiden kontekstissa. Tulokset korostavat tarvetta kehittää osallistumisen käytäntöjä kohti vuorovaikutteisempia, jatkuvampia ja vaikuttavampia muotoja sekä vahvistaa strategian ymmärrettävyyttä ja saavutettavuutta eri toimijaryhmille.

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**KEYWORDS:** strategy, strategy as practice, participation, public sector, resident, stakeholders

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# **1 Introduction**

The purpose of this study is to provide additional understanding and knowledge about the external stakeholders and residents of the wellbeing services county, as well as their participation in the organization's strategy process. The whole is examined through the lens of Strategy as Practice, which focuses attention on the practical actions of actors.

## **1.1 Motivation for the study**

The actors and individuals participating in strategy work have been studied for a long time. In particular, Whittington (1996) already outlined a model in the 1990s in which the focus was on individual-level practical participation in the strategy process. Several different terms have also been used for those who make strategy: manager, strategist, practitioner. There are some differences between the private and public sectors in terms of who should make strategy and which actors should be involved in the process. In this thesis, we are particularly interested in strategy work in the Finnish public sector in social and healthcare. Social and healthcare has undergone major changes in a short period of time as a result of the healthcare reform. Hospital districts have been replaced by wellbeing services counties, as a result of which several different organizations have been merged together in a short time. The changes are very recent and require adjustment, but also require new kinds of attention to the organization's shared strategy. In addition, in the public sector the legitimacy and effectiveness of strategy work are tied to the extent to which residents and stakeholders participate in the strategy process. This study therefore focuses particularly on the perspective of external stakeholders and residents of the region, as traditionally these groups have received less attention in strategy research. In the study, public sector strategy work is examined through the Strategy as Practice theory, in which the focus is on the interaction of actors and the practices included in the process.

## 1.2 Research gap

Strategy work has often been studied from the perspective of an organization's own employees. In particular, studies emphasize the views of executive team members and middle management on strategy work and its preparation. Less literature can be found on actors outside the organization and their participation in the preparation of strategy. The societal responsibility and public value of the public sector also differ significantly from the private sector, which is why in the strategy process it is important to take into account the thoughts and wishes of stakeholders surrounding the organization as well as the residents of the area. There is relatively little research on the topic, which is why the thesis focuses particularly on the involvement of this target group when making strategy. Well-being services counties as organizations have also not yet been extensively studied, so there is a need for new research.

From previous research, a research gap can be identified regarding the involvement of external stakeholders in the strategy work of public organizations. Research conducted around the topic provides several research gaps. Finnish public social and healthcare strategy has been studied at least by Wiili-Peltola (2001). In her study, she examined the attitudes of middle management in a hospital district towards the organization's strategy. The study did not focus on the strategy-making phase, but rather on the success of implementation, although it provides a good understanding of the significance of strategy in a public hierarchical organization. The involvement of top management and middle management in public sector strategy work has also been studied by Begkos et al. (2020) as well as Eriksson and Lehtimäki (1998). Vaara and Whittington (2012), in turn, have compiled Strategy as Practice studies from past decades in their article and discuss the theoretical approach extensively through these. Their article includes suggestions for further research on better involvement of personnel, but does not mention the involvement of actors outside the organization, with the exception of consultants. Mantere and Vaara (2008) also state in their article that the inclusiveness of strategy has been studied too little.

Previous studies that have addressed the involvement of external actors have also left research gaps for future studies. Joyce (2004, pp. 108–109) states in his study that community organisations should be included as part of public organization strategy work so that the strategy would better serve the needs of the community. According to him, it would also be important for a public organization to involve the public generally, even though it may be challenging. However, Joyce’s study leaves out the means by which stakeholder organizations and citizens should be involved. His article also does not address very deeply the significance of participation and the benefits it brings to public sector organizations. George (2017, p. 529), in turn, studied the participation of actors and individuals outside the organization in public sector strategic planning. In particular, he examined the effects of their participation on the effectiveness of the process. However, he does not address in his study how actors outside the organization can be involved.

### **1.3 Aim and research question**

This study focuses on the participation of residents of the wellbeing services county and external stakeholders in strategy work. Participation and the strategy process are examined through the lens of Strategy as Practice, in which practical actions and interaction between people are at the center. The study has chosen to focus only on actors outside the organization, that is, residents and stakeholders, whereby internal actors have been excluded from the study. Internal actors include the personnel of the wellbeing services county as well as elected representatives. The case organization of the study is the Wellbeing Services County of Ostrobothnia, which is responsible for providing social and healthcare as well as rescue services in the region of Ostrobothnia. The data of the thesis is collected through the Wellbeing Services County’s own channels in the form of surveys and interviews. The approach of the study is mixed methods. Although the study also includes quantitative data, the main emphasis of the analysis is qualitative, focusing on the practices and experiences of participation.

The study has two research questions that complement each other. The first research question is:

- 1) *How is the participation of residents and external stakeholders realized within the wellbeing services county's strategic process?*

By answering this question, we examine in particular the current state of participation in the Wellbeing Services County of Ostrobothnia. This helps to outline the overall picture, as well as the perspectives of residents and stakeholders on participation and its methods.

A follow-up question to the first is:

- 2) *How can the participation of residents and stakeholders in the strategy process be further developed?*

Examining only the current state would leave the topic somewhat incomplete, so the thesis aims to introduce a practical perspective by considering the development of the strategy process. At the same time, the thesis can provide the management of wellbeing services counties with means to examine the process in the current and future strategy periods.

## **1.4 Thesis structure**

This thesis consists of five chapters. After the introduction, Chapter 2 presents the theoretical background related to the topic, with particular focus on strategy, Strategy as Practice, wellbeing services counties, and citizen and stakeholder participation. Then, Chapter 3 addresses the methodology of the thesis. In this chapter, the research method, the case organization, as well as data collection and its analysis are described in more detail. Following the methodology, Chapter 4 presents the results of the study, which are collected through interviews and surveys. After the results, Chapter 5 analyzes the findings of the study in relation to the theoretical framework and the research questions.

## 2 Literature review

This chapter is divided into three subsections. The first subsection examines strategy as a plan as well as Strategy as Practice theory, drawing on previous research. The chapter aims to define strategy as a concept, elaborate on its significance, and construct an understanding of the development of strategy. The Strategy as Practice approach brings strategy theory to a more practical level and closer to the participation practices that are the focus of this study. The second subsection focuses on the core themes of the study, namely participation and the participating actors. The subsection defines residents and stakeholders in the context of the wellbeing services county, as well as ways of their participation in strategy work. The chapter also examines in more detail different participation practices and introduces perspectives from open strategy research on the involvement of external actors. Finally, the third subsection brings together the preceding chapters in the form of a theoretical framework.

### 2.1 Strategy and Strategy as Practice

Defining the concept of strategy has been one of the cornerstones of strategy research over the past decades, and yet it is still characterized by a certain level of complexity and multidimensionality. Ultimately, there is no single precise definition that would fully encompass it. Therefore, the purpose of this section is to clarify how strategy is understood in this particular study. In addition, this chapter aims to highlight strategy approaches that are relevant for the study. In addition to strategy itself, the chapter seeks to elaborate on the Strategy as Practice (SAP) theoretical approach, through which the entire research topic will be examined, as well as the related terms Praxis, Practitioners, and Practices. Finally, SAP is linked to the theory of strategy participation, which is grounded in practical action and actors. Next, Table 1 presents the empirical, theoretical, and integrative works utilized in Chapter 2.1.

Author(s) and year of publication	Title of the study
Ansoff, H. I. (1965)	Corporate Strategy

Chandler, A. D. (1980)	Strategy and structure: Chapters in the history of the industrial enterprise
David, F. R., & David, F. R. (2015)	Strategic management: Concepts and cases (15th ed., global ed)
Eriksson, P., & Lehtimäki, H. (1998)	Strategic Management of the Local Information Society – A Constructionist Perspective on the Production and evaluation of Strategy Documents
Floyd, S. W., & Lane, P. J. (2000)	Strategizing throughout the organization: Management role conflict in strategic renewal
Floyd, S. W., & Wooldridge, B. (2000)	Building Strategy from the Middle: Reconceptualizing Strategy Process
Hardy, C., Palmer, I., & Phillips, N. (2000)	Discourse as a Strategic Resource
Hoon, C. (2007)	Committees as strategic practice: The role of strategic conversation in a public administration
Jarzabkowski, P. (2005)	Strategy As Practice: An Activity Based Approach
Jarzabkowski, P., Balogun, J., & Seidl, D. (2007)	Strategizing: The challenges of a practice perspective
Jarzabkowski, P., Burke, G., & Spee, P. (2015)	Constructing Spaces for Strategic Work: A Multimodal Perspective
Jarzabkowski, P., & Paul Spee, A. (2009)	Strategy-as-practice: A review and future directions for the field
Jarzabkowski, P., Paul Spee, A., & Smets, M. (2013)	Material artifacts: Practices for doing strategy with 'stuff'
Jarzabkowski, P., & Whittington, R. (2008)	Hard to disagree, mostly
Kohtamäki, M., Whittington, R., Vaara, E., & Rabetino, R. (2022)	Making connections: Harnessing the diversity of strategy-as-practice research
Mantere, S. (2005)	Strategic practices as enablers and disablers of championing activity
Mantere, S., & Vaara, E. (2008)	On the Problem of Participation in Strategy: A Critical Discursive Perspective
Mintzberg, H. (1978)	Patterns in Strategy Formation
Mintzberg, H. (1979)	The structuring of organizations: A synthesis of the research
Mintzberg, H., & Waters, J. A. (1985)	Of Strategies, Deliberate and Emergent

Paroutis, S. (2013)	Discourse revisited: Dimensions and employment of first-order strategy discourses during institutional adoption
Rouleau, L. (2005)	Micro-Practices of Strategic Sensemaking and Sensegiving: How Middle Managers Interpret and Sell Change Every Day
Vaara, E., & Whittington, R. (2012)	Strategy-as-Practice: Taking Social Practices Seriously
Whittington, R. (1996)	Strategy as Practice
Whittington, R. (2006)	Completing the Practice Turn in Strategy Research

**Table 1.** A summary of the articles in chapter 2.1.

### 2.1.1 Strategic planning

Numerous definitions of strategy have been presented in the literature, of which a few of the most significant from the history of strategy research are examined next. In brief, strategy has been described as a plan (Mintzberg, 1978, p. 934). Strategy is a plan of long-term objectives in which sufficient resources are ensured to achieve these objectives (Chandler, 1980, p. 13; Mintzberg & Waters, 1985, p. 258). In his book *Corporate Strategy*, Ansoff (1965, p. 94) defines strategy as the scope defined by the organization and the direction of growth. According to Mintzberg (1979, p. 25), strategy is a combination of external environmental factors and decisions made within the organization. One recurring definition of the concept of strategy is that strategy is something that people in the organization do, not something that an organization has (Jarzabkowski et al., 2013, p. 42; Kohtamäki et al., 2022; Paroutis & Heracleous, 2013).

One of the fundamental pillars of strategy research is Whittington's model of the four perspectives of strategy. According to Whittington (1996, pp. 731–732), there are four main approaches in strategic management: policy, process, planning, and practice (Figure 1). In this study, we focus particularly on the Strategy as Practice school. From a historical perspective, it is important to understand the development of strategic thinking across different decades. In Whittington's model, on the vertical axis the term where represents the direction in which strategy should move, and the term how represents

how to get there. On the horizontal axis, the division is made between the organizational and the individual perspective. Practice research is one of the most recent of the four research approaches, and it focuses on examining how participation in strategy work occurs, particularly at the individual level.



**Figure 1.** *Four perspectives on strategy* (Whittington, 1996, p. 732).

Strategy is also associated with a strong process-oriented perspective. In traditional strategy research, a distinction has also been made between strategy formulation and implementation, which have often been examined as separate phases. Mintzberg and others have long studied the process surrounding the formation of strategy. Traditionally, the formation of strategy has been treated as an analytical process in which long-term objectives and actions are defined for the organization (Mintzberg & Waters, 1985, p. 257). Originally, Mintzberg studied strategy and its formation as a “*pattern in a stream of decisions*” (1978, p. 934). Nearly 50 years ago, he stated that an organization’s strategy is shaped by the environment and operational activities, and that leadership is required to integrate these (p. 943). David and David (2015), in turn, defined strategy formulation as the process in which the organization’s objectives are determined and appropriate strategies are selected, while strategy implementation emphasizes putting those strategies into practice through concrete actions and the distribution of resources. The separation of strategy into formulation and implementation phases has also been criticized, as it oversimplifies the complex and multi-phased nature of strategy formation processes

(Mintzberg, 1978). Mintzberg argues that strategies can also emerge through the organization's ongoing activities and practices.

Mintzberg and Waters have, however, later examined strategy more as a pattern of actions and behavior (1985, p. 257). In their study, they emphasize that when forming strategy it is important to recognize the difference between intended and realized strategy. The former refers to the strategy planned by management, and the latter to what actually occurs within the organization. If the strategy proceeds from intended strategy to realized strategy as planned, it is then a deliberate strategy. They note, however, that the strategy process does not always proceed this smoothly, and often strategy may instead be an emergent strategy (pp. 257–258). In this model, strategy changes along the way, for example due to environmental or internal changes. They add that strategy or the organization's management has not failed even if the strategy is emergent, but rather it requires openness and flexibility from the organization (p. 271).

### **2.1.2 Strategy as Practice**

Strategy research has been conducted extensively over several decades. However, researchers have observed that research does not always correspond to practical strategy work. In response to this, a research perspective called Strategy as Practice (SAP) has emerged (Jarzabkowski, 2005, pp. 16–17; Whittington, 1996, pp. 731–732). The SAP perspective shifts the focus from organization-level analyses closer to the actions carried out by individuals (Jarzabkowski, 2005, pp. 16–17; Whittington, 1996, pp. 732–733), as strategy is continuously created in practical work (Jarzabkowski et al., 2013, p. 41). SAP has emerged as a counterbalance to traditional strategy research, which focused more on economics and largely overlooked the concrete actions of individuals involved in strategic work (Jarzabkowski & Spee, 2009, pp. 69–70). Therefore, SAP research does not necessarily aim to explain strategic change or organizational success, but rather focuses on strategic activity and interaction within the organization at multiple levels (Jarzabkowski & Spee, 2009, p. 70; Jarzabkowski & Whittington, 2008, p. 102). Strategy can also be understood as a form of organizational work, in which case it is necessary to consider

what kinds of practices are utilized and how multiple actors participate in strategy work (Jarzabkowski et al., 2013, p. 42).

The framework of Strategy as Practice research particularly emphasizes strategy praxis, practitioners, and practices (Jarzabkowski et al., 2013, p. 42; Jarzabkowski & Whittington, 2008, p. 101; Vaara & Whittington, 2012, p. 285). These SAP parameters are generally understood in research as follows. Praxis refers to the activity and practices of doing strategy, practitioners are the individuals who participate in strategy-making, and practices refer to the symbolic and material tools used in strategy work (Jarzabkowski & Spee, 2009, p. 70; Jarzabkowski & Whittington, 2008, p. 101). SAP research has been conducted from both micro and macro perspectives (Jarzabkowski & Spee, 2009, p. 71). However, many researchers note that the focus of studies is more on micro-level phenomena, with attention on praxis, practitioners, and practices, even though practices influencing strategy-making at a local level also shape the field more broadly.

The strategy process consists of various events and flows of activity. This is referred to as praxis (Jarzabkowski & Spee, 2009, p. 73). Praxis refers to the process of doing strategy, in which theoretical terms such as intent and emergence, or thinking and acting, cannot be separated in practical content (Jarzabkowski, 2005, pp. 22–24). Thus, praxis refers to the actual flow of work, such as meetings and strategy-related talk (Jarzabkowski et al., 2013, p. 42). Strategy-making may also include calculations, filling in forms, and presentations, all of which are encompassed by praxis (Jarzabkowski & Whittington, 2008, p. 101). According to Kohtamäki et al. (2022, p. 215), the term praxis refers to the real, concrete activities of strategy formulation that occur at different levels. According to Whittington (2006, p. 619), praxis refers to the real-world activities, what people actually do, when engaging in strategy creation and execution. Praxis differs from the concept of practices, which refers to shared routines, norms, and procedures that guide and influence action. Praxis is fundamentally internal organizational work and encompasses both routine and non-routine, formal and informal activities.

In the Strategy as Practice approach, the actors of strategy are in a central role. They are referred to as practitioners (Jarzabkowski, 2005, pp. 22–24). Jarzabkowski states that people make strategy and that it is shaped through interaction between individuals. The practitioners perspective focuses particularly on how the strategy process appears from the perspective of those who create it. How the actors operate, who they are, and how they interact. She further notes that not all of these individuals are necessarily formally referred to as strategists, but they may include, for example, employees at different levels of the organization, consultants, accountants, investors, authorities, or consumers. Practitioners can refer to either internal or external actors involved in strategy-making (Jarzabkowski et al., 2013, p. 42; Jarzabkowski & Spee, 2009, p. 72). Practitioners can also be divided into those who are directly or indirectly involved in strategy-making (Jarzabkowski & Whittington, 2008, pp. 101–102). Jarzabkowski and Whittington specify that actors directly involved in strategy work may include managers or consultants, whereas those indirectly involved may include, for example, business schools, the media, or legislators.

Participants in the strategy process can also be examined as a group. Jarzabkowski and Spee (2009, p. 72) have identified from previous research two different starting points for examining strategy practitioners. The first perspective considers whether the practitioner is an individual or a group. The second perspective focuses on whether the practitioner is internal or external to the organization. If SAP research is interested in the actions and behavior of an individual in the strategy process, it may examine, for example, the actions of a particular manager or chief executive officer. The group perspective, in turn, may consider, for example, the entire executive team or the organization's middle management. In this thesis, we examine actors outside the organization who have participated in strategy work particularly from a group perspective, that is, external aggregate practitioners. We are not primarily interested in individual practitioners.

Strategy practitioners may also be embodied in individual actors. According to Whittington (1996, p. 732), SAP does not only address the core competencies of the organization,

but also the competence of an individual manager as a strategist. Similar to earlier planning traditions, this approach is directed at the managerial level and does not particularly take into account expertise found elsewhere in the organization. Yet the perspective extends beyond simply examining strategic direction, as the emphasis lies in how managers and consultants act effectively and interact throughout the strategy-making process. (Whittington, 1996, p. 732). Many studies focusing on strategy actors tend to concentrate mainly on the role and perspectives of top management, even though strategic actions occur at many other levels of the organization as well (Jarzabkowski & Spee, 2009, p. 69). In this study, there is an interest in expanding the concept of practitioners beyond management.

If praxis referred to the actual course of strategy work and the processes included in it, in the Strategy as Practice approach practices refers to the tools and objects utilized in the praxis phase (Jarzabkowski, 2005, pp. 22–24; Jarzabkowski et al., 2013, p. 42). According to Jarzabkowski (2005), these can be categorized in three ways. First, there are administrative practices, which assist in the coordination and organization of strategy. Such rational tools include, for example, budgets, forecasts, and performance indicators. Second, discursive tools are mentioned, such as linguistic and symbolic resources in the strategy process (pp. 24–27). She emphasizes that particularly linguistic choices have significance in strategy-making. Finally, she identifies episodic practices, meaning enabling and organizing modes of action such as meetings and workshops.

Concrete strategy tools, that is, practices, have also been widely studied. Jarzabkowski and Whittington (2008, p. 101) describe practices as including various routines, conceptual frameworks, and technologies that enable strategy work. According to them, material practices used in the process may include, for example, PowerPoint presentations and flip charts. Jarzabkowski et al. (2013, p. 43) emphasize that objects used in strategy process, such as notes or tables, are not in themselves strategy tools, but they can be mobilized for use in the strategy process and assigned a specific meaning within that

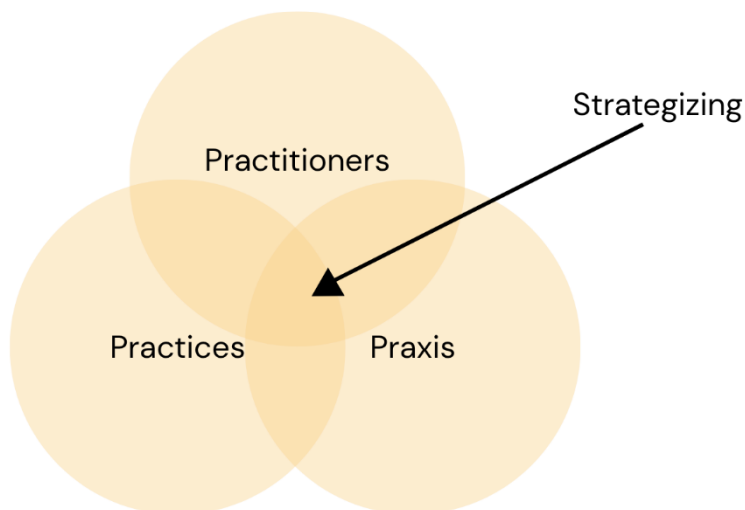
process. This also implies that tools may have different purposes in different processes. The objects described above are referred to by Jarzabkowski et al. as epistemic objects.

### **2.1.3 Participation in strategizing**

Strategy as Practice provides a useful lens for examining participation in the strategy process, as it emphasizes the role of multiple actors and their everyday practices in strategy formation. Originally, strategy work was thought to concern only the top management of the organization. This was partly due to the nature of strategy as a plan for decision-making (Floyd & Wooldridge, 2000, p. 43). Gradually, strategy research and the concept of practitioners expanded beyond top management to also include middle management within the organization (p. 48). The role of middle management was particularly emphasized when research began to focus on strategy implementation (p. 49). There is also a link between the activity of middle management, organizational capabilities, and competitive advantage when considering strategy work and the actors involved (p. 62). According to Floyd and Lane (2000, p. 158), the top management's role centers more on making strategic decisions, while middle managers focus on relaying information between the operational level and senior leadership. They further note that these roles may vary or overlap depending on the organization in question. However, top management and middle management often differ in terms of the type of information they produce and the expectations placed on their behavior. In any case, middle management is no longer seen merely as an implementer of top management decisions, but as a group that plays a notable role in strategic change (Hoon, 2007, pp. 921–922).

The Strategy as Practice perspective, however, questions the idea that managers are the only actors involved in strategizing. Its key contribution to this study is the view that strategy-making is not merely a managerial task, but rather encompasses a wide range of interactive activities and routines carried out by various participants (Hoon, 2007, p. 922). All forms of strategic activity are often referred to as strategizing. Jarzabkowski et al. (2015, p. 27) define strategizing as activities, interactions, and negotiations between different actors, as well as the practices based on these situations. According to

Jarzabkowski (2005, pp. 148–149), strategizing is also interaction between top management and other actors who influence strategy. Meetings, workshops, and rituals are types of strategy practices in which strategy takes shape (Hoon, 2007, p. 925; Mantere, 2005). These formal strategizing situations often define who participates in them and what is discussed. In the study by Jarzabkowski et al. (2007), strategizing is also strongly linked to Strategy as Practice theory. As noted earlier, strategizing can be understood as the making of strategy. This can also be illustrated through three key elements: practitioners, praxis, and practices, through whose interaction strategy is formed (Jarzabkowski et al., 2007). This is also illustrated in Figure 2.



**Figure 2.** A conceptual framework for analysing strategy-as-practice (Jarzabkowski et al., 2007, p. 11)

The quality of interaction also has significance in strategy-making. Strategizing is more of an organizational learning process than merely analytical decision-making (Floyd & Wooldridge, 2000, p. 87). Therefore, strategies develop over time in various social contexts and relationships. Social network theory, developed by sociologists, examines internal and external relationships and networks of an organization, as well as their behavior and impact (p. 88). Such organizational relationships with networks may include, for example, supplier or buyer relationships. Social relationships also play a major role in strategic change, as they increase the information available to actors and deepen understanding of the strategic context of the organization (p. 90). However, the quality of

relationships and networks matters. Positive relationships increase knowledge sharing and the transfer of expertise, whereas negative relationships may act as isolating mechanisms and prevent access to information (p. 92). Positive relationships and strong ties also involve mutual trust, which enables cooperation and its continuation (p. 97).

Actors participating in strategy work, and the praxis surrounding it, can also be defined through agency. Mantere (2005, p. 157) refers to individuals participating in strategy work as the champions of strategy. These are individuals who influence strategy more broadly than merely through their own operational responsibilities. Although Mantere himself focuses on internal champions within the organization, the description does not explicitly limit individuals influencing strategy to internal or external actors. Thus, it leaves room for this thesis to examine particularly external champions more broadly. However, Mantere continues by noting that champions describe a role of agency, which excludes individuals who would like to participate in strategy-making but are unable to do so (pp. 158–159). This leads to a crucial question of participation. Who gets to participate in strategy work, and are all those willing to participate actually heard?

Examining participation practices is also important in order to identify the benefits and challenges within participation processes themselves. Mantere and Vaara (2008, p. 341) state that participation is one of the greatest challenges in strategy research and practice. However, research shows that weak strategy more easily leads to dissatisfaction, as well as poorly constructed and implemented strategy. Participation is strongly connected to the core idea of SAP, namely practical actions and interaction between people, and is therefore also a significant part of this study. It is nevertheless recognized that a stable organizational environment tends to produce a more hierarchical administrative structure, whereas a dynamic environment fosters broader involvement from middle managers and other employees (p. 342).

When examining the involvement of external actors in strategy work, it is important to pay particular attention to certain aspects. Internal strategic discourse within an

organization may be familiar to, for example, the executive team or middle management, but external partners are outside the reach of this discourse. Participation in strategy work cannot therefore focus solely on internal operating models. When involving external actors, attention must be paid to the language of strategy used, as well as to the meaning and understanding constructed around the strategy. Actors who are involved in strategy work often already have prior experience in strategy-making, although these actors rarely bring divergent visions of the future into the process (Eriksson & Lehtimäki, 1998, p. 298). If an organization seeks new approaches, it should involve actors for whom strategy-making or strategic language is not as familiar. Research by Hoon (2007, p. 921) shows that informal discussions between top management and middle management in the strategy process also shape strategy. Discussion, both formal and informal, thus has significance in strategic work. However, the research raises the question of how to equally effectively capture the views of those actors who do not work within the same organization and with whom informal strategic discussions do not take place.

Discursive research is a significant part of strategizing (Jarzabkowski et al., 2015, p. 27). From the perspective of this thesis, discursive research is important because it demonstrates the ways in which one can participate in strategy work, how strategy can be understood, and how different strategic roles are enacted. Increasing understanding helps to resolve ambiguities and contradictions in strategy work. Discourse is a structure of social reality that is conveyed through language (Mantere & Vaara, 2008, p. 341). Strategic discourse also constructs meaning around organizational practices. Discursive research is therefore interested in language, rhetoric, and narratives, and examines strategy as a social and particularly linguistic construct (Hardy et al., 2000, p. 1229). In the linguistic choices of strategy, it is also important to consider who makes decisions. Often, the organization's management is responsible for how strategy is expressed, and therefore strategy often reflects the social environment of management (Eriksson & Lehtimäki, 1998, p. 294). Eriksson and Lehtimäki (p. 298) recommend that strategy participation should be approached through language. Linguistic choices and the meaning of words are not often the first considerations of those creating strategy, but they help to unpack

the paradoxes of strategy-making and are an important part of the sensemaking of participants.

Sensemaking describes how managers interpret and construct meaning for themselves from information related to strategic change, whereas sensegiving concerns the ways in which they convey these interpretations to others and seek to shape the eventual outcome (Rouleau, 2005, p. 1415). When considering these concepts in the context of this thesis, sensemaking could refer to the understanding that stakeholders and residents form for themselves based on strategy material, and sensegiving would refer to the understanding communicated by the wellbeing services county to stakeholders and residents. Both are important themes in participation, as external actors must be able to interpret the meaning of the wellbeing services county's strategy for themselves, while the wellbeing services county organization must be able to communicate strategic change in a way that enables shared understanding to be constructed.

## 2.2 Participation and stakeholder involvement

In this chapter, the theories of the two previous chapters are combined closer to the topic of the study. The participation practices of the wellbeing services county's strategy work are examined through the lens of Strategy as Practice. The chapter discusses who the residents and stakeholders of the wellbeing services county are, and why they should participate in the strategy process. The third subsection addresses more specifically the question of how the participation of these groups in the strategy process has been studied previously. In addition, the topic is expanded through open strategy theory, which provides the study with a complementary perspective on the involvement of external stakeholders and continuous development. Next, the empirical, theoretical, and integrative works utilized in Chapter 2.2 are presented (Table 2).

Author(s) and year of publication	Title of the study
Arnstein, S. R. (2019)	A Ladder of Citizen Participation

Bryson, J. M. (2004)	What to do when Stakeholders matter: Stakeholder Identification and Analysis Techniques
Bryson, J. M., Quick, K. S., Slotterback, C. S., & Crosby, B. C. (2013)	Designing Public Participation Processes
Cho, S., Mossberger, K., Swindell, D., & Selby, J. D. (2021)	Experimenting with Public Engagement Platforms in Local Government
Einola, S., Kohtamäki, M., & Hietikko, H. (2019)	Open Strategy in a Smart City
Freeman, R. E. (1984)	Strategic management: A stakeholder approach
George, B. (2017)	Does strategic planning 'work' in public organizations? Insights from Flemish municipalities
Golsorkhi, D., Rouleau, L., Seidl, D., & Vaara, E. (2019)	Cambridge Handbook of Strategy as Practice
Hautz, J., Seidl, D., & Whittington, R. (2017)	Open Strategy: Dimensions, Dilemmas, Dynamics
Jarzabkowski, P., & Kaplan, S. (2015)	Strategy tools-in-use: A framework for understanding "technologies of rationality" in practice
Jarzabkowski, P., Paul Spee, A., & Smets, M. (2013)	Material artifacts: Practices for doing strategy with 'stuff'
Joyce, P. (2004)	Public sector strategic management: The changes required
Kaihlaniemi, A.-M., Kainiemi, E., Virtanen, L., Hiltunen, P., Einola, S., & Heponiemi, T. (2025)	Health and social care professionals' expectations for e-leadership in the digital transformation: A qualitative study
Malhotra, A., Majchrzak, A., & Niemiec, R. M. (2017)	Using Public Crowds for Open Strategy Formulation: Mitigating the Risks of Knowledge Gaps
Stieger, D., Matzler, K., Chatterjee, S., & Ladstätter-Fussenegger, F. (2012)	Democratizing Strategy: How Crowdsourcing Can Be Used for Strategy Dialogues
Vallaster, C., & von Wallpach, S. (2018)	Brand Strategy Co-Creation in a Nonprofit Context: A Strategy-as-Practice Approach
Voorberg, W. H., Bekkers, V. J. J. M., & Tummers, L. G. (2015)	A Systematic Review of Co-Creation and Co-Production: Embarking on the social innovation journey
Whittington, R., Cailluet, L., & Yakis-Douglas, B. (2011)	Opening Strategy: Evolution of a Precarious Profession

**Table 2.** A summary of the articles in chapter 2.2.

### **2.2.1 Resident participation in public sector strategy**

Residents living in the area of the wellbeing services county and their opportunities to participate are aspects defined by law. According to Section 3 of the Act on Wellbeing Services Counties, a resident of a wellbeing services county is a person whose municipality of residence is located within the area of the wellbeing services county. The regional council is responsible for ensuring diverse opportunities for participation and influence for residents of the wellbeing services county and users of its services (Act on Wellbeing Services Counties, Section 29). Opportunities for participation and influence may include, for example, discussion and consultation events, as well as client councils. The regional council may also promote participation by planning services together with users, providing opportunities for financial planning, and selecting service users to the governing bodies of the wellbeing services county. Communication of the wellbeing services county is also regulated by law. According to Section 34 of the Act on Wellbeing Services Counties, the wellbeing services county must inform residents how they can participate in and influence the preparation of decisions. The language used in communication must also be clear and understandable.

There may also be different levels of resident participation in the strategy process. First, a clear distinction must be made between mere participation rituals and actual, meaningful influence (Arnstein, 2019, pp. 24–25). According to Arnstein, empty participation allows power holders to claim that all parties have been heard, even though in reality the situation remains a status quo. Genuine influence, in turn, gives residents the power to influence the outcome of the strategy process. Arnstein has developed an eight-rung ladder of citizen participation, which is divided into three main categories: at the lowest level Nonparticipation, followed by Degrees of tokenism, and at the highest level Degrees of citizen power. Nonparticipation, which covers the two lowest rungs, refers, for example, to advisory committees that function like a rubber stamp and create an illusion of participation. The next three rungs fall under the category Degrees of tokenism, which Arnstein describes as a step closer to full participation. It represents a shift from one-way communication from officials to residents toward consulting residents, for example

through attitude surveys or public hearings. However, according to Arnstein, participation is still not fully realized at this level, as participation is mainly measured by the number of participants, which in turn gives those in power the impression that participation has been achieved. Residents, however, do not gain meaningful influence from participation. The top three rungs belong to the category Degrees of citizen power, which describe levels of power in which citizens have increasing decision-making authority. These may include different forms of partnerships that allow negotiation or compromise with power holders, or the redistribution of power, where less advantaged citizens gain a majority of decision-making positions. From the perspective of this thesis, it is essential to examine whether resident participation in the strategy process remains merely one-way communication or a numerical count of participating citizens, or whether participation actually changes the current state.

### **2.2.2 Stakeholder participation in public sector strategy**

In the previous section, we discussed one stakeholder group of the wellbeing services county, namely residents. However, the wellbeing services county has many other external stakeholders, which are defined next. According to Bryson (2004, p. 22), in the public and nonprofit sectors the term stakeholder refers to people, groups, and organizations that leaders and managers must take into account in some way. Freeman (1984, p. 46), in turn, defined stakeholders as any individual or group that can influence the organization's ability to achieve its objectives, or that is influenced by those objectives. Stakeholders are also actors who influence the organization's strategy and are influenced by it, or are otherwise affected by the organization's future direction (Bryson, 2004, p. 22). Bryson's research demonstrates that stakeholder research encompasses differing views on whether stakeholders should be limited to individuals and groups with the power to directly shape the organization's future, or whether the concept can also include those without such influence. In this study, stakeholders are considered according to the broader definition, as very few stakeholders have this kind of influence over the wellbeing services county. The position of certain stakeholder categories, such as municipalities, communities, and foundations, within the wellbeing services county is also defined by

law. A member of a wellbeing services county may also be a municipality if it is located within the area of the wellbeing services county, or a community or foundation if its domicile is in a municipality within the wellbeing services county (Act on Wellbeing Services Counties, Section 3).

Partnership working is part of a transition in which public sector organizations are more responsible for solving complex community problems than for the outcomes of service delivery (Joyce, 2004, p. 108). According to Joyce, one way in which public organizations, such as wellbeing services counties, can also develop service delivery is by involving community organizations in the strategy process. To ensure that services meet the needs of the community, public sector organizations can, for example, send their completed strategic documents to local stakeholders and request their comments. Joyce states that public organizations can also address community problems by developing strategic planning through shared networks, but notes that strategic planning within networks may be more difficult to manage than planning within a single organization.

### **2.2.3 Participation as a strategic practice**

In the previous subsections, it has been discussed, from the perspective of this thesis, who should be involved in the strategy process and why. Next, based on previous research, it is presented how participation in the strategy process occurs in practice. According to Bryson et al. (2013, pp. 23–25), participation takes place through various participation practices, whose form and implementation vary depending on the organizational context and objectives. They further note that participation can occur through different methods, such as informing, consulting, involving, and collaborating. These different forms of participation also require different means of interaction. They highlight deliberative approaches, such as workshops and small group discussions, which enable deeper interaction and the construction of shared understanding among participants. On the other hand, different forms of participation also serve different purposes. Participation may be limited to the collection or dissemination of information, or it may enable joint learning, development, and the strengthening of decision-making legitimacy. For

example, surveys and workshops enable different forms of action and follow-up measures as participation methods.

Strategy tools have been widely studied, but in this thesis the focus is particularly on tools that are suitable for involving different groups. The term tool may refer to frameworks, concepts, models, or methods, and they function as instruments of strategy practice (Jarzabkowski & Kaplan, 2015, p. 538). Material forms of strategy-making also include various epistemic objects such as whiteboards, spreadsheets, and PowerPoint presentations (Jarzabkowski et al., 2013, pp. 41–43), but these are not necessarily the most suitable tools for involving actors outside the organization. These epistemic objects may also be nested, meaning that interconnected objects are part of the knowledge production process (Jarzabkowski et al., 2013, p. 43). This is relevant, as participatory tools are often transformed into informational tools.

Interactive situations are an important part of strategic practices as well as stakeholder involvement. In their article, Seidl and Guérard highlight different situations such as meetings and workshops, which can function as means of participation (Golsorkhi et al., 2019, pp. 564–565). In these encounters, strategic views are shared, processed, and challenged. According to the authors, a few defining characteristics of strategic meetings or workshops should be highlighted. They are planned, bounded, goal-oriented, and take place in a physical or digital space. Planned and bounded interaction situations mean that someone has decided who participates and what is discussed. This may also shape which perspectives are expressed and which remain excluded (pp. 566–567). However, the authors emphasize that such interaction situations are important for sharing knowledge and creating shared understanding (sensemaking). These aspects are particularly emphasized in the case of external stakeholders (pp. 568–569).

In addition to physical interaction, digital participation platforms provide an opportunity for residents and stakeholders to participate in the strategy process. Digital participation platforms are tools specifically designed for citizen participation, enabling the collection

of feedback, discussion, and the sharing of ideas between the public sector and citizens (Cho et al., 2021, pp. 764–765). Such platforms may also include various functionalities such as surveys, discussion forums, data visualization, map-based tools, and voting (p. 767). In this case as well, it is important to note that many digital participation methods remain at the level of consultation, as they are often used to collect citizens' views, for example through surveys and voting. According to Cho et al., the advantage of digital participation platforms lies in their accessibility and flexibility, as participation is not bound by time or place (p. 769). This may enable reaching a broader group of participants compared to traditional participation methods. Digital participation also has limitations, such as inequality in digital skills and access (p. 770). This may lead to unequal participation across population groups, and participation may become biased toward certain groups. The study by Cho et al. shows that the use of digital participation platforms is linked to broader participation practices, and their use alone does not necessarily increase citizen participation without other supporting practices (pp. 783–784).

Engaging residents in the strategy process may not be simple, but it is worthwhile. George (2017, p. 529) has studied strategic management in municipalities in the Netherlands, and the results show that strategic planning produces better outcomes when both internal (such as staff) and external (such as residents) stakeholders participate in the process. Involving the general public in the strategy process is not easy, and few public sector organizations have been able to do so successfully (Joyce, 2004, pp. 108–109). It should be noted that Joyce's study on public sector strategic management was conducted in the early 2000s, after which both participation practices and research have developed further. However, he lists four actions that an organization can take so that the general public may accept the plans prepared on their behalf:

1. A strategy process that focuses on the strategic analysis and formulation of citizens' problems.
2. Utilizing the organization's expertise according to the prioritization of citizens' problems.

3. Preparing resource plans that support citizens' priorities rather than those of the organization.
4. Involving citizens in transforming strategic ideas into strategic plans.

The participation of stakeholders in planning and strategy work has also been studied through co-creation (Vallaster & von Wallpach, 2018, pp. 984–985). In this approach, stakeholders are not merely passive participants but active co-developers. In their study, they highlight how reciprocal commitment, transparency, and shared values between the organization and its stakeholders are prerequisites for the co-creation of strategy (pp. 996–998). The results also show that stakeholders are more likely to voluntarily engage in co-development if they expect to gain subjective value from the organizational experience. In the case of a wellbeing services county, the willingness of external stakeholders to participate in strategy development is likely related to a mutually accepted outcome, where both the wellbeing services county and its stakeholders move in the same direction. The study by Vallaster and von Wallpach also highlights how continuous interaction between the organization and its stakeholders shapes the operating models and practices of co-creation processes. From the perspective of Strategy as Practice, co-creation can be understood as praxis activities between the organization and its stakeholders.

Voorberg et al. (2015) also highlight in their article the differences and similarities between co-creation and traditional participation. By co-creation, they refer specifically to the active engagement of citizens in the design, implementation, and further development of public services at various stages of the process (pp. 1334–1335). According to them, co-creation differs from traditional participation in that it requires an active role from citizens, whereas participation may also be passive. They distinguish three key roles in the co-creation process: citizens may act as implementers of services (co-implementer), participate in their design (co-designer), or act as initiators (pp. 1339–1341). Their study shows that citizen participation is often limited to the implementation of services, whereas participation in strategic planning or initiative-taking is less common. Voorberg et al. identify the objectives of co-creation as, for example, improving

efficiency and effectiveness, as well as increasing customer satisfaction. Their study indicates that the success of co-creation processes is influenced by factors related both to the organization and to citizens. On the organizational side, key factors include, for example, an open attitude toward participation and functional structures, whereas citizen participation is influenced by factors such as motivation, competence, and social capital (pp. 1341–1342). In the context of a wellbeing services county, it is important to consider the willingness of residents and stakeholders to engage in active co-creation, as it requires motivation and time resources from both parties. Kaihlanen et al. (2025, pp. 6–7) also highlight the importance of organizational resources and leadership in change, for example when designing new participation methods.

#### **2.2.4 Open strategy and participation**

This subsection focuses on the theoretical approach of open strategy. The chapter first reviews earlier theoretical research on open strategy and then more recent empirical studies. In open strategy, the organization enables open innovation by utilizing the knowledge and ideas of external actors, such as users and partners (Whittington et al., 2011, pp. 534–535). Whittington et al. further argue that many of the same elements that drive open innovation also underlie open strategy. In principle, open innovation is only one form of open strategy, as innovations are a type of strategy process. In both, however, openness can be seen as a continuum, which may include, for example, the sharing or collection of information. Open strategy can therefore be understood as a process in which organizations co-strategize and collaborate with multiple stakeholders (Hautz et al., 2017, p. 299). According to Hautz, open strategy theory extends the Strategy as Practice concept well, as both focus on strategy as practice. However, Strategy as Practice is less focused on transforming organizational relationships and broader societal responsibility, for which open strategy provides practices.

Open strategy and its processes involve both challenges and benefits. On the downside, greater involvement, for example among lower-level managers, may create increased pressure regarding the success of strategy and responsibility (Whittington et al., 2011,

pp. 534–535). From the organization’s perspective, opening up strategy may also involve difficulties. Openness may, for example, mean greater exposure to pressure from consumers and authorities. The authors note that open strategy challenges two traditional principles of strategy. These are exclusiveness and secrecy. Traditionally, strategy has been the exclusive responsibility of top management and has been kept separate from operational management. Second, strategy has traditionally been kept secret in order to ensure the best competitive advantage in the field. Although open strategy is often considered particularly relevant in the technology sector, the authors argue that it applies more broadly across sectors, both private and public. Whittington et al. argue that opening up strategy broadens the range of strategic ideas and increases commitment, as well as understanding of strategy implementation. Hautz et al. (2017, p. 298) also note several benefits of open strategy, including increased creativity, greater commitment, joint sensemaking, and the creation of a positive perception.

Open strategy challenges traditional concepts by expanding inclusion and increasing transparency. In open strategy, participation is extended to actors outside the organization, such as consultants and suppliers (Whittington et al., 2011, p. 535). In the framework presented by Whittington et al. (Figure 3), two main principles of open strategy, transparency and inclusion, are illustrated in relation to internal and external activities. Few organizations are fully transparent and inclusive in their operations. These aspects also do not extend decision-making authority in strategy, but rather refer to the exchange of views, information, and knowledge. Inclusion refers to participation in the organization’s strategy discussion, the sharing of knowledge and perspectives, and proposals that guide the continuous development of strategy (p. 536). Internal inclusion, in turn, refers, for example, to employees’ opportunities to provide input on strategy, organizational development, and innovation. External inclusion refers to the ability of external actors and individuals to jointly develop strategy and scenarios. For example, crowd-sourcing provides an external perspective on the organization’s strategy. Transparency, in turn, refers to the availability of information about the organization’s strategy process and the completed strategy. Transparency and inclusion do not necessarily go

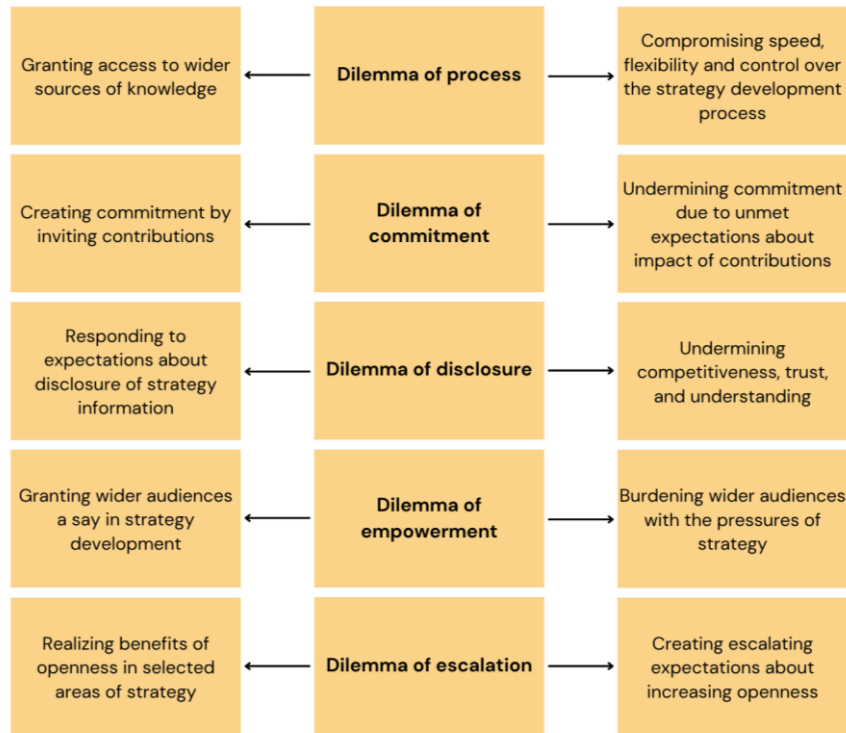
hand in hand, as an organization may be open about its activities without involving internal or external actors in their development. Internally, transparency also refers to the need for managers at different levels to understand the strategy in order to implement it. External transparency, according to Whittington et al., may include, for example, strategy communication events aimed at external stakeholders, where the strategy or its updates are presented to key groups.

	Transparency	Inclusion
Internal	e.g. blogging	e.g. jamming
External	e.g. strategy updates	e.g. crowd-sourcing

**Figure 3.** *Open strategy: transparency and inclusion* (Whittington et al., 2011, p. 535)

Open strategy is also associated with significant tensions and challenges. Hautz et al. (2017, pp. 298, 301–303) identify five key dilemmas that describe the dual effects of openness in strategy processes: process, commitment, disclosure, empowerment, and escalation (Figure 4). The process dilemma relates to the effects of participation in the strategy process. Broader participation enables diverse perspectives, but at the same time it may slow down decision-making. The second dilemma relates to commitment. Participation may increase commitment to the strategy, or conversely weaken it if participants' expectations regarding their influence are not fulfilled. The disclosure dilemma relates to the information shared in the strategy process. Transparency may increase the organization's legitimacy, but on the other hand it may also weaken its competitiveness. The empowerment dilemma, in turn, relates to the fact that participation may increase the influence of actors, but at the same time it introduces new demands in terms of time use and responsibility. The escalation dilemma specifically relates to the escalation of

openness. When an organization opens its strategy process in certain areas, it may create expectations for even broader openness.



**Figure 4.** *Central dilemmas of open strategy* (Hautz et al., 2017, p. 302).

Research shows that participatory strategy processes can increase the effectiveness of strategy work, but their success depends strongly on the method of implementation and the structure of the process. For example, in the study by Stieger et al. (2012, pp. 55–65), it was observed that large-scale participation through a digital platform can produce a significant amount of strategically relevant content: within two weeks, 135 discussion threads and over 1300 comments were generated in the organization, and nearly half of the employees participated actively in the discussion. This suggests that participatory methods, especially digital ones, can mobilize a large number of actors for strategy work even within a short period of time. At the same time, however, the study shows that participation is unevenly distributed, as a significant proportion of participants did not produce any content, and participation was concentrated among an active core group. In addition, internal organizational structures, such as access to systems, influenced

participation. For example, production workers were almost entirely excluded from the process. When applied to the context of a wellbeing services county, it can therefore be assumed that not all residents and stakeholders will automatically participate, even if the opportunity is provided. Furthermore, participation must be made a natural part of everyday activities. However, there is a risk that only already active residents or stakeholders will take advantage of the opportunity to influence. The study by Stieger et al. also highlighted that the greatest value of participation may not lie in individual ideas, but in the interaction itself. Dialogue helped to create a shared understanding of the organization's situation. In the public sector context, this finding likely also strengthens the legitimacy of the wellbeing services county and provides both stakeholders and the organization with a shared objective.

Research also shows that an open strategy process enables the involvement of a broad range of external stakeholders in strategy formation, which is particularly relevant in the public sector context. Malhotra et al. (2017) examine in their case study an online-based strategy process in which a diverse group of actors from different backgrounds participated. According to the results, such large-scale participation can generate active and interactive discussion, as the majority of the content produced by participants consists of reactions to others' views rather than merely the expression of individual opinions (p. 403). At the same time, their study shows that although participants' views differed, large-scale participation did not lead to significant conflict, but the discussion remained largely constructive. In addition, the study highlights that involving a broad group can increase the legitimacy and acceptability of the strategy (p. 404).

When strategy is developed together with different stakeholders, it does not appear solely as something produced by the organization, but rather as a collective process. Open strategy thus contains many elements of co-creation, meaning that stakeholders are active rather than passive actors. In the study by Einola et al. (2019), crowd-sourcing functions as a key tool for co-development and enabling innovation in the strategy process of the city of Vaasa. To support participation, participants were provided with

sufficient background information to ensure a shared understanding of the themes under discussion. In addition, the crowd-sourcing platform enabled interaction among citizens, allowing participants to comment on and emphasize each other's views, which facilitated discussion and the development of ideas.

### **2.3 Theoretical framework**

In the previous chapters, the strategy process has been examined from the Strategy as Practice perspective, the specific characteristics of strategic activity in the public sector, as well as the participation of residents and stakeholders in the strategy process. In this chapter, these perspectives are combined into a theoretical framework that guides the analysis of this study.

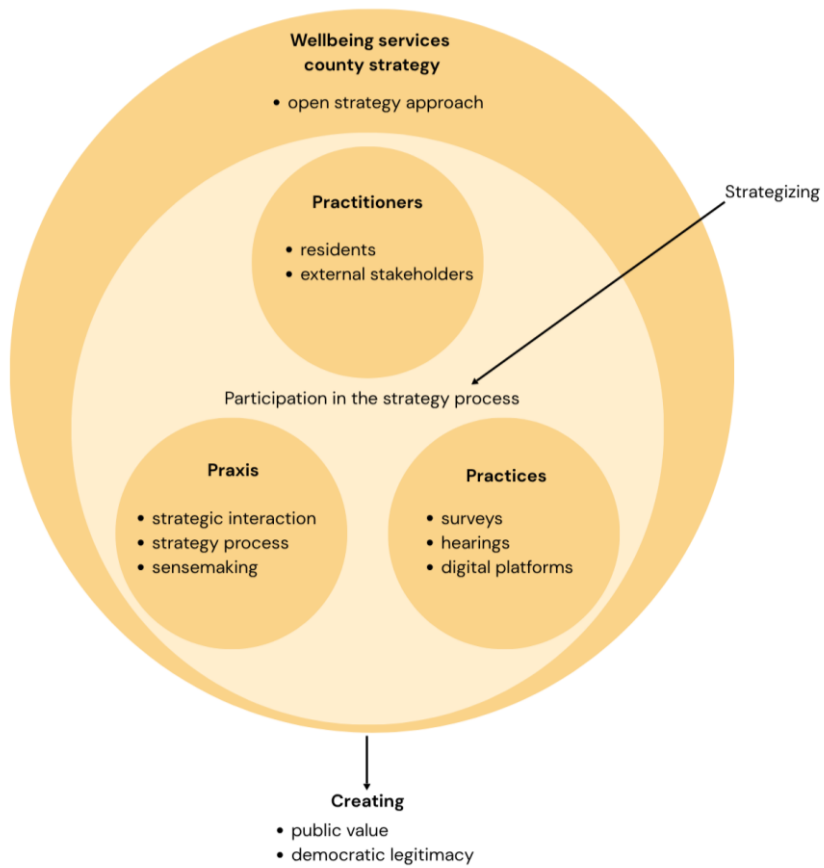
The Strategy as Practice (SAP) research approach examines strategy as practical activity, focusing on what people do during the strategy process, what kinds of practices they utilize, and who participates in strategy work. In the SAP perspective, strategy work is often structured through three key concepts: practitioners, practices, and praxis. Practitioners refers to the actors participating in strategy work, practices to the tools and methods used in strategy work, and praxis to the concrete activities and interactions of strategy work. In this study, the concept of practitioners refers particularly to actors outside the organization, namely the residents of the wellbeing services county and external stakeholders. These may include, for example, municipalities, communities, and foundations that participate in the development of the wellbeing services county's activities or are affected by its strategic decisions. The SAP perspective enables the examination of the strategy process as a broader social activity, in which strategy is not formed solely through the decision-making of organizational management, but also through interaction between different actors.

Strategy work is examined in this study in the context of the public sector, where strategic activity is closely linked to public value thinking and democratic legitimacy. The strategies of wellbeing services counties do not primarily aim to achieve competitive

advantage, but rather to promote the wellbeing of residents and to produce public value. For this reason, the openness, inclusiveness, and consideration of different actors in the strategy process are particularly important in the public context. The open strategy perspective complements the theoretical framework of the study by highlighting the dimensions of openness in strategy work, particularly inclusion and transparency.

From the SAP perspective, the strategy process consists of various strategic practices through which participation takes place. In this study, particular attention is given to participatory strategy tools, such as surveys, consultation events, and the use of digital participation platforms. Through these practices, actors participating in the strategy process can express their views and experiences regarding the organization's activities and its future direction. At the same time, the strategy process is constructed as praxis activity, in which strategy is formed through interaction and sensemaking processes. While the Strategy as Practice approach examines strategy as practices and actors, open strategy emphasizes the extent to which the strategy process opens beyond the organization. In this way, open strategy connects the theme of participation to the practices of strategy work and provides a conceptual foundation for involving residents and stakeholders in the strategy process.

The theoretical framework presented in Figure 5 illustrates how the strategy work of a wellbeing services county is formed through the interaction of practitioners, practices, and praxis elements in the context of the public sector. This study examines how the open strategy environment of a wellbeing services county can enable better conditions for joint strategizing and thereby produce more public value and democratic legitimacy for residents and stakeholders. The study aims to identify both the current state of participation and future development opportunities within the wellbeing services county and more broadly within the public sector.



**Figure 5.** Theoretical framework of residents and stakeholder participation in the strategy process of a wellbeing services county.

### **3 Methodology**

This chapter describes the methodology of the thesis in more detail. The chapter presents the research method used and the data collection methods, as well as prepares the analysis of the data for the results chapter. In addition, this chapter provides a more detailed description of the Wellbeing Services County, which serves as the case organization.

#### **3.1 Research approach**

In this study, a mixed-methods research approach was utilized to examine the participation of residents and external stakeholders in the strategy work of the wellbeing services county. Mixed-methods research refers to an approach in which elements of qualitative and quantitative research are combined (Schoonenboom & Johnson, 2017, p. 108). According to Schoonenboom and Johnson, this aims to achieve a deeper understanding of the topic. In this study, the mixed-methods approach was chosen because both qualitative and quantitative methods were combined in the data collection through interviews and surveys. However, the analysis itself leaned more toward qualitative research, as the objective was to examine the realization of participation among residents and stakeholders, as well as the future development needs of participation. These require a more descriptive language typical of qualitative research rather than numerical representation.

According to Saunders et al. (2023, pp. 187–188), qualitative and quantitative research can be combined in different ways within a mixed-methods approach. The main designs in mixed methods are concurrent triangulation design, concurrent embedded design, sequential exploratory design, sequential explanatory design, and sequential multi-phase design. In this study, the research design used was concurrent triangulation design, as qualitative and quantitative data were collected in parallel and complemented each other in the analysis. The data collected through both methods aimed to examine the same phenomena, and neither approach was prioritized over the other.

### **3.2 The case organization**

According to Gibbert et al. (2008), a case study is a research method that enables the examination of complex phenomena in their natural context and particularly supports the development and testing of theory. They further state that a key strength of the case study lies in its ability to produce in-depth and practice-oriented understanding of an organization, as the research is often based on close interaction with practitioners. At the same time, case studies involve challenges related to methodological reliability, particularly in terms of validity and reliability, as well as limited statistical generalizability, which is why their value is primarily based on analytical generalization.

The case organization of this study was the Wellbeing Services County of Ostrobothnia, whose channels were also utilized in the collection of the data. The Wellbeing Services County of Ostrobothnia is one of 21 wellbeing services counties and is responsible for social and healthcare as well as rescue services in Ostrobothnia (About us, n.d.). The Wellbeing Services County consists of 14 municipalities (Wellbeing services counties on the map, n.d.), of which the largest is Vaasa. The organization employs 8,000 professionals (All available jobs, n.d.), and its operations are divided into eight sectors (Organization structure, n.d.). In 2024, nearly 179,000 residents lived in the area, of whom approximately 49% were Swedish-speaking, 40% Finnish-speaking, and 11% speakers of other languages (Kototietokanta, n.d.). The Wellbeing Services County approved a new strategy in October 2025, but its preparation had already begun a year earlier. The data for this thesis was collected as part of the preparation of the wellbeing services county's strategy. The new strategy was developed for the years 2026–2029.

### **3.3 Data collection**

In the study, different data collection methods were utilized, enabling a comprehensive and diverse dataset typical of mixed-methods research. Both interviews and digitally conducted surveys were used for data collection. In the study, interviews can be classified as structured, semi-structured, and unstructured interviews (Saunders et al., 2023,

p. 443). In this thesis, the interviews were positioned between structured and semi-structured. The same interview framework was followed in all interviews, but the questions sometimes led to different follow-up questions depending on the interviewee's responses. Interviews are, however, an effective way to collect empirical data, especially when the phenomena under examination are occasional and rare (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007, p. 28). Eisenhardt and Graebner note that interviews may also provoke different reactions in interviewees, which is why careful interpretation of the data afterward is important. The surveys in this thesis were conducted as self-completed questionnaires. This means that respondents complete the survey independently, and the surveys are often conducted online, allowing responses through, for example, a computer, tablet, or smartphone (Saunders et al., 2023, pp. 509–510).

The Wellbeing Services County of Ostrobothnia approved a new strategy in autumn 2025. The data collection for this thesis was conducted as part of the preparation of the strategy during spring and summer 2025. The interviews and surveys were carried out as part of the participation work in the strategy process, which is why they also included questions beyond the scope of this study, and the results of these questions were utilized in the actual strategy formulation. The questions considered useful for answering the research questions of this thesis were included in the dataset, and they are presented in Chapter 4.

The interviews were conducted with the management team of the Wellbeing Services County of Ostrobothnia in March 2025. The management team consists of 22 members, and interviews were successfully conducted with 20 of them. The interviews lasted between 30 and 45 minutes, and with one exception, they were conducted using the Microsoft Teams platform. One interview was conducted in person at the county's office building. The interviews were conducted in Finnish, but interviewees also had the opportunity to respond in Swedish. To facilitate transcription, the built-in transcription tool of Teams was used, but the transcripts were subsequently reviewed manually. The

interview framework included 13 questions, although not all of them were utilized in this thesis. The interview questions are presented in Appendix 1.

Data from residents of the Wellbeing Services County was collected through a survey, which could be answered digitally via the DigiFinland Polis platform, currently known as Voxit. It was a participation platform introduced to Finland by DigiFinland and Sitra, designed to enable constructive expression of opinions (“DigiFinland,” n.d.). On the Polis platform, even large groups of people could respond anonymously, and participants could vote on predefined statements. A total of 53 statements were created on the platform, to which participants could respond with agree, disagree, or skip. Residents did not have the option to comment or provide open-ended responses. The survey was open for three weeks in April 2025, and it was promoted on the Wellbeing Services County’s website as well as on social media channels. Paid advertising was also used in social media promotion. A total of 759 residents of the region responded to the survey. In 2024, the population of Ostrobothnia was 178,758, which means that approximately 0.42% of the population participated in the survey. Participants were not required to respond to every statement, and the average respondent reviewed 46.54 statements. With the exception of a few demographic statements, the statements were presented to respondents in random order. More detailed demographic information of respondents is presented in Table 3. The survey also broadly examined residents’ views on the future of the wellbeing services county, and therefore not all questions could be utilized in this thesis. The statements included in the survey are presented in Appendix 2.

<b>Age groups</b>	
under 18 years old	9 pcs / 1,2 %
18–64 years old	560 pcs / 77,6 %
over 64 years old	153 pcs / 21,2 %
<b>Native language</b>	
Finnish	231 pcs / 31,3 %
Swedish	65,6 pcs / 65,6 %

something else	23 pcs / 3,1 %
<b>Residential area</b>	
Southern: Kaskinen, Kristiinankaupunki, Närpiö, Korsnäs, Maalahti	120 pcs / 16,8 %
Central: Vaasa, Mustasaari, Laihia, Vöyri	363 pcs / 50,9 %
Northern: Pietarsaari, Uusikaarlepyy, Kruunupyy, Luoto, Pedersöre	230 pcs / 32,3 %

**Table 3.** Demographic background of respondents to the resident survey.

The survey for external stakeholders of the Wellbeing Services County of Ostrobothnia was conducted on the Webropol platform during June–August 2025. Webropol is a survey tool designed for various organizations, intended for measuring customer and employee experience (“Webropol,” n.d.). The survey was distributed via email to 149 partners of the wellbeing services county, including municipalities, companies, organizations, parishes, and other actors in the region. A total of 23 stakeholders responded to the survey, meaning that 15.4% of the recipients participated. The summer period likely had an impact on the response rate. The survey consisted of seven open-ended questions and four questions with predefined answer options. Not all questions are utilized in this thesis. The distribution of responding stakeholders is presented in Table 4. The survey framework is available in Appendix 3.

<b>Organizations</b>	
municipality	4 pcs / 17,4 %
company	2 pcs / 8,7 %
association	11 pcs / 47,8 %
other organization	6 pcs / 26,1 %

**Table 4.** Distribution of organizations responding to the stakeholder survey.

### 3.4 Data analysis

The empirical data of the study included both survey responses and interview material. Therefore, both qualitative and quantitative research methods were utilized in the data analysis. The analysis process began with familiarizing with the collected data and the directions it revealed. Themes were formed based on the observations emerging from the data, and these themes were used to construct the subheadings of Chapter 4. The aim was to examine the data thematically in the results chapter rather than by individual surveys or interviews. This approach enabled the identification of the core findings of the study and supported answering the research questions presented at the beginning.

The quantitative results of the surveys included different types of data. The resident survey consisted of predefined statements to which respondents could answer only agree, disagree, or skip. The statements related to the strategy, services, and decision-making of the Wellbeing Services County of Ostrobothnia. There are several types of data. The results obtained from the resident survey are referred to as nominal data (Saunders et al., 2023, p. 577), as they cannot be ordered, for example, by magnitude or category. In the analysis of such data, various bar graphs or charts are often used (p. 591). In this thesis, the survey results were analyzed using clear bar graphs, in which percentages are visible to the reader. The results were used to identify the most common patterns related to residents' trust in services, their sense of participation, and the development of decision-making. The stakeholder survey included both closed-ended and open-ended questions. In the closed-ended questions, respondents were asked to evaluate the suitability of a statement on a scale from 1 to 4, where 1 indicated strongly disagree and 4 strongly agree. The data from the closed-ended questions was ordinal data (Saunders et al., 2023), as the responses could be placed in a clear order. The data from the closed-ended questions was visualized in bar graph form to facilitate analysis.

The responses to the open-ended questions of the stakeholder survey, as well as the interviews with the management team, were analyzed thematically, and the Gioia methodology was utilized in constructing the data structure. Thematic analysis is a relatively

general analytical approach in which meaningful patterns are identified as the process progresses (Saunders et al., 2023, p. 664). The Gioia methodology, in turn, provides a systematic way to analyze qualitative data so that the views of the participants remain the starting point of the analysis, while the results can simultaneously be linked to theoretical discussion (Gioia et al., 2013). The method increases the transparency and credibility of the analysis by making visible the connection between empirical data and theoretical conclusions. In the Gioia methodology, the analysis proceeds in stages. First are the 1st-order concepts, meaning the participants' own expressions. Second are the 2nd-order themes, referring to the researcher's theoretical interpretation. Finally, there are aggregate dimensions, in which broader conceptual categories are formed. In this thesis, the data structure based on the Gioia methodology is presented in Figure 6.

1 <sup>st</sup> order concepts	2 <sup>nd</sup> order themes	Aggregate dimensios
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strategy understood by stakeholders</li> <li>• Strategic language clarity</li> <li>• Limited resident awareness</li> <li>• Strategy not visible to residents</li> <li>• Communication gaps</li> </ul>	Strategy awareness and clarity	Preconditions for participation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strategy through services</li> <li>• Strategy through decisions</li> <li>• Not a separate document</li> <li>• Experienced via outcomes</li> <li>• Lack of visible implementation</li> </ul>	Strategy as everyday action	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Low resident trust</li> <li>• Higher stakeholder trust</li> <li>• Trust linked to services</li> <li>• Strategy credibility issues</li> <li>• Weak trust–engagement link</li> </ul>	Trust in the organization and services	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strategy perceived as abstract</li> <li>• Weak participation relevance</li> <li>• Expert–driven strategy</li> <li>• Limited perceived impact</li> </ul>	Perceived relevance of participation	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focus on organized stakeholders</li> <li>• Residents as diffuse grouo</li> <li>• Uneven participation</li> <li>• Selective engagement</li> </ul>	Identification of key participants	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Surveys</li> <li>• Workshops</li> <li>• Meeetings</li> <li>• Digital platforms</li> <li>• Multiple participation channels</li> </ul>	Methods of participation	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stakeholder–dominated participation</li> <li>• Weak resident experience</li> <li>• Feeling of being heard varies</li> <li>• Unclear participation impact</li> <li>• Limited meaningful engagement</li> </ul>	Experiences of participation	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strategy abstraction</li> <li>• Complex strategic language</li> <li>• Low–quality input challenges</li> <li>• Large data columes</li> <li>• Lack of visible outcomes</li> </ul>	Challenges of participation	

**Figure 6.** Data structure of thesis utilizing the Gioia methodology.

### 3.5 Validity and reliability

The reliability of a case study is often assessed through validity and reliability. According to Gibbert et al. (2008, pp. 1466–1468), validity consists of criteria such as internal validity, construct validity, and external validity, whereas reliability refers to the replicability of the study and the transparency of the research process. Internal validity refers to the logical consistency of the study and the justification of interpretations. The authors point out that internal validity can be assessed through a clear research framework, pattern

matching, and theory triangulation. Construct validity refers, according to the article, to the extent to which the study examines the phenomenon it claims to investigate. This criterion is particularly considered during data collection. Construct validity can be evaluated in two ways. First, through clear evidence of how the researcher moved from research questions to conclusions, and second, through triangulation, meaning the use of multiple data sources to examine the same phenomenon from different perspectives. According to Gibbert et al., external validity relates to the generalizability of the findings, which in case studies is based on analytical generalization to theory. There should be multiple cases in order for the results to be analytically generalizable. Researchers must also justify the case study selection to the reader and provide detailed information about the case study context.

In this study, internal validity was supported by a systematic analysis process in which the data was gradually developed into theoretical interpretations. The data structure discussed in the analysis section, based on the Gioia methodology, provides the reader with insight into the progression and analysis of the study. Construct validity was strengthened by the use of multiple data sources, which enabled the phenomenon to be examined from different perspectives. However, although multiple data sources were used, the number of participants varied across them. For example, the stakeholder survey received relatively few responses in relation to the total number of stakeholders, which was likely due to the summer period. In addition, although the resident survey received several hundred responses, this still represented only a small proportion of the total population of Ostrobothnia. External validity was based on linking the findings to existing theory, such as the Strategy as Practice and open strategy approaches. The results of the study may not be generalizable to the entire public sector, but due to the similarities between wellbeing services counties, the findings can be generalized at the national level to similar organizations.

Reliability in case study research refers to the possibility that the study could be replicated in the same way and produce similar results. Gibbert et al. (2008, pp. 1468–1469)

define reliability particularly as the absence of random error and the transparency and systematic nature of the research process. It is essential that the implementation of the study is documented in sufficient detail so that another researcher could follow the same steps and evaluate the course of the study. For this reason, reliability can be strengthened, for example, by clearly describing the research process, documenting data collection and analysis, and organizing the research material systematically so that it can be examined afterward. In this study, reliability is strengthened by the transparent description of the research process and the systematic execution of the analysis, which enables the evaluation and potential replication of the study.

## **4 Findings**

This chapter presents the results of the data collected in the thesis. First, context is provided for the findings by outlining the strategic characteristics of the public sector and the wellbeing services county. After this, the subsections are organized thematically based on the categories emerging from the results. The thematic structuring has been carried out using the Gioia methodology. The purpose of the results chapter is to identify key findings and insights from the collected data in relation to the research topic and research questions, as well as to identify possible similarities. In the results, quotations from the management team interviews are indicated with the abbreviation MT (management team), and quotations from the open-ended responses of the stakeholder survey are indicated with the abbreviation SH (stakeholder).

### **4.1 Public sector context and wellbeing services county**

In this subsection, we first examine the specific characteristics of the public sector in the strategic process. Private and public organizations have different objectives and different societal roles. This must also be taken into account in their strategy work. In particular, differences in funding, decision-making, and societal responsibility in the public sector shape the direction of strategy in a distinctive way. Secondly, this section focuses specifically on the wellbeing services county as a strategic actor. There are various types of public sector organizations, each with its own function. However, this thesis focuses specifically on participation practices within the wellbeing services county, and it is therefore important to clarify the structure and operating principles of this type of organization when strategy is being formed.

#### **4.1.1 Special characteristics of public sector strategic work**

In order to define the specific characteristics of strategy work specifically in the public sector context, it is first necessary to understand what kind of actor the public sector and its organizations are. According to Kearney and Meynhardt (2016, pp. 544–545), public

sector organizations are established to fulfill societal needs and to create public value. They further note that such organizations face complex societal demands that are interdependent. Public organizations provide functions such as education, health, religion, and culture. The value created by the public sector is realized through the social outcomes it produces (Moore, 2013, p. 3). What makes social outcomes significant is not that they create value for individual citizens, but that they are valuable for the broader public. Thus, in public organizations, the customer can be seen as the collective public, both locally and nationally.

Perhaps one of the greatest differences between private and public sector organizational strategy is that in the public sector, the aim is not to achieve competitive advantage or attract profitable customers, but rather to improve public services (Kearney & Meynhardt, 2016, p. 550). Eriksson and Lehtimäki (1998, p. 291) state that public organizations develop strategies to consider how to prepare for the future. Strategically, public value should be at the center of public organizational activity, and the public sector should provide sufficient services and goods to achieve public value, that is, the rights and obligations of citizens (Kearney & Meynhardt, 2016, p. 560; Zaki et al., 2024, p. 3). Strategy in a public organization is therefore about value choices that improve the lives of residents (Höglund et al., 2021, p. 1611).

Public value creation also focuses on the measurement of strategic objectives and performance (Höglund et al., 2021, p. 1613). These results can guide future strategy work and planning, but they also provide stakeholders with the opportunity to participate in the development of public services. According to Höglund et al. and Moore (1995), a public organization's strategy has failed when the organization's objectives do not reflect the will of the community. In such cases, the organization does not produce the desired services, or the services provided do not create public value in the long term. Determining what constitutes public value is not always straightforward and is based on collective decision-making by politicians, public officials, and stakeholders (Höglund et al., 2021, p. 1614).

Strategic activity in the public sector can also be divided into three components: the authorising environment, public value creation, and operational capacity (Höglund et al., 2021, p. 1612). The authorising environment provides democratic legitimacy for public sector strategies and helps to clarify the ownership of strategy. It can generally be understood to include locally or nationally elected politicians, senior officials with financial or legal responsibilities, and regulatory authorities. These are all actors that can be seen as granting the authority and resources that enable the functioning of public organizations. Thus, these authorising actors also play a role in the activities of public organizations. The creation of public value, however, involves both elected representatives and public managers. Measuring the performance of the public sector also increases its legitimacy and transparency and helps to clarify how public funds are used (Moore, 2013, p. 3).

#### **4.1.2 Wellbeing services county as a strategic actor**

Since the beginning of 2023, there have been 21 self-governing wellbeing services counties in Finland, in addition to Helsinki, which independently provides services in its own area (Duties and Other Activities, n.d.). In simple terms, the task of wellbeing services counties is to provide both social and healthcare services as well as rescue services to the population in their area. Despite regional boundaries, wellbeing services counties may also agree to carry out certain tasks jointly. According to Section 7 of the Act on Organising Social and Healthcare Services (612/2021), the primary responsibility for promoting the wellbeing and health of residents lies with the wellbeing services county. Their duties include monitoring the health and wellbeing of their residents and reporting on this annually to the regional council. Wellbeing services counties do not have their own taxation rights; instead, their funding is primarily based on state funding (Duties and Other Activities, n.d.).

Strategic planning in wellbeing services counties begins with national strategic objectives confirmed by the government, which aim to ensure that services and responsibilities are

managed equally, with quality, and cost-effectively across regions (Act on Wellbeing Services Counties 611/2021, Section 12 a). In regional elections held every four years, residents of the wellbeing services county elect representatives to the regional council, which is the highest decision-making body of the region (Duties and Other Activities, n.d.). The regional council is responsible for the operations and finances of the wellbeing services county and decides on the wellbeing services county strategy (Act on Wellbeing Services Counties, Section 22). In its strategic planning, the wellbeing services county must set objectives for promoting the health and wellbeing of its residents, as well as measures to support these objectives (Act on Organising Social and Healthcare Services, Section 7). In addition, the regions must consider the estimated impacts of their decisions on residents. The wellbeing services county strategy is based on an assessment of the county's situation at the time of its formulation, but it guides the county's operations and finances through long-term objectives (Act on Wellbeing Services Counties, Section 41). The wellbeing services county is also managed in accordance with the strategy approved by the regional council. As part of the wellbeing services county strategy, the county must prepare a service strategy to support the planning and management of finances and operations (Act on Organising Social and Healthcare Services, Section 11). The service strategy sets objectives for how, for example, residents' needs and the accessibility of services are taken into account in operations. Service users must also be consulted in the preparation of the service strategy.

The strategy of wellbeing services counties plays a significant role in guiding operations. At the beginning of the millennium, Wiili-Peltola (2001) studied the strategies of hospital districts and argued that hospital operations increasingly resemble multi-production systems. According to her, hospital strategies are necessary because it is no longer sufficient to rely on national guidelines; instead, their operations must be effective, efficient, and economically justified (p. 385). Wiili-Peltola also noted that hospitals had to increasingly legitimize their operations in order to secure funding from municipalities. Since then, hospital districts have been replaced by wellbeing services counties, but the need for legitimization remains essential for securing funding.

## 4.2 Preconditions for participation

The results of this subsection show how residents' and stakeholders' perceptions of the strategy of the Wellbeing Services County of Ostrobothnia influence their ability to participate in the strategy process. The findings highlight observations related to the awareness, clarity, and reliability of the strategy, both at the level of the document and in practice. Experiences of the strategy and the understanding associated with it form the basis for the legitimacy of the wellbeing services county. In Table 5 below are presented the interview results and answers to open-ended questions falling under the aggregate dimension "Preconditions for participation".

Management team / Stakeholder	Quotation
SH1	"The current objective 'We use our resources effectively' is not functioning at the moment. Service chains are stalling, operations remain siloed, and multidisciplinary or multi-actor collaboration is not being utilized smoothly."
SH2	"The current strategy has been relatively functional. The vision will continue to work. In terms of actions, there are elements that may not have been achievable. Some themes should be continued, as they are important, but the work is not yet complete."
SH4	"The strategy is quite ambitious, and in many respects we are still quite far from it."
SH7	"It is good that the strategy is bilingual, sufficiently concise, and includes concrete indicators."
MT12	"The strategy should be clear and practical, so that it is easy to grasp at a glance."
MT16	"There should be a clear foundation and core messages, a clear theme. It should be repeated sufficiently often and in a sufficiently concrete manner."
MT4	"The strategy should be the same as what we do. Strategy starts from what we actually provide to people, for example in digital services."

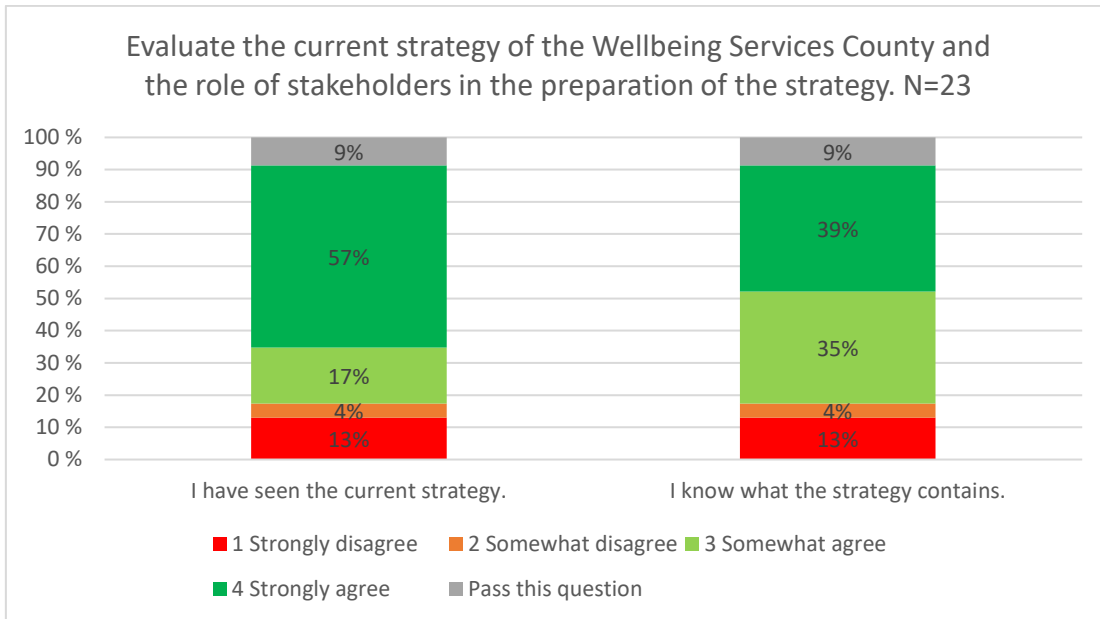
MT5	“There is no need to tell the customer that this is strategic work. It should be so embedded in our operations that everything we do is strategy.”
MT19	“For residents, the strategy is primarily visible in how services function. They do not necessarily read strategy documents, but if services are accessible and work well, the strategy has succeeded.”
MT13	“For residents, the strategy should be visible in the quality of services, accessibility, and opportunities for participation.”
MT16	“People do not think in terms of strategy but rather in terms of promises. Concrete actions are more important to them. Communication is important in showing where we aim to improve.”
MT4	“One of our biggest needs is that residents in our area trust our services. When they need help, they receive it.”
MT4	“We probably need to consider what the means are to build that trust, for example in the strategy map, and how it can be achieved.”

**Table 5.** A summary of the interview quotes and answers to open-ended questions from Section 4.2.

#### 4.2.1 Awareness and clarity of the strategy

The results first examine themes related to the awareness of the strategy. Awareness of the strategy is essential when considering broader factors influencing participation.

External stakeholders were asked to evaluate the current strategy of the Wellbeing Services County of Ostrobothnia, that is, the strategy for the years 2022–2025. The questions aimed to determine whether stakeholders had previously seen the current strategy of the wellbeing services county and whether its content was familiar to them. The evaluation was conducted through statements to which stakeholders responded on a scale from 1 to 4, where 1 indicated strongly disagree and 4 strongly agree. The results are presented in Figure 7.



**Figure 7.** Stakeholders' views on the current strategy 2022-2025.

The results indicate that at least 74% of the responding stakeholders have seen the current strategy of the Wellbeing Services County of Ostrobothnia. The same proportion of respondents also knows what the strategy includes. The strategy of the wellbeing services county is therefore relatively well known also among external stakeholders. This provides a good foundation for further questions related to the strategy. The results suggest that the wellbeing services county has either communicated its strategy to stakeholders or that stakeholders have independently familiarized themselves with it. Of the respondents, 17% had not seen the strategy or were not familiar with its content. Additionally, 9% of respondents skipped the question entirely.

In the survey, stakeholders also had the opportunity to comment on the current or future strategy of the wellbeing services county in an open response field. Stakeholders described the current strategy using the following statements:

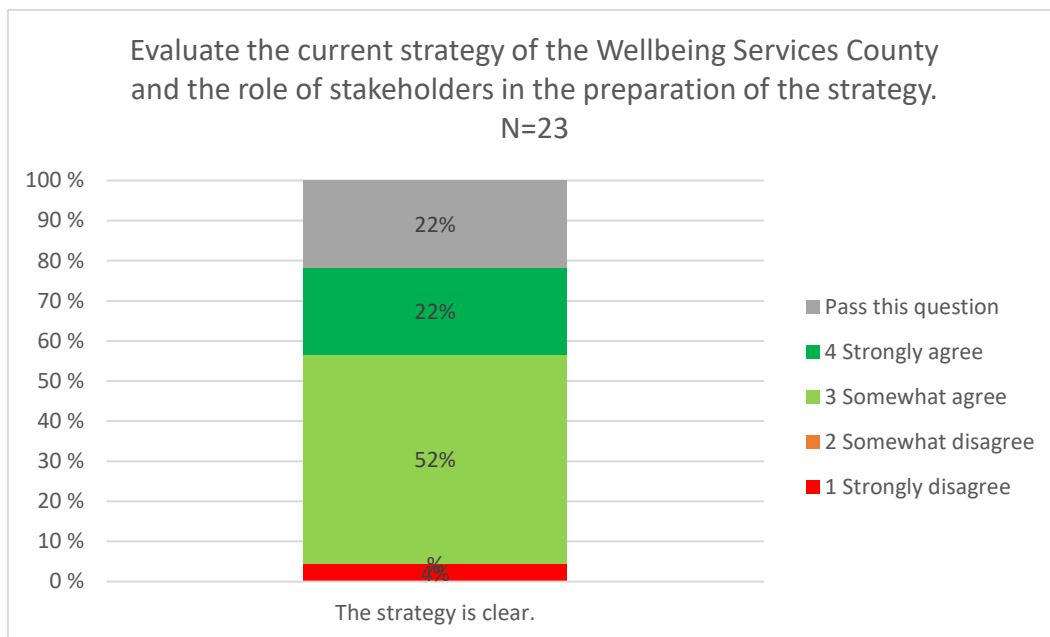
*SH1: "The current objective 'We use our resources effectively' is not functioning at the moment. Service chains are stalling, operations remain siloed, and multidisciplinary or multi-actor collaboration is not being utilized smoothly."*

*SH2: "The current strategy has been relatively functional. The vision will continue to work. In terms of actions, there are elements that may not have been achievable. Some themes should be continued, as they are important, but the work is not yet complete."*

*SH4: "The strategy is quite ambitious, and in many respects we are still quite far from it."*

The comments relate to the content of the current strategy of the Wellbeing Services County. They indicate that the strategy is also substantively familiar to stakeholders. Satisfaction with the strategy depends on the responding organization, and the responses highlight different content-related observations. The responses of stakeholders SH2 and SH4 also suggest that the overall direction of the current strategy has been appropriate, but continuous efforts extending beyond individual strategy periods are needed in order to achieve the objectives and vision.

In addition, for the purposes of this study, it is important to understand how clear stakeholders perceived the current strategy to be. Stakeholders were asked to evaluate the clarity of the strategy on a scale from 1 to 4, where 1 indicates strongly disagree and 4 strongly agree. The responses of stakeholders are presented in Figure 8. Stakeholders also had the opportunity to provide comments in an open-ended question.



**Figure 8.** Stakeholders' views on the clarity of strategy.

When asked to evaluate the clarity of the strategy, 74% of stakeholders considered the strategy to be clear. Of these, 22% strongly agreed with the statement and 52% somewhat agreed. Only 4% strongly disagreed, meaning that in their view the strategy is not clear. Over one fifth, that is 22%, did not respond to the question, which is a relatively large proportion. However, the question itself was not entirely unambiguous, and assessing the clarity of a strategy may be difficult. On the other hand, leaving the question unanswered may also indicate that the strategy is not fully clear to these respondents.

Stakeholders also had the opportunity to comment on the current or future strategy in an open-ended response field. SH7 commented on the current strategy as follows:

*SH7: "It is good that the strategy is bilingual, sufficiently concise, and includes concrete indicators."*

This response highlights three aspects related to clarity: language, length, and concreteness. The Wellbeing Services County of Ostrobothnia is bilingual, and half of the population is Swedish-speaking, which means that documents should also be linguistically understandable for the majority. SH7 also identifies the length of the strategy, in this

case its conciseness, as a positive feature. Third, the respondent praises the presence of concrete indicators. These may refer, for example, to the objectives in the strategy map or other elements perceived as concrete by the respondent. Similar observations regarding the clarity of the strategy also emerged in the management team interviews.

*MT12: "The strategy should be clear and practical, so that it is easy to grasp at a glance."*

In this interview, MT12 highlights not only clarity but also the practicality of the future strategy. Practicality and the concreteness mentioned in the stakeholder response are closely related concepts, although they differ slightly in nuance. The management team member also emphasizes that the strategy should be easy to understand at a glance. This perspective aligns with the response of stakeholder SH7, where the current strategy was described as clear and concise.

*MT16: "There should be a clear foundation and core messages, a clear theme. It should be repeated sufficiently often and in a sufficiently concrete manner."*

MT16 also highlights different elements of clarity in the interview. The main point of this comment is that the future strategy should have a clear theme and core message. This again reflects the idea that simplicity enhances clarity. The respondent also emphasizes sufficient concreteness, as did previous interviewees, as well as the importance of repetition.

#### **4.2.2 Strategy in action**

The study also aimed to highlight the management team's views on the role of strategy in everyday work, as these perceptions also influence participation practices. These perspectives also reflect the management team's expectations regarding the strategy process. In addition, the management team's views on the role of strategy are important because they help to position strategy in relation to the region's population and stakeholders.

In the interviews, members of the management team were asked how the strategy of the Wellbeing Services County of Ostrobothnia should be visible in daily work and how it should, in turn, be communicated to residents and stakeholders. In several responses, it was emphasized that strategy is reflected in the organization's actions and operations.

*MT4: "The strategy should be the same as what we do. Strategy starts from what we actually provide to people, for example in digital services."*

*MT5: "There is no need to tell the customer that this is strategic work. It should be so embedded in our operations that everything we do is strategy."*

*MT19: "For residents, the strategy is primarily visible in how services function. They do not necessarily read strategy documents, but if services are accessible and work well, the strategy has succeeded."*

The responses of MT4, MT5, and MT19 indicate that strategic activity should be reflected in all organizational actions, and there is no need to explicitly communicate the content of the strategy to residents. A common element in these responses is services. From the perspective of the interviewees, the strategy should be visible to residents through service provision, service functionality, and service effectiveness. MT19 also highlights service accessibility as one indicator of strategic success. Thus, the strategy should be visible in actions rather than merely as a document.

*MT13: "For residents, the strategy should be visible in the quality of services, accessibility, and opportunities for participation."*

MT13 also emphasizes the importance of service quality and accessibility in strategic activity. In addition, the respondent highlights opportunities for resident participation. MT16 was asked about the preparation of the future strategy and emphasized concrete

actions that the strategy should reflect, as well as the importance of communication. According to this respondent, what matters most to the population are the promises made in the strategy, and communication is closely linked to making these promises.

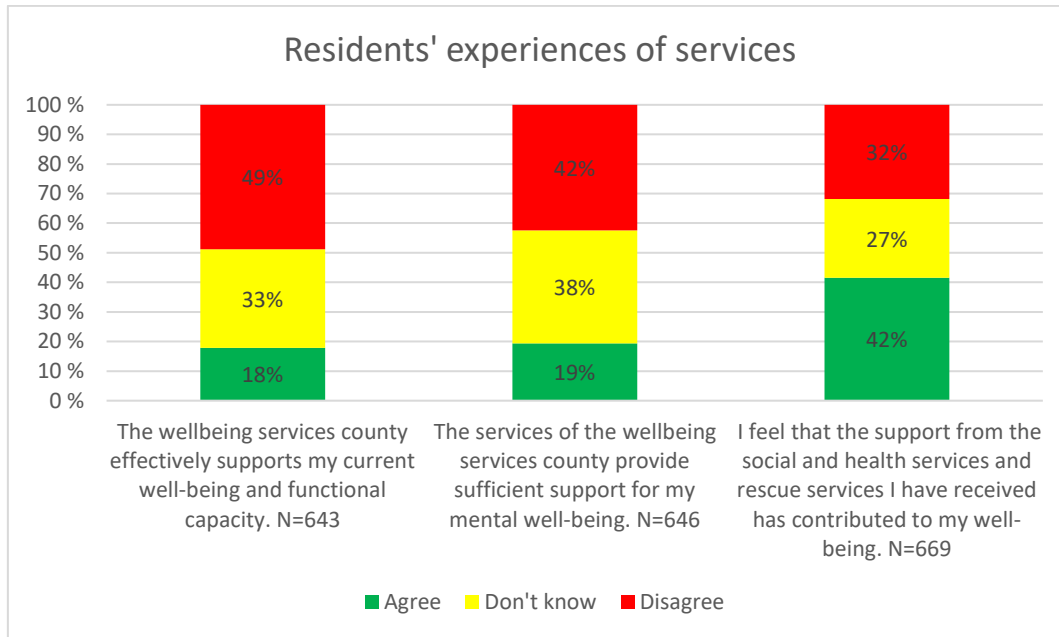
*MT16: "People do not think in terms of strategy but rather in terms of promises. Concrete actions are more important to them. Communication is important in showing where we aim to improve."*

Residents' trust in services also emerged in other management team interviews. Interviewees were asked to identify the most important aspects for the functioning of the wellbeing services county and for residents. MT4 highlights the need for residents to trust the services and to believe that they will receive help when needed. The strategy should therefore reflect ways to build this trust among residents.

*MT4: "One of our biggest needs is that residents in our area trust our services. When they need help, they receive it."*

*MT4: "We probably need to consider what the means are to build that trust, for example in the strategy map, and how it can be achieved."*

In the resident survey, residents were asked about their views on the services of the Wellbeing Services County of Ostrobothnia and the impact of these services on their wellbeing. The results are presented in Figure 9. In addition, residents were asked about their trust in the wellbeing services county, as well as the perceptions created by public discussion regarding its operations. These results are presented in Figure 10.



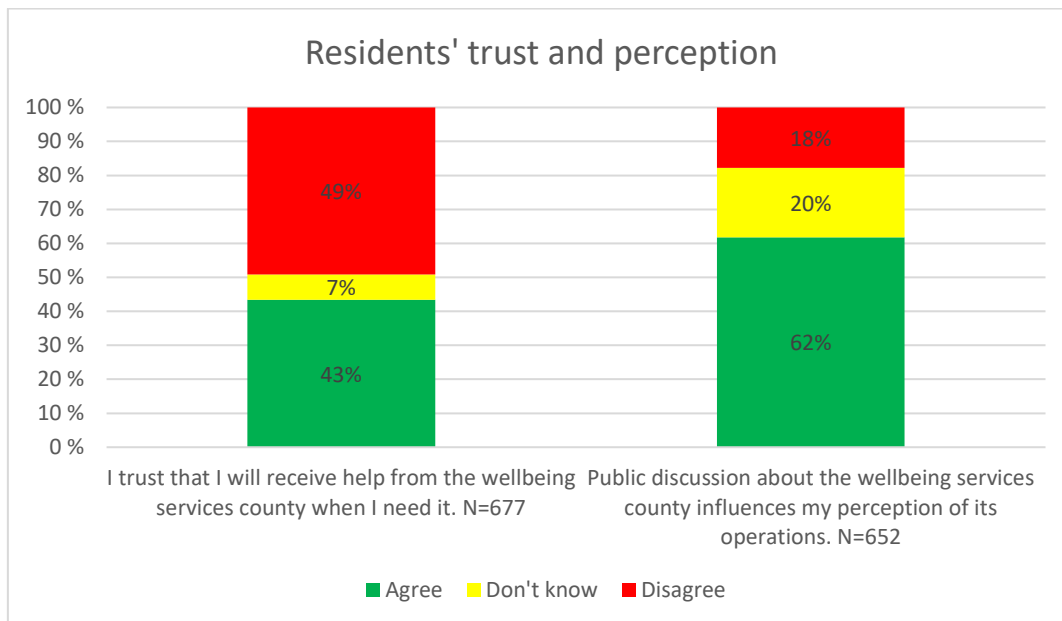
**Figure 9.** Residents' experience of services.

Figure 9 presents three statements to which residents responded either agree, disagree, or skip. In the first statement, respondents were asked whether the wellbeing services county effectively supports their current wellbeing and functional capacity. Only 18% of respondents agreed with the statement, meaning that the wellbeing services county effectively supports their current wellbeing. This figure is concerningly low when considering the functions and purpose of the wellbeing services county. However, respondents may also have reacted to the wording of the statement. The wellbeing services county may support wellbeing without necessarily doing so effectively. In any case, 33% of respondents skipped the question, and nearly half felt that the wellbeing services county does not effectively support their current wellbeing or functional capacity.

In the second statement of Figure 9, residents were asked whether the services of the Wellbeing Services County of Ostrobothnia provide sufficient support for their mental wellbeing. Only 19% responded that the services provide sufficient support. 38% of respondents skipped the question, and 42% disagreed with the statement. The high number of skipped responses may be explained, for example, by the fact that respondents have not needed support for mental wellbeing and therefore do not have sufficient

knowledge of these services to respond. In any case, the results indicate that satisfaction with the services is not particularly high.

In the final statement of Figure 9, residents were asked to evaluate whether the support received from social and healthcare services and rescue services contributes to their wellbeing. 42% of respondents agreed with the statement, indicating that the support they received has contributed to their wellbeing. The results are somewhat contradictory compared to the two previous statements, but the wording likely plays a role here. In addition, this statement emphasizes services that residents have actually received, meaning that there has been active interaction between the resident and the organization. In the first statement, the respondent may not have used the services of the wellbeing services county. In the third statement, 27% of respondents skipped the question, and 32% disagreed with the statement.

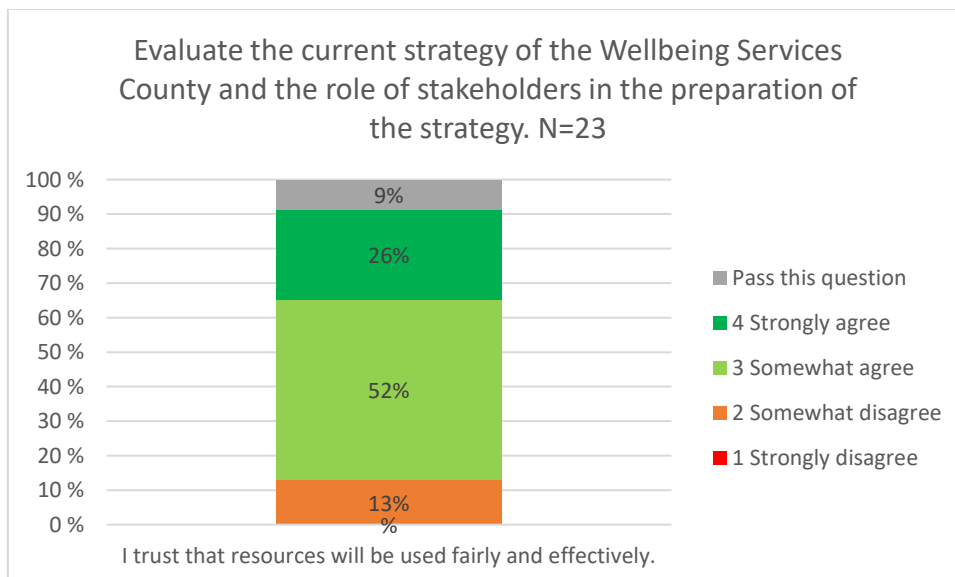


**Figure 10.** Residents' trust and perception.

In Figure 10, residents were asked to evaluate whether they trust that they will receive help from the Wellbeing Services County of Ostrobothnia when they need it. Fewer than half, 43%, responded that they trust they will receive help, while 49% indicated that they do not trust they will receive help when needed. These responses reveal a great deal

about trust in the operational capacity and services of the wellbeing services county. However, the statement does not specify whether “receiving help” refers to critical emergency care, fire services, or, for example, dental care. This has been left to the respondent’s interpretation and may also contribute to variation in the responses. Only 7% skipped this statement, suggesting that it was relatively easy to answer compared to the previous ones.

The second statement in Figure 10 concerns perceptions of the wellbeing services county. Residents were asked to evaluate whether public discussion about the wellbeing services county influences their perception of its operations. A total of 62% of respondents acknowledged that public discussion affects their perceptions. One fifth of respondents skipped the question, and only 18% indicated that public discussion has not influenced their perceptions. Both traditional media and social media contribute to shaping perceptions of society. At this point, it is relevant to consider whether this also influences the level of trust observed in the first statement of the figure. In other words, even if a resident has not personally needed assistance from the wellbeing services county, public discussion may create an impression that obtaining help is difficult.



**Figure 11.** Stakeholders’ trust in the use of resources.

Trust is also highlighted in the results of the stakeholder survey (Figure 11). In the survey, stakeholders were asked to evaluate the current strategy of the Wellbeing Services County of Ostrobothnia. They were specifically asked whether they trust that the wellbeing services county uses its resources effectively. A total of 78% of responding stakeholders expressed trust in the use of resources. Of these, 26% fully trust the use of resources, while a larger share, 52%, somewhat trust it. Resources in the context of the wellbeing services county may refer to various aspects, such as financial resources, accessibility, personnel, systems, and facilities. Nine percent of respondents skipped the question, and 13% indicated that they somewhat disagree, suggesting that they do not fully trust the use of resources.

### 4.3 Participation in the strategy process

The participation of residents and stakeholders in the strategy process is one of the main themes of this thesis. This subsection examines findings from the management team interviews, as well as the resident and stakeholder surveys, that relate to participation practices. The results highlight methods of participation, experiences of participation, and related challenges. In addition, stakeholders identified in the management team interviews, who should be involved in the strategy process, are discussed. In Table 6 below are presented the interview results and answers to open-ended questions falling under the aggregate dimension "Participation in the strategy process".

Management team / Stakeholder	Quotation
MT1	"The wellbeing services county exists for the population, so citizen influence and participation are important in strategy work."
MT4	"We exist for the population, so we must listen to them in order to understand what is important to them."
MT13	"At certain levels, the population should also be heard and their needs identified, but not in a way where the strategy is formed directly based on their preferences."
MT1	"Involving patients and clients is something I would prioritize more than has traditionally been done. There are people with everyday

	experience. Are there identifiable shortcomings or challenges in how the wellbeing services county operates?”
MT2	“The perspective of citizens should be included, meaning that clients and patients should be consulted.”
MT12	“Strategy work should involve all personnel, residents, organizations, and other key stakeholders.”
MT5	“Elected representatives and stakeholders, and so on, so in a way participation from everyone is needed.”
MT3	“Cooperation with external organizations and associations. Even if they are not directly involved in our strategy work, our joint activities must be considered.”
MT4	“We must involve those who will live with the strategy, for example stakeholders, large companies, third sector actors, and municipalities as one important group.”
MT17	“Traditional partners such as municipalities in the region and third sector organizations.”
MT18	“We have traditional partners, which include, for example, municipalities in the region.”
MT19	“Dialogue with municipalities and cities is important.”
MT5	“Municipalities in the region are certainly one group. They should participate, not from an advocacy perspective, but specifically from the perspective of shared residents.”
MT9	“Municipalities do not ask us, for example, ‘we are preparing our strategy, how would you like to influence it,’ because we are an independent actor. I would not, for example, ask municipalities to comment on our strategy.”
MT11	“Of course, those who use our services, and then also cooperation authorities.”
MT2	“External providers could also be involved.”
MT9	“In my view, involving the population should happen through some kind of digital tool where people can comment and propose ideas.”
MT20	“Ensuring that the voice of third sector organizations is heard is challenging, but it can be achieved through the effective use of digital tools and platforms.”

MT1	“There should probably be some kind of channel for involving the population. The more people are included in such a process, the more difficult it becomes.”
MT9	“If we have, for example, an online option to participate or give feedback, the same channel could be used for both residents and organizations. Otherwise, it creates a huge workload to combine different inputs, and it does not add value. If we receive 2,000 comments, it becomes unmanageable.”
MT9	“There should be some kind of guiding model so that people are not starting from scratch. But they do not necessarily understand tools, processes, resources, and so on. It is not clear from a simple image. So how should the questions be formulated?”
MT12	“In practice, this is carried out through surveys, workshops, and public hearings. The goal is for the strategy to be genuinely shared and to respond to the needs of the region.”
MT9	“If we have a multi-provider model involving organizations and other actors, and there is already a working group in place, perhaps it could be used through that.”
MT18	“We have a strategic cooperation agreement with municipal leaders, according to which we meet a few times a year. This provides us with a ready forum to discuss with municipalities and cities and hear their perspectives.”
MT9	“When we collaborate with different sectors, for example in joint forums.”
MT3	“We need to identify shared factors and how to move things forward together with municipalities and the third sector. Joint analysis of the ‘How is Ostrobothnia doing’ report with stakeholders could be sufficient.”
SH1	“Bilateral meetings between our organization and the wellbeing services county, without other similar organizations.”
SH5	“Workshops on future plans, where the responsibilities of different parties are highlighted, have been useful. In a situation where both the Wellbeing Services County of Ostrobothnia and the municipality must save money, it is easy to shift responsibility to the other party in matters where both have responsibility.”

SH16	“More genuine dialogue and listening. At the moment, the wellbeing services county makes decisions, and statements or consultations do not have real significance, nor is it communicated that citizens are being heard.”
SH11	“We have gained the impression in the municipality that, instead of municipal cooperation, the focus has so far been more on cooperation with organizations. However, residents of the wellbeing services county always live in a municipality, so aligning activities could be the next focus. Structures for cooperation between the wellbeing services county and municipalities may exist at higher management levels, but are insufficient among experts across different themes.”
SH12	“The company wants to act more as a strategic, genuine partner in the future, instead of engaging in one-off purchases. A shared vision for smooth and rapid access to care for the residents of Ostrobothnia, as well as a preventive approach, can be ensured through strong cooperation.”
MT2	“Of course, it is easier if residents have been able to participate in the strategy work. There are usually challenges in strategy implementation if staff and the population have not been involved.”
MT5	“From the perspective of how participation in the early stages affects later commitment to the jointly identified important issues.”
MT2	“It is not necessary that they participate in the strategy work, but that the strategy is considered appropriate by them.”
MT15	“First of all, strategy cannot be developed separately from the operating environment in which it functions. For us in the wellbeing services county, this means that the strategy is developed in cooperation with different actors.”
MT1	“I am thinking about strategic thinking, how easy or difficult it is, and how much knowledge is required to be able to set or prioritize strategic objectives for such an organization.”
MT5	“I recognize that especially for customers and some staff, it is probably very difficult to understand what they are participating in. Strategy work is quite high-level, and it is very difficult to bring it down to a level where you ask for opinions on everyday issues,

	even though those issues do influence the higher-level aspects, so it is very challenging.”
SH7	“A challenging task. Different partners and residents are likely to interpret different things in the concise statements found under each heading. The most important thing is that we can meet at some level and reach a point where we can agree on the goal of achieving the most prosperous population in our region.”
MT4	“If I talk about strategy, it must be so understandable and written in such a way that it is easy to understand and to see oneself in it.”
MT4	“In my opinion, a good strategy is one that consists of a single image and a small amount of text explaining what is being done. When the strategy map includes all kinds of promises, processes and competencies, it becomes too complex for most people to understand. I hope the strategy map will now be so clear that nothing else is needed.”
MT16	“When it comes to residents, communication is more challenging. It is known that, for example, the wellbeing services county’s website is not the channel where people usually look for information. It would be necessary to consider other ways to communicate the message of the strategy.”
MT8	“It is of course quite difficult how children could participate. Teenagers to some extent, and parents, but how children themselves could participate in this.”
MT9	“I do not know, in previous cases when changes to the service network were made and the population was asked, there were a huge number of responses, even critical ones, but they did not necessarily provide much added value.”
MT19	“Another significant group is the third sector organizations, which are somewhat more challenging because they are so dispersed. There are over eight hundred social and health organizations and associations alone, so ensuring their voices are heard is difficult. There is practically no other way than to use digital methods and platforms that make participation easier and more feasible.”

**Table 6.** A summary of the interview quotes and answers to open-ended questions from chapter 4.3.

### 4.3.1 Key stakeholders

In the management team interviews, respondents were asked to share their views on who should be involved in strategy work. This thesis focuses particularly on findings related to residents and stakeholders. Results concerning personnel have been given less emphasis, as they are not directly related to the research topic, although they represent an important group in strategy work. The management team provided a wide range of responses regarding actors to be involved in strategy work.

The population and residents of the region were mentioned in several management team responses. For example, MT1, MT4, and MT13 highlight in their responses the needs of the population, which require participation in order to be understood. MT1 and MT4 emphasize that the wellbeing services county exists for the population, which in itself provides a reason to seek their views for the future strategy. However, MT13 points out that the strategy should not be formed entirely based on the population's preferences. This likely refers to the professional expertise of the wellbeing services county and its personnel, as well as national-level guidance, which should not be overlooked in strategy work.

*MT1: "The wellbeing services county exists for the population, so citizen influence and participation are important in strategy work."*

*MT4: "We exist for the population, so we must listen to them in order to understand what is important to them."*

*MT13: "At certain levels, the population should also be heard and their needs identified, but not in a way where the strategy is formed directly based on their preferences."*

Interviewees MT1 and MT2 further emphasized specific groups within the population, namely clients and patients of the wellbeing services county. According to them, these

groups should be consulted in strategy work, as they possess insights into the organization's operations that differ from those of, for example, personnel. What distinguishes clients and patients from the broader population of Ostrobothnia is that they have certainly used the services of the wellbeing services county. It is therefore important to also consider potential clients in addition to current users.

*MT1: "Involving patients and clients is something I would prioritize more than has traditionally been done. There are people with everyday experience. Are there identifiable shortcomings or challenges in how the wellbeing services county operates?"*

*MT2: "The perspective of citizens should be included, meaning that clients and patients should be consulted."*

In addition to the population, various management team members also identified other key actors who should be involved in strategy work. MT12 mentions organizations and other key stakeholders as examples. MT5 highlights elected representatives and stakeholders. Elected representatives refer to democratically elected officials, who, like personnel, are excluded from this study as they represent internal actors. MT3 clarifies that stakeholders refer to external organizations and associations with whom collaboration should take place.

*MT12: "Strategy work should involve all personnel, residents, organizations, and other key stakeholders."*

*MT5: "Elected representatives and stakeholders, and so on, so in a way participation from everyone is needed."*

*MT3: "Cooperation with external organizations and associations. Even if they are not directly involved in our strategy work, our joint activities must be considered."*

Interviewee MT4 further specifies the concept of stakeholders by noting that large companies, third sector actors, and municipalities should be involved in strategy work. Traditionally, the third sector refers to non-profit civic actors that operate outside the public and private sectors. In the context of a wellbeing services county, such actors may include associations, organizations, foundations, cooperatives, clubs, and parishes.

*MT4: "We must involve those who will live with the strategy, for example stakeholders, large companies, third sector actors, and municipalities as one important group."*

Municipalities were also mentioned by other management team members when discussing actors to be involved in strategy work. MT17 identifies municipalities in the region as traditional partners alongside third sector organizations. MT18 similarly refers to municipalities as "traditional partners," and MT19 emphasizes the importance of dialogue with municipalities and cities in strategic discussions.

*MT17: "Traditional partners such as municipalities in the region and third sector organizations."*

*MT18: "We have traditional partners, which include, for example, municipalities in the region."*

*MT19: "Dialogue with municipalities and cities is important."*

Municipalities are also mentioned in the response of MT5. However, this respondent emphasizes that municipalities should participate in strategy work from the perspective of residents rather than from a general advocacy perspective. The interview does not specify what is meant by an advocacy perspective, but it may refer to other interfaces between municipalities and the wellbeing services county.

*MT5: "Municipalities in the region are certainly one group. They should participate, not from an advocacy perspective, but specifically from the perspective of shared residents."*

There were also differing opinions regarding which actors should be involved. Interviewee MT9 argues that it is not necessary to involve municipalities in the strategy work of the wellbeing services county or to request their formal statements. However, this response does not oppose general cooperation, which often underpins strategic decisions, but rather focuses on the idea of requesting formal input on the strategy. MT9 justifies this by noting that municipalities do not request input from the wellbeing services county for their own strategies, as both are independent actors.

*MT9: "Municipalities do not ask us, for example, 'we are preparing our strategy, how would you like to influence it,' because we are an independent actor. I would not, for example, ask municipalities to comment on our strategy."*

Regarding stakeholders to be involved in strategy work, MT11 highlights cooperation authorities. The interview does not specify exactly which actors this refers to. In general, authorities may include ministries or their subordinate organizations, such as the police, or state agencies such as customs authorities.

*MT11: "Of course, those who use our services, and then also cooperation authorities."*

*MT2: "External providers could also be involved."*

In addition, MT2 highlights external providers as actors who should be included in the strategy process. The interview does not clarify whether external providers refer to other social and healthcare service providers or suppliers providing goods and services to the wellbeing services county. In any case, the wellbeing services county has a wide range of stakeholders whom, according to the management team, should be involved in strategy work.

### 4.3.2 Methods of participation

In the management team interviews, respondents were asked about different methods of participation. A variety of approaches emerged, the selection of which depends entirely on the situation and the target group being involved. Some methods are already established routines within the wellbeing services county, while others represent newer concepts. Interviewee MT9 particularly highlights digital tools as a means of engaging the population. According to this respondent, such tools should enable commenting and proposing ideas, meaning that they should function as reciprocal communication platforms.

*MT9: "In my view, involving the population should happen through some kind of digital tool where people can comment and propose ideas."*

The use of digital platforms is also supported by interviewee MT20, who notes that involving the third sector can be challenging, but is best achieved through the effective use of digital environments and platforms.

*MT20: "Ensuring that the voice of third sector organizations is heard is challenging, but it can be achieved through the effective use of digital tools and platforms."*

Interviewee MT1 shares a similar view regarding the challenges of participation. This respondent notes that the larger the number of participants involved, the more difficult participation becomes. A functional channel can help address this issue. In the context of the wellbeing services county, stakeholder groups are indeed large, as the population exceeds 170,000 and there are several hundred external stakeholders.

*MT1: "There should probably be some kind of channel for involving the population. The more people are included in such a process, the more difficult it becomes."*

MT9 further adds that the same participation channels can be used for both residents and stakeholders. When the questions posed to both groups are the same, it becomes easier to consolidate the results. It is also important to consider the organization's resources when processing and utilizing the results, as this requires personnel.

*MT9: "If we have, for example, an online option to participate or give feedback, the same channel could be used for both residents and organizations. Otherwise, it creates a huge workload to combine different inputs, and it does not add value. If we receive 2,000 comments, it becomes unmanageable."*

In the interview, MT9 also reflects on how questions should be formulated for residents and stakeholders so that they are understandable to those who are not familiar with strategy work. The respondent notes that it is easier to comment on an existing model than to start from a completely blank slate.

*MT9: "There should be some kind of guiding model so that people are not starting from scratch. But they do not necessarily understand tools, processes, resources, and so on. It is not clear from a simple image. So how should the questions be formulated?"*

MT12 highlights additional participation methods, including surveys, workshops, and public hearings. These methods are not mutually exclusive with the previously mentioned approaches, as surveys, workshops, and hearings can all be conducted through various channels, including digital platforms. Surveys are likely more suitable for collecting quantitative participation data, while workshops and hearings typically generate qualitative insights.

*MT12: "In practice, this is carried out through surveys, workshops, and public hearings. The goal is for the strategy to be genuinely shared and to respond to the needs of the region."*

Another potential method of participation is the use of joint working groups with stakeholders, as highlighted by MT9. The respondent specifically refers to a multi-provider model, within which such working groups have already been established, and suggests that these could also be utilized in the strategic process.

*MT9: "If we have a multi-provider model involving organizations and other actors, and there is already a working group in place, perhaps it could be used through that."*

Other existing channels include cooperation forums with stakeholders. Interviewee MT18 points out that there are already cooperation agreements with municipal leaders, within which organizations meet several times a year. Such established forums could also be utilized in strategy work. MT9 similarly mentions joint forums with stakeholders used in partnership activities.

*MT18: "We have a strategic cooperation agreement with municipal leaders, according to which we meet a few times a year. This provides us with a ready forum to discuss with municipalities and cities and hear their perspectives."*

*MT9: "When we collaborate with different sectors, for example in joint forums."*

Interviewee MT3 also mentions joint report analysis sessions with stakeholders. As an example, the respondent refers to the "How is Ostrobothnia doing" report, which is published annually in the spring and provides information on the wellbeing and health of the region's population.

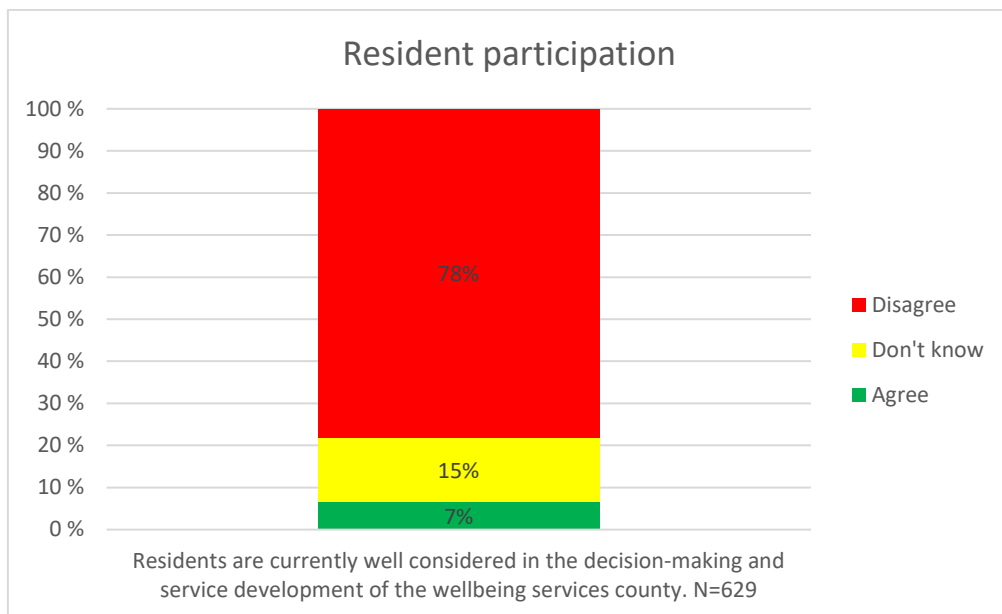
*MT3: "We need to identify shared factors and how to move things forward together with municipalities and the third sector. Joint analysis of the 'How is Ostrobothnia doing' report with stakeholders could be sufficient."*

Overall, a wide range of participation methods emerged from the interviews. Some rely on digital platforms, while others represent more traditional approaches. These methods can also be categorized into participation through direct interaction, such as workshops, forums, and hearings, and participation at a distance, such as through surveys.

### **4.3.3 Experiences of participation**

In the management team interviews, as well as in the resident and stakeholder surveys, the aim was to explore experiences of participation and perceptions of inclusion. The topic was addressed through both closed-ended survey questions and open-ended response fields. Combining the perspectives of all three groups, the management team, residents, and stakeholders, provides a broad view of how participation practices within the Wellbeing Services County of Ostrobothnia appear or could appear.

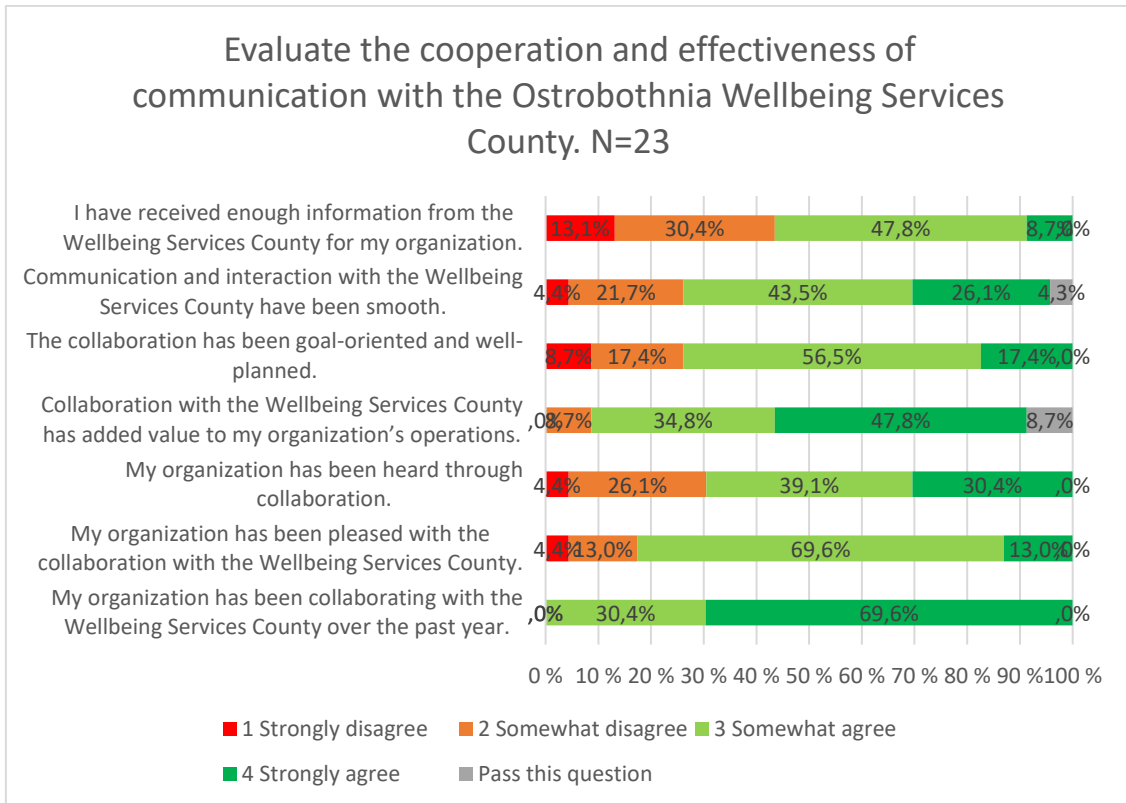
In the resident survey, respondents were asked to evaluate whether residents are currently well considered in the decision-making and service development of the wellbeing services county. The statement could be answered by selecting agree, disagree, or skip. The purpose of this statement was to examine how residents themselves perceive their participation or their ability to influence matters that concern them. The results are presented in Figure 12.



**Figure 12.** Residents' views on the realization of participation.

Figure 12 shows that the majority of respondents, 78%, disagreed with the statement. According to these respondents, residents are not sufficiently considered in current decision-making and development activities. Fifteen percent skipped the statement, and only 7% agreed with it. This statement can be interpreted in several ways from the respondent's perspective. One approach is to consider whether residents' participation is visible in the outcomes of decisions, such as changes in service quality, accessibility, or location. Another perspective is whether the respondent has personally been asked for their opinions regarding decision-making or development. In any case, the majority of respondents disagreed with the statement.

Stakeholders were asked to evaluate the effectiveness of cooperation and communication with the Wellbeing Services County of Ostrobothnia. The results are presented in Figure 13. The evaluation was conducted through several statements, to which stakeholders responded on a scale from 1 to 4, where 1 indicates strongly disagree and 4 strongly agree.



**Figure 13.** Cooperation and communication with stakeholder groups.

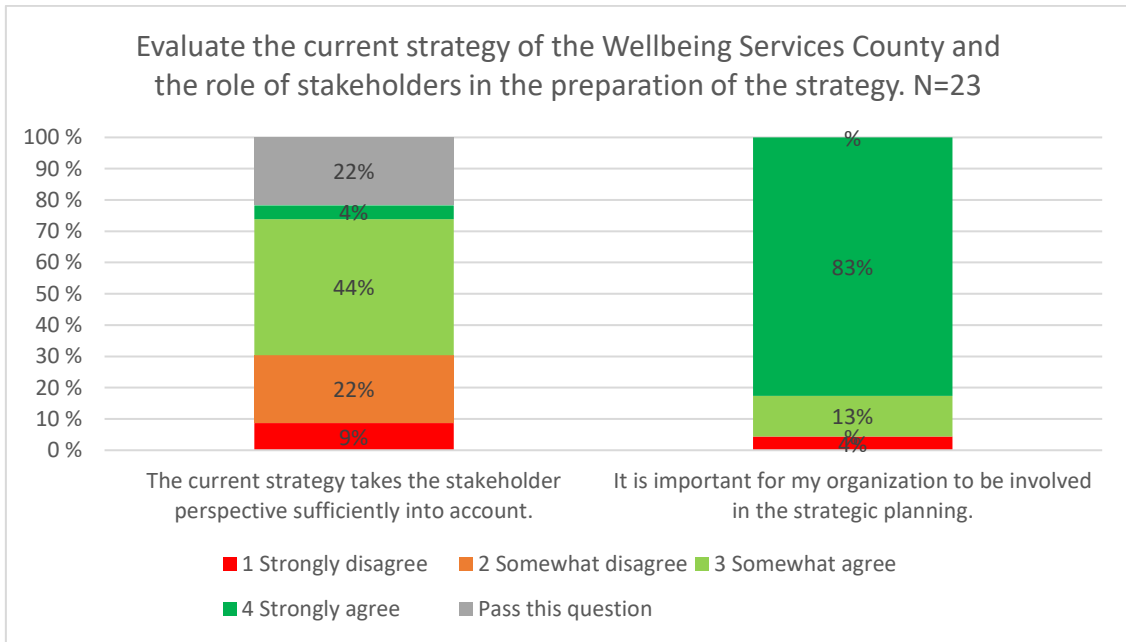
The review of Figure 13 begins from the bottom. Stakeholders were first asked to evaluate whether they had engaged in cooperation with the wellbeing services county during the past year. Based on the results, all responding stakeholders had engaged in cooperation. Approximately 70% strongly agreed with the statement and 30% somewhat agreed. Assessing past cooperation helps in evaluating perceptions of strategic collaboration. Stakeholders were then asked to assess their level of satisfaction with the cooperation. Only 13% were fully satisfied, while approximately 70% were somewhat satisfied. In addition, around 17% of respondents were not satisfied with the cooperation over the past year. This indicates that there is room for improvement in cooperation, at least from the stakeholders' perspective.

The following statements in Figure 13 focus more on participation and genuine interaction. Stakeholders were asked to evaluate whether they felt heard in the cooperation. Approximately 30% strongly agreed and 39% somewhat agreed, indicating that they felt heard. However, 31% disagreed with the statement, meaning they did not feel heard in

the cooperation. Stakeholders were also asked to assess whether cooperation with the Wellbeing Services County of Ostrobothnia had created added value for their activities. The majority felt that it had. Approximately 48% strongly agreed and 35% somewhat agreed. Nearly 9% of respondents did not feel that cooperation had created added value, and a similar proportion skipped the question.

The final three statements further deepen the evaluation of the effectiveness of cooperation and participation (Figure 13). Stakeholders were asked to assess whether cooperation had been goal-oriented and systematic. Approximately 74% of respondents agreed with the statement, indicating that they consider cooperation to be goal-oriented. In addition, stakeholders were asked whether interaction with the wellbeing services county had been smooth. Seventy percent of respondents considered the interaction to be smooth, while 26% did not. This suggests that there are still areas for improvement in interaction. Finally, stakeholders were asked to evaluate whether they had received sufficient information from the wellbeing services county for their organization's use. The results are more divided here. Only about 9% strongly agreed with the statement, nearly half (48%) somewhat agreed, and 44% felt that they had not received sufficient information.

Stakeholders' views on participation in strategy work were also explored through the stakeholder survey. Stakeholders were asked to evaluate the current strategy of the Wellbeing Services County of Ostrobothnia for 2022–2025 and their role in its preparation. The results of the survey are presented in Figure 14.



**Figure 14.** Stakeholders' views on strategic participation.

In the first statement of Figure 14, stakeholders were asked whether the current strategy of the Wellbeing Services County of Ostrobothnia sufficiently takes the stakeholder perspective into account. The results are somewhat divided. A total of 48% of respondents believe that the stakeholder perspective is sufficiently considered in the strategy. However, only 4% strongly agreed with the statement. Meanwhile, 31% disagreed, indicating that they do not believe the perspective is adequately considered. More than one fifth, 22%, skipped the question, which may suggest that they did not fully understand the question or were unable to assess whether the stakeholder perspective is visible in the strategy.

Secondly, stakeholders were asked whether participation in the strategy work of the Wellbeing Services County of Ostrobothnia is important for their organization. Nearly all respondents, 96%, considered participation in the process to be important. Only 4% indicated that participation was not important to them. This suggests that stakeholders have a clear need to be heard in the strategy process.

In the open-ended questions, stakeholders were also asked what kind of cooperation they would like to engage in with the Wellbeing Services County of Ostrobothnia in the

future. The purpose of this question was to identify potential new forms of collaboration that could also support participation in strategy work and the implementation of the strategy.

*SH1: "Bilateral meetings between our organization and the wellbeing services county, without other similar organizations."*

*SH5: "Workshops on future plans, where the responsibilities of different parties are highlighted, have been useful. In a situation where both the Wellbeing Services County of Ostrobothnia and the municipality must save money, it is easy to shift responsibility to the other party in matters where both have responsibility."*

The open responses from the stakeholder survey highlight a desire for interaction between organizations. Stakeholder SH1 emphasizes bilateral meetings between the organization and the wellbeing services county. SH5, in turn, highlights the importance of clarifying the division of responsibilities, which can be addressed, for example, in workshops. Through discussions, shared interfaces can be identified and responsibilities agreed upon between actors.

*SH16: "More genuine dialogue and listening. At the moment, the wellbeing services county makes decisions, and statements or consultations do not have real significance, nor is it communicated that citizens are being heard."*

Respondent SH16 emphasizes the need for genuine dialogue and listening. According to this view, the wellbeing services county currently makes decisions without meaningfully considering statements or consultations.

*SH11: "We have gained the impression in the municipality that, instead of municipal cooperation, the focus has so far been more on cooperation with organizations. However, residents of the wellbeing services county always live in a municipality, so aligning*

*activities could be the next focus. Structures for cooperation between the wellbeing services county and municipalities may exist at higher management levels, but are insufficient among experts across different themes.”*

Stakeholders such as SH11 particularly emphasize the need for stronger cooperation between municipalities and the Wellbeing Services County of Ostrobothnia. In addition to cooperation at the leadership level, collaboration among experts would also be beneficial. Since municipalities and the wellbeing services county share the same residents, multiple points of interaction emerge.

*SH12: “The company wants to act more as a strategic, genuine partner in the future, instead of engaging in one-off purchases. A shared vision for smooth and rapid access to care for the residents of Ostrobothnia, as well as a preventive approach, can be ensured through strong cooperation.”*

Companies such as SH12 also express a desire for genuine partnership and a willingness to engage in strategic collaboration in the future. Shared goals regarding the population and a common direction provide a strong foundation for such partnerships.

In addition to the stakeholder survey, participation and its opportunities were also discussed in the management team interviews. Members of the management team were asked whether it is important, from the perspective of strategy success, to involve as many different actors as possible. In MT2’s response, it becomes evident that strategy implementation is easier when residents have been involved in the process. MT5 similarly highlights that early-stage participation influences later commitment to the strategy.

*MT2: “Of course, it is easier if residents have been able to participate in the strategy work. There are usually challenges in strategy implementation if staff and the population have not been involved.”*

*MT5: "From the perspective of how participation in the early stages affects later commitment to the jointly identified important issues."*

MT2 also adds that while participation of the population is not strictly necessary, it is important that the strategy is generally accepted, meaning that it has gained legitimacy among residents.

*MT2: "It is not necessary that they participate in the strategy work, but that the strategy is considered appropriate by them."*

Management team members were also asked to evaluate the preparation of the upcoming strategy. MT15 emphasizes that strategy cannot be developed in isolation from its operating environment, and therefore it is essential that the strategy is developed in cooperation with different actors.

*MT15: "First of all, strategy cannot be developed separately from the operating environment in which it functions. For us in the wellbeing services county, this means that the strategy is developed in cooperation with different actors."*

Participation in strategy work appears somewhat different depending on the perspective. However, a common theme is that participation and interaction are necessary to ensure that the strategy is collectively recognized and serves the interests of residents and stakeholders.

#### **4.3.4 Challenges of participation**

The involvement of residents and stakeholders in the strategy work of the Wellbeing Services County of Ostrobothnia is essential and, to a certain extent, also mandated by law. However, the process itself includes challenges that were explored through interviews and surveys. Members of the management team and stakeholders share their perspectives on participation.

In the interviews, management team members were asked how participation should be implemented in practice. In addition to the practical approaches discussed in the previous section, several challenges emerged that should be considered in participation processes. One of these challenges relates to strategic thinking and organizational knowledge. MT1 highlights that participating in strategy work may require a certain level of understanding of the organization as well as strategic thinking.

*MT1: "I am thinking about strategic thinking, how easy or difficult it is, and how much knowledge is required to be able to set or prioritize strategic objectives for such an organization."*

Respondent MT5 points out that it may be challenging for customers to understand what they are actually participating in, as strategy work operates at a high level of abstraction. At the same time, they note that everyday questions, which are easier for participants to relate to, still influence these higher-level concepts.

*MT5: "I recognize that especially for customers and some staff, it is probably very difficult to understand what they are participating in. Strategy work is quite high-level, and it is very difficult to bring it down to a level where you ask for opinions on everyday issues, even though those issues do influence the higher-level aspects, so it is very challenging."*

In the open-ended responses of the stakeholder survey, respondent SH7 notes that partners and residents may interpret concise strategic statements in different ways. This can affect not only strategy implementation but also the commenting phase, if the terminology and condensed expressions are not clear to residents and stakeholders.

*SH7: "A challenging task. Different partners and residents are likely to interpret different things in the concise statements found under each heading. The most important thing is*

*that we can meet at some level and reach a point where we can agree on the goal of achieving the most prosperous population in our region.”*

Similarly, in the management team interviews, respondent MT4 emphasizes that the language of the strategy must be easily understandable so that everyone can recognize themselves in it.

*MT4: “If I talk about strategy, it must be so understandable and written in such a way that it is easy to understand and to see oneself in it.”*

MT4 continues by stating that if too many elements are included in the strategy map, they become difficult to comprehend for most people. They express a preference for a strategy that is as simple and clear as possible, ideally condensed into a single visual.

*MT4: “In my opinion, a good strategy is one that consists of a single image and a small amount of text explaining what is being done. When the strategy map includes all kinds of promises, processes and competencies, it becomes too complex for most people to understand. I hope the strategy map will now be so clear that nothing else is needed.”*

Another challenge related to participation is communication. Respondent MT16 highlights that organizational websites may not be the most effective channel for residents to find or encounter information about the strategy.

*MT16: “When it comes to residents, communication is more challenging. It is known that, for example, the wellbeing services county’s website is not the channel where people usually look for information. It would be necessary to consider other ways to communicate the message of the strategy.”*

Additional challenges identified in the management team interviews include engaging residents of different age groups. Respondent MT8 reflects on how children and

teenagers, who are also residents of the wellbeing services county, could be involved in strategy work and have their perspectives heard.

*MT8: "It is of course quite difficult how children could participate. Teenagers to some extent, and parents, but how children themselves could participate in this."*

Another challenge raised by the management team relates to the large number of responses and participants. While a high response rate can be seen as a positive challenge, it also consumes resources. Respondent MT9 notes that a large number of responses does not necessarily translate into high-quality input.

*MT9: "I do not know, in previous cases when changes to the service network were made and the population was asked, there were a huge number of responses, even critical ones, but they did not necessarily provide much added value."*

Respondent MT19 highlights that the large number and dispersion of stakeholders across the region makes it difficult to engage with each party individually, leaving digital platforms as the most viable option.

*MT19: "Another significant group is the third sector organizations, which are somewhat more challenging because they are so dispersed. There are over eight hundred social and health organizations and associations alone, so ensuring their voices are heard is difficult. There is practically no other way than to use digital methods and platforms that make participation easier and more feasible."*

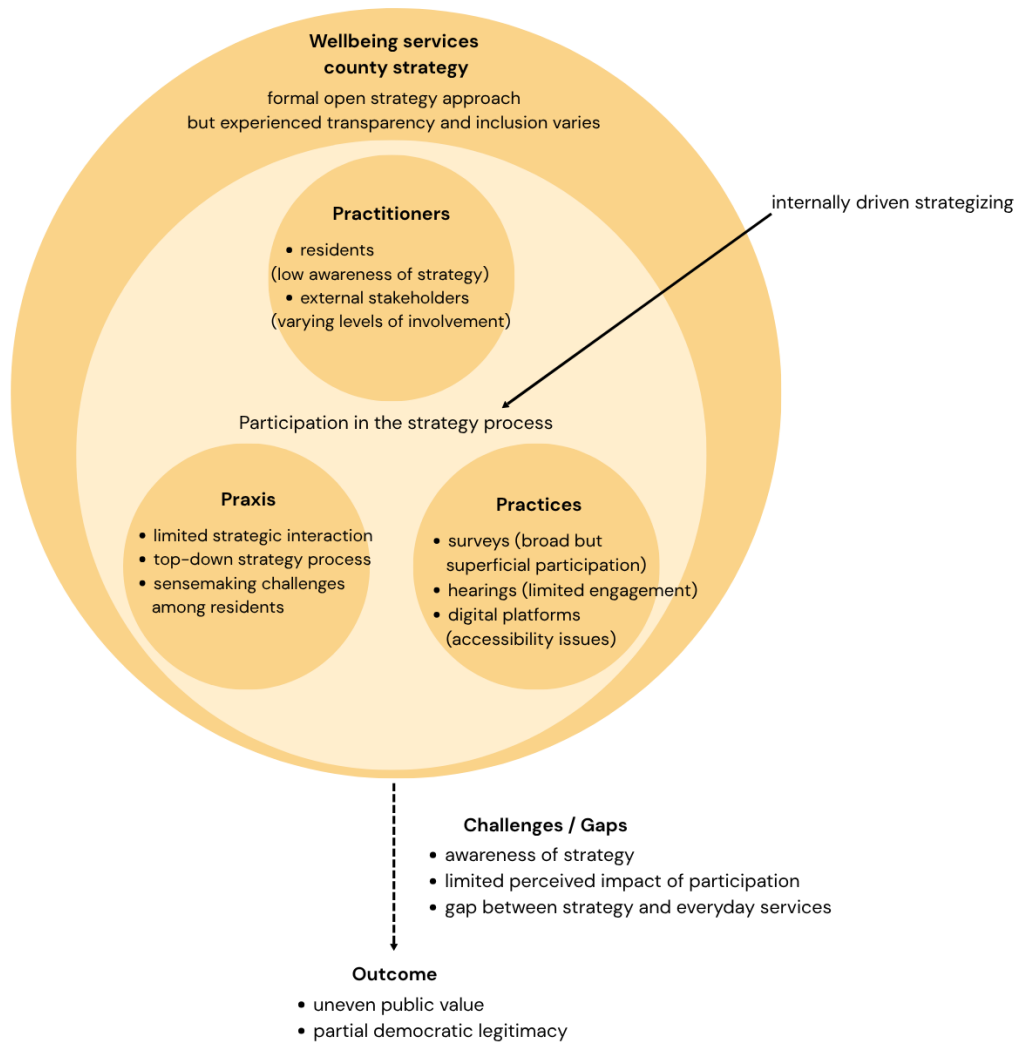
Thus, participation in the strategy process also involves several challenges. The key lies in identifying these challenges so that they can be taken into account when designing participation processes, for example in terms of visual presentation, language choices and resource allocation.

#### 4.4 Synthesis of findings

In this subsection, the results of the surveys and interviews are summarized before proceeding to their analysis. In addition, an updated theoretical framework based on the results is presented. The results chapter examined the views of residents and stakeholders on participation in the strategy process, as well as their perceptions of the strategy of the Wellbeing Services County of Ostrobothnia. Experiences of the strategy itself may also influence participation more broadly.

The results indicate that the strategy is primarily perceived as concrete actions and services rather than as a formal document. Especially from the perspective of residents, the strategy remains relatively abstract, and there are limited opportunities to engage with it directly, which weakens their ability to participate in the strategy process. Stakeholders who operate closer to the organization have a better understanding of the strategy and perceive it as a framework guiding activities. Overall, the perception of the strategy is strongly linked to the functionality of services and trust in the organization, highlighting the importance of strategy implementation in the external environment.

With regard to participation, the results show that multiple forms of engagement are utilized in the strategy process, such as surveys, workshops, and digital platforms. However, participation is mainly limited to informing and consulting, and only rarely extends to deeper interaction or co-creation. Although both residents and stakeholders are provided with opportunities to participate, participation appears fragmented, episodic, and largely organization-driven. This limits its impact and perceived meaningfulness. Furthermore, challenges related to communication, accessibility, and the breadth of participants influence how participation is realized in practice. Consequently, the intended openness and inclusiveness of the strategy process do not fully correspond to how participation is experienced by different actors. The results of participation, aligned with the theoretical framework, are presented in Figure 15.



**Figure 15.** Theoretical framework of the empirical findings.

## **5 Discussion**

### **5.1 Theoretical implications**

In this chapter the results of the thesis are summarized through the lens of strategy as practice (SAP) and they are analyzed in relation to previous research as well as the research questions of the thesis. The discussion chapter focuses on the main elements of SAP theory, that is practitioners, practices and praxis, particularly in the context of the public sector.

#### **5.1.1 Participation in the strategy process from the SAP perspective**

One of the objectives of this study is to examine how the participation of residents and external stakeholders is realized in the strategy process of the Wellbeing Services County. The strategy as practice perspective helps to understand this phenomenon. In addition, the results and participation activities are also examined through the linguistic choices of the strategy and the creation of understanding as well as through open strategy, since these were linked as part of the strategy as practice practices in the theoretical section of the thesis.

The findings highlight several different stakeholders who should be included in the strategy process of the Wellbeing Services County. These actors, that is the practitioners of the process, are an essential part when examining the realization of participation in the context of the public sector. The results show that residents and external stakeholders are recognized as important actors in the strategy work by the Wellbeing Services County. The views of these stakeholders are considered valuable, and their participation is generally seen as desirable. The intention to promote participation begins with the understanding that the Wellbeing Services County exists for the population and that the foundations of the strategy are based on the needs of the population. This means that in order to produce public value and meet societal needs, the Wellbeing Services County

must return to the roots of its existence, that is to the population (Kearney & Meynhardt, 2016). According to the results, the stakeholders also see their participation in the strategy process of the Wellbeing Services County as important.

The findings highlight essential external stakeholders of the Wellbeing Services County such as third sector organizations, associations, parishes, authorities, providers, companies and the municipalities of the region. The results indicate that the Wellbeing Services County has a large number of external stakeholders who, in addition to residents, should be included in the strategy process. The traditional SAP understanding that practitioners are only the top management, middle management and possible external consultants is therefore not the whole truth. In this study practitioners thus do not refer only to professionals of strategy language (Jarzabkowski, 2005), but the aim is specifically to reach actors outside the strategic bubble. Particularly in the context of the public sector, where the purpose of the organization is based on serving the community, the definition of practitioners must also cover a broader public (Moore, 2013).

The findings show that the role of residents and external stakeholders remains passive in the strategy process of the Wellbeing Services County. The key guidelines and decisions of the strategy work are made within the organization, and external actors participate in the process mainly through informing and consulting. The strategy work is therefore strongly organization-centered, but on the other hand legislation also defines for example the role of the Wellbeing Services County Council in the decision making of the strategy. Previous research shows that strategy research has strongly focused on the role of management (Floyd & Wooldridge, 2000), and the participation of external actors has been studied less. In the results of the management team interviews it is highlighted that participating in the strategy process is also not easy without knowledge of the organization or strategic understanding. The participation of external stakeholders in the actual decision making of the strategy is therefore not necessarily possible, but more active participation methods can still be used in the process itself.

Based on the findings, various strategic practices are used in the strategy work and participation processes of the Wellbeing Services County, such as digital platforms, surveys, workshops, hearings, working groups and cooperation forums. This indicates that participation is structurally considered as part of the strategy process and several different methods have been developed. Opportunities for participation are therefore occasionally available, and the organization systematically seeks to collect views from different stakeholders and residents. However, the results do not show how the different participation methods are divided between residents and stakeholders. The results on the experience of participation and trust nevertheless suggest that more diverse methods are used for stakeholder participation than for resident participation. Resident participation focuses mostly on surveys and hearings, whereas with stakeholders different cooperation models such as forums and working groups have been built.

The findings show that a challenge for participation may be obtaining relevant responses and views from residents and stakeholders. Responses to surveys, for example, may unexpectedly be numerous, but a large number does not necessarily indicate the quality of the responses. A large number of participants nevertheless consumes the resources of the Wellbeing Services County. This suggests that the Wellbeing Services County should choose participation methods so that they serve both the goals of the organization and provide residents and stakeholders with a genuine opportunity to participate. The meaningfulness and impact of strategy participation has been highlighted in previous research (Arnstein, 2019), since poorly implemented participation reduces its impact as well as the commitment of those being included. The results of the thesis also show that difficult-to-understand strategy language and high-level concepts may complicate the participation of residents and stakeholders in the process.

From the perspective of strategy work, the findings highlight that the strategy should primarily appear to residents and stakeholders as concrete actions and measures, not as a strategy document. This suggests that the organization genuinely sees the strategy as a document guiding everyday work. On the other hand, the results also show that

residents' experience of participation is weak and trust in services is partly lacking. This may mean that the strategy does not necessarily appear as practical actions to the residents and stakeholders of the region as well as hoped. The findings also suggest that participation and trust are interdependent factors. For residents, the promises made and concrete decisions are more important than the strategy itself. The more residents experience participation, the more trust they have in the services and decisions of the Wellbeing Services County. In the management team interviews, building trust with residents and stakeholders is highlighted as one area for development. This difference can be interpreted as a gap between the intended strategy and the realized strategy, which has also been identified in previous strategy research. Such a strategy is referred to as emergent strategy (Mintzberg & Waters, 1985). A strategy may be formally well prepared, but its practical implementation remains incomplete, which may weaken its impact.

The findings show that the sense of inclusion among stakeholders is higher than among residents. Still, stakeholders also hope for more genuine dialogue in strategy participation. Most stakeholders also trust that the Wellbeing Services County uses its resources effectively, fairly and efficiently. The different starting points for building trust between residents and stakeholders may be due to the different participation methods used by the Wellbeing Services County. Participation towards residents is more focused on informing through surveys, but with stakeholders other cooperation models and networks have already been built. This is in line with previous research, which has shown that participation practices in the sector often emphasize informing and consulting rather than deeper cooperation (Arnstein, 2019). Reciprocal participation methods are less studied and they also consume more organizational resources. According to the results, most residents do not feel that they are taken into account in the decision making of the Wellbeing Services County and less than half of the stakeholders feel that the strategy takes their perspective into account.

One of the findings relates to the comprehensibility and meaningfulness of the strategy. According to the results, the strategy is familiar to most stakeholders, and its content is

considered clear. However, particularly for residents the strategy may be difficult to understand, and the terms used in it unclear. The findings emphasize that the strategy should be practical, understandable and sufficiently concise. Linguistic aspects, especially regarding bilingualism, also affect participation opportunities in the region. Challenges in understanding the strategy weaken the actors' opportunities to participate in the strategy process. The findings show that knowledge of the organization, strategic thinking and understandable concepts may facilitate the participation opportunities of residents and stakeholders. Sensemaking challenges also directly affect participation (Rouleau, 2005). If actors do not understand the strategy or their own role in it, it may be difficult for them to participate in its creation in a meaningful way. This highlights the importance of language, communication and interaction in strategy work. SAP research has emphasized the role of discursive practices in making strategy (Jarzabkowski et al., 2015), and the results of this study support this perspective.

The realization of participation in the strategy process can also be examined through open strategy literature, which emphasizes openness, inclusion and transparency in strategy work (Hautz et al., 2017). In the findings of this study it appears that the challenges of participation relate particularly to one-way participation, the impact of participation and the comprehensibility of the strategy. Thus it can be stated that although the strategy process contains open strategy elements, they are not yet fully realized in practice. Floyd and Wooldridge (2000) also highlight in their research that positive relationships with external actors, such as residents and stakeholders, increase knowledge sharing and the transfer of expertise and strengthen mutual trust, which is beneficial in the participation process.

### **5.1.2 Developing participation practices**

The second objective of the study is to examine how the participation of residents and external stakeholders in the strategy process can be developed. One area for development emerging from the results relates to the level of the participation process. The current forms of participation, particularly towards residents, emphasize informing and

consulting, whereas deeper forms of participation, such as co-creation and partnership, remain limited. In addition, the impact of participation should be made more visible. Based on the findings, it is not always clear to participants how their views influence strategy or decision making. In addition to participation being experienced as weak, trust in the activities of the Wellbeing Services County and in the development of services is also low. This weakens commitment and the meaningfulness of participation. Developing participation would therefore also affect the population's trust. It is essential to create a clear link between participation and strategic decisions. According to Arnstein (2019), there are significant differences in the impact of participation, and her ladder of citizen participation ranges from participation resembling a rubber stamp to a level where residents have genuine decision-making power. In open strategy literature the importance of participation for the legitimacy and quality of the strategy is also emphasized, but this also requires real opportunities for influence (Hautz et al., 2017). Thus participation should be developed in a direction where external actors do not merely give their views on the strategy, but development is carried out in cooperation.

Co-creation research also provides a new perspective on strategy participation (Vallaster & von Wallpach, 2018; Voorberg et al., 2015). In its stakeholders are not only passive participants but actively part of co-creation. This also increases inclusion and transparency familiar from open strategy theory (Whittington et al., 2011). Co-creation creates value for participation itself, impact on the strategy process and a strategy that better serves the community. The findings of the stakeholder survey also highlight the need for genuine dialogue and participation, which a survey or other passive participation method cannot meet. On the other hand, according to the results, residents' sense of participation is weak and a consultation-based survey may leave sensemaking incomplete if strategy language or the wellbeing organization are not familiar beforehand. Co-creation would also enable better hearing of residents and stakeholders as well as joint planning based on the needs of the population.

Residents and stakeholders consider it important to be part of the strategy process of the Wellbeing Services County. The management team interviews also highlight that including and hearing external actors is important for the strategy. From previous research we see that participation largely depends on the operating principles of the organization and its management. The term champions used by Mantere (2005) to describe actors involved in strategy work illustrates the role of agency. The Wellbeing Services County organization has the authority to define who these actors are and who, on the other hand, remain outside participation. The Wellbeing Services County also defines the official strategizing situations and what is discussed there or what kind of information is shared there (Hoon, 2007). Responsibility for the participation process and how the strategy is presented is therefore largely on the Wellbeing Services County (Eriksson & Lehtimäki, 1998). The findings show that the participation of residents and stakeholders in the strategy process increases commitment and facilitates the implementation of the strategy.

The use of different participation methods in the right situation and target group also emerges in the results as well as in previous participation research. As already noted, the participation methods for stakeholders are currently more interactive than resident participation. One reason for this is certainly also the large number of residents compared to the number of stakeholders in the region. In interactive situations the Wellbeing Services County nevertheless defines what kinds of perspectives are brought forward and how understanding is given to stakeholders (Golsorkhi et al., 2019). On the other hand, digital participation platforms enable the participation of a larger group, but they often remain at the level of consulting or informing (Cho et al., 2021). Digital platforms may also be more accessible when the participating group is geographically dispersed and linguistically diverse. The organization should nevertheless consider that digital participation platforms also involve limitations such as digital skills and access to devices.

When developing the participation process, attention must be paid to the communication and comprehensibility of the strategy. The findings show that the strategy may be

perceived as too high-level activities and the connection to everyday practices is not seen. From the SAP perspective the strategy is constructed through language, so “translating” the strategy into something concrete and linked to everyday life is a key prerequisite for broader participation. The results highlight the idea of templates and visualization, through which the Wellbeing Services County could better sensegive the strategy process. In addition, commenting on the strategy based on a more visual version may reduce its abstractness and provide better starting points for participation. Understandable strategy language gives residents and stakeholders the opportunity to create understanding around the sensemaking process (Rouleau, 2005). Participation processes must pay attention to strategy language also because the process should include actors who do not have previous experience of strategy work (Eriksson & Lehtimäki, 1998). Particularly if the organization hopes for new approaches to the strategy, it should include actors who are outside the reach of the organization and its strategy language (Hoon, 2007).

Communicating about participation can nevertheless be challenging according to the findings. The use of the right channels and platforms matters when considering reaching the population. Geographical dispersion among residents and stakeholders also challenges communication and participation. Communication is not necessarily only in the hands of the Wellbeing Services County. The results show that most residents feel that public discussion affects their perception of the activities of the Wellbeing Services County. In addition to the Wellbeing Services County’s own communication, the media therefore constructs an image of Finnish social and health care. Turning stakeholder consultation into interactive activity could also affect the trust issues caused by public discussion. The results nevertheless show that most stakeholders are satisfied with the cooperation with the Wellbeing Services County and with its communication. This provides a good basis for strategy participation also in the future.

## **5.2 Managerial implications**

The findings of the study provide practical recommendations for the management of the Wellbeing Services County for developing the strategy process and participation

practices. First, the process should enable more interactive strategy work, for example by using the co-creation model. The depth of participation should also be increased by offering external actors more genuine opportunities to influence the strategy. This may mean precisely increasing co-creation, giving stakeholders a more active role in strategy workshops and expanding participation to different stages of the strategy.

Most of the stakeholders who responded to the survey had seen the previous Wellbeing Services County strategy and considered its content clear. Continuity and concreteness were hoped for future strategies and participation processes. In addition, the results highlight that the strategy should be concise and repeated sufficiently. However, both the strategy and participation communication need to be clarified and made more concrete. Strategy participation should be carried out in a way that is understandable also to actors outside the organization. This may require, for example, plain language versions of the strategy and the use of concrete examples to illustrate strategic objectives and participation as a process.

In addition, the Wellbeing Services County should develop mechanisms through which the effects of participation are made visible. This may increase and strengthen the meaningfulness of participation. For example, feedback channels and communication about how participants' views have been taken into account in the strategy work may increase the sense of meaningfulness. Overall, the study shows that participation is not a separate part of the strategy process but a central part of its realization.

### **5.3 Limitations and suggestions for further research**

There are several limitations related to this study that must be taken into account when interpreting the results. First, the study is based on a single case study in one Wellbeing Services County, which means that the results are not fully generalizable. Although the case study allows for an in-depth examination of the phenomenon in the context of the public sector, the results cannot be generalized statistically to other organizations.

However, the similarity of the public sector and Wellbeing Services Counties nationally allows the results to be transferred at least partially to other similar organizations.

The data of the study consist of different sources, each with its own limitations. The resident survey enables reaching a large group of participants, but it does not provide a broader understanding of the experiences of individual respondents. In addition, less than one percent of all residents of Ostrobothnia responded to the resident survey, so the results of the survey do not represent the views of the entire population. The response rate of the stakeholder survey was also relatively low, which may affect the representativeness of the results. The interview data complement this whole by providing a deeper perspective, but they mainly represent the thoughts of the internal management about the strategy process. The data therefore emphasize different perspectives, which is both a strength and a limitation of the study. In addition, the study examines participation through the experiences and observations of participants. This means that the results describe how participation appears to different actor groups, but not necessarily how participation is objectively realized from the perspective of the organization.

In future research it would be useful to examine participation in strategy processes with a larger sample in several Wellbeing Services Counties or other public sector organizations. This would allow comparison of the results and provide a better picture of how participation is realized in different organizations within the same sector. In addition, longitudinal research could provide valuable information on whether the ideas emerging in the participation process influence the activities of the Wellbeing Services County or another organization in the long term. Further research can also be conducted on the impact of participation. The study could examine how different forms of participation, such as co-creation, affect the experience of participation and, on the other hand, the realization of the strategy.

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1. Management team interviews

1. What is your name and your job title in the Wellbeing Services County of Ostrobothnia?
2. Which actors should be involved in strategy work, and how is this realized in practice?
3. How would you evaluate strategy work at the moment?
4. How should the implementation of the strategy take place for personnel and residents?
5. How is the strategy visible, or how should it be visible, in the daily work of the Wellbeing Services County of Ostrobothnia?
6. What is the role of leadership in strategy work at the moment, and how should the strategy be led in the upcoming strategy period in order to achieve the desired outcome?
7. From the perspective of your own sector/field of activity, what is the biggest challenge at the moment?
8. In your opinion, what are the biggest future challenges for the residents of the Wellbeing Services County of Ostrobothnia? What do you see as the biggest challenge for the Wellbeing Services County of Ostrobothnia?
9. How do you view the resource situation of the Wellbeing Services County of Ostrobothnia? In your opinion, to what should resources be allocated in the future?
10. How do you see the Wellbeing Services County of Ostrobothnia in five years?
11. What are the factors through which the Wellbeing Services County of Ostrobothnia has succeeded in distinguishing itself from other wellbeing services counties, and how should these factors be led in the future?
12. In your opinion, what are the biggest future challenges for the implementation of the strategy of the Wellbeing Services County of Ostrobothnia? What factors weaken or improve the success of the strategy?

13. What issue in your own sector/field of activity should be particularly emphasized during the next strategy period 2026–2029?

## Appendix 2. Resident survey

1. I am under 18 years old.
2. I am 18–64 years old.
3. I am over 64 years old.
4. My native language is Finnish.
5. My native language is Swedish.
6. My native language is something other than Finnish or Swedish.
7. My municipality of residence is Kaskinen, Kristiinankaupunki, Närpiö, Korsnäs, or Maalahti.
8. My municipality of residence is Vaasa, Mustasaari, Laihia, or Vöyri.
9. My municipality of residence is Pietarsaari, Uusikaarlepyy, Kruunupyy, Luoto, or Pedersöre.
10. I know how and where to apply for the social and health services and rescue services I need.
11. The quality of social and health services is more important than their location.
12. The number of social and healthcare service points should be reduced so that the remaining ones can have a larger workforce and better services with the decreasing resources.
13. It is important to invest in preventive healthcare, even if it means reducing around-the-clock services.
14. I feel that the support from the social and health services and rescue services I have received has contributed to my well-being.
15. I prefer digital services (e.g., chat or remote consultations) over in-person visits.
16. If digital services (e.g., chat or remote consultation) speed up my service process, I prefer using them instead of calling for an appointment.
17. I have used digital self-care support services (e.g., Omaolo questionnaires, mobile care pathways, weight management groups).
18. I know how to book an appointment digitally.

19. The workforce should be transferred from traditional social and health services to digital services (e.g., chat or remote consultations, mobile care pathways).
20. I believe that expanding digital services improves the accessibility of services in the wellbeing services county.
21. Contraceptive and family planning services are easily accessible.
22. I feel that I receive the support I need for parenting.
23. I set an example for my child with a good lifestyle and exercise habits.
24. I am employed, and occupational healthcare services sufficiently support my work ability and functional capacity.
25. It is clear to me which services belong to primary healthcare and which to occupational healthcare.
26. I am an unemployed jobseeker and need social and health services to support my employment.
27. I use home care services, and I'm satisfied with the services provided.
28. The wellbeing services county should invest more in home care for the elderly rather than institutional care services.
29. The senior line is familiar to me and has made it easier to make contact.
30. I have heard about the senior advisory services and know how to contact them.
31. The services of the wellbeing services county provide sufficient support for my mental well-being.
32. I am functional and able to manage daily tasks.
33. I have close people in my life whom I am in regular contact with.
34. I feel lonely.
35. Mental health services should focus more on availability and short, intensive treatment periods rather than long treatment relationships.
36. I want to take responsibility for improving my well-being and functional capacity if I receive support for it.
37. I have a relative or close person who can help me with daily life if needed.

38. I have needed the services of the wellbeing services county to support my mental well-being.
39. Healthy lifestyles are key to improving my well-being.
40. I feel that weight management is important for maintaining my health.
41. I go outdoors daily.
42. I exercise regularly.
43. I am willing to take more responsibility for my own and my loved ones' well-being.
44. I have at least one hobby that maintains and strengthens my well-being and health.
45. I participate in the activities of an organization in my residential area.
46. My residential area is safe and supports my well-being.
47. Public discussion about the wellbeing services county influences my perception of its operations.
48. Residents are currently well considered in the decision-making and service development of the wellbeing services county.
49. I am concerned about increasing social inequality.
50. Due to changes in social security, I have had to rely on food aid and/or church diaconal assistance.
51. The wellbeing services county effectively supports my current well-being and functional capacity.
52. The wellbeing services county should have the right to levy taxes.
53. I trust that I will receive help from the wellbeing services county when I need it.

### **Appendix 3. Stakeholder survey**

1. Basic information
2. My organization is: a municipality, a company, an association, or another type of organization?
3. Evaluate the functionality of cooperation and communication with the Wellbeing Services County of Ostrobothnia.
4. What kind of cooperation would your organization like to have with the Wellbeing Services County of Ostrobothnia in the future?
5. Open response field regarding cooperation and communication with the Wellbeing Services County of Ostrobothnia.
6. Evaluate the current strategy of the Wellbeing Services County of Ostrobothnia and the role of stakeholders in the strategy preparation.
7. From your organization's perspective, what are the biggest challenges currently faced by the residents of the Ostrobothnia region? Select a maximum of three.
8. Which areas should the Wellbeing Services County of Ostrobothnia prioritize during the next strategy period 2026–2029?
9. Which aspects are currently functioning well in the Wellbeing Services County of Ostrobothnia, and which aspects should be developed from your organization's perspective?
10. Open response field regarding the current or future strategy of the Wellbeing Services County of Ostrobothnia.
11. Other comments or additional information.