

What do we talk about when we talk about citizens? Public actors and researchers navigating citizen roles at the border of a semi-urban living lab[☆]

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ABSTRACT

A central challenge for Living Labs (LLs) is how they connect to, and embed learnings, in formal transport and mobility planning structures and practices. This article focuses on a workshop-series, established by researchers within a LL centred research programme, to create a bridge between the LL and its municipal partner. We explore the narratives that emerged about citizen roles in the workshop-series. Results suggest that there is not one dominant framing of citizen roles, but a spectrum of narratives exist in tandem. However, citizens are seldom framed as taking part in the final stages of decision-making processes, even if their input is regarded as important. Our findings also show that a workshop-series can be used to extend the scope of LL methodologies to actively engage public actors. LL-adjacent workshops can be viewed as inter-boundary spaces which open a window to the complexities of ordinary transport and mobility planning processes, as well as a space for researchers to actively work with embedding learnings from LLs.

1. Introduction

Literature on sustainability transformations argues that transformations will require systematic changes which demand meaningful societal engagement (Chilvers et al., 2021). Living Labs (LLs) and adjacent forms of experimentation are said to open up new sites and forms of participation (Cognetti, 2023). They also mark out arenas for citizens to partake in sustainability transformations (Witzell et al., 2022). Previous research shows that the publics involved in LLs have been understood through a range of lenses; ranging from co-producers of a new service or technology to participants in consultation processes; or recipients of information (Menny et al., 2018). While LLs are new arenas for participation and change, the changes they seek to initiate should not be detached from existing governance and planning structures. An ongoing challenge is therefore how experimental projects involving citizen centred LLs can work to integrate and link learnings with formal governance and planning structures and practices (Scholl et al., 2018; van Waes et al., 2021).

This study is based upon work within the Mistra Sustainable

Accessibility and Mobility Services (SAMS) research programme. In line with Fuglsang et al. (2021), the multi-stakeholder programme aimed to orchestrate and facilitate interaction between market actors, public actors, researchers, and citizens, with a LL methodology employed as a core aspect of the programme. In addition to the LL a palette of other research methods and approaches were also part of the programme (Mistra SAMS, 2024). The programme's overarching ambitions align with transformative research goals; namely research with the normative ambition to “facilitate transformative societal change” (Wittmayer et al., 2024, p. 2). The LL at the centre of the Mistra SAMS programme was an action-based intervention around every-day mobility practices, where a small group of participants (14 households) were invited to reduce car use and try selected mobility and accessibility services. In this paper, we do not analyse the LL itself, and the household participants were not involved in the workshop-series analysed. Instead, our focus is on how public actors navigate themes of citizen participation in a workshop-series set up adjacently to the living lab.

The paper focuses on a workshop-series established by researchers working in the SAMS programme (the authors) and concerns the

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relationship between the LL, public actor responsibilities and citizen participation. The workshop primarily focused on involving municipal level public actors connected to a research-led LL. This paper explores the narratives which emerged about citizen roles in the workshop-series. Our research questions are: 1) what kind(s) of narratives about citizen roles emerge in the workshop-series?, and 2) how does a workshop-series contribute to transformation processes at the intersection between an experimental setting and ordinary planning processes? Question 1 aims to look at the content of the workshops and the narratives about citizen roles that emerged. Question 2 aims to explore how workshop-based methods contribute to ongoing discussions about the relationship between LLs and planning processes. With these research questions the paper contributes to both citizen participation literature and LL literature.

The motivation behind the study rests on two elements of previous research into LLs. Firstly, the role of LLs as sites and arenas for participation. And secondly, literature which argues that a central challenge for LLs is how and whether they connect to and embed learnings in formal governance and planning structures and practices (van Waes et al., 2021; Bulkeley et al., 2019). In this study we understand the connection between these two elements as “the relationship between public administrations and one of their core constituents: citizens” (Fuglsang et al., 2021, p. 10).

Citizen participation has been described as a buzzword as well as a contradictory model of governance (Zandbergen and Jaffe, 2014). Citizen participation covers a broad spectrum of modes of participation, including bottom-up participation initiated by citizens, and the integration of various forms of participation in top-down institutional settings (ibid). Participatory processes often differ according to whether participation is related to discourse around an issue (e.g. consultations or dialogue processes), or action-based participation (e.g. involvement in a trial or living laboratory) (Chilvers et al., 2021). In this paper, we define citizen participation broadly as the “heterogeneous collective practices through which publics engage in addressing collective public problems (...) whether deliberately or tacitly, which actively produces meanings, knowings, doings and/or forms of social organization” (ibid., p. 257). Understanding what citizen participation means and how the term is mobilized can therefore be done by focusing on the different narratives about citizen roles in various settings. In this paper, we discuss the SAMS workshop-series as one such setting.

Citizen roles have previously been explored in literature on citizen participation within the energy sector (Dunphy and Lennon, 2023; Mullally et al., 2018). However, our case concerns narratives about citizen roles in the transport sector, which has gained limited attention in research. Citizen roles in the transport sector have been dominated by user or consumer perspectives (Hansson et al., 2023), and citizens have been predominantly viewed as rational choice beings through a neo-classical lens (Kębłowski and Bassens, 2018). This paper therefore contributes to expanding the literature on citizen roles and participation in the transport and mobility field and LL methodologies.

The structure of the article is as follows. In Section 2 we present an overview of the workshop-series, as well as our approach to analysing the content of the workshops. In Section 3 we outline our analytical framework on narratives about citizen roles. Section 4 covers the results of the analysis, followed by a concluding discussion in Section 5.

2. Contextualising the study: methods and material

In this section we briefly summarise the SAMS Living Lab, give an overview of the workshop-series carried out on the theme of citizen participation, and present how we have analysed this material in relation to the aims and research questions of this article. As mentioned, this research is part of the Mistra SAMS research programme, which aimed to study how accessibility and mobility services can contribute to a transformation of the transport system. The programme set up a LL in the newly established and still developing neighbourhood of Riksten

(currently 3000 inhabitants and growing), in Botkyrka municipality, located southeast in the Stockholm region (see Figs. 1 and 2).

The location of the LL was chosen in dialogue between municipal officials and SAMS programme management in order to gain knowledge about transformation processes in semi-urban settings, characterized by car dependency and insufficient public transport. As reflected in the map in Fig. 2, Riksten is one such semi-urban setting. 14 households, who live in the neighbourhood, were engaged in the LL to reduce individual car use via mobility and accessibility services offered by the programme through a digital platform. The services offered in the LL experiment have primarily been bicycle-oriented services.³ In this article, we discuss a workshop-series which was identified as an approach to actively involve local governance actors during the SAMS programme. The series focused specifically on citizen participation, with predominantly municipal actors participating. The workshops took place between December 2021 – January 2024, running in parallel to the LL within the Mistra SAMS programme (see Fig. 3).

2.1. The workshop-series

In total we carried out five online workshops. The selection of workshop participants was made based on discussions between a municipal contact person for the SAMS programme, a strategic planner at the municipality, and the authors. Participants were selected because of their responsibility for key functions at the municipality or role in other organisations that have authority and different planning mandates over spatial planning and transport planning in Riksten. At the first workshop, officials from the national (3 persons) and regional planning levels (1 person) with responsibilities for public transport services and road infrastructure in Riksten participated. One representative from the private development company responsible for housing development also participated in the second workshop. Apart from this, key officials from Botkyrka municipality (4–6 persons) were the main participants. The municipal officials primarily included officials responsible for strategic and operative transport planning, as well as neighbourhood strategists responsible for community dialogue with stakeholders and citizens. The number of participants thus varied, from three to ten persons (see Table 1). Two researchers (the authors) participated and led each workshop session, and between 2 and 4 additional researchers participated in workshops 1, 3, 4 and 5 to support documentation or to present results from the LL. The variation of participants in workshops series distinguishes it from other methods seeking to study communicative processes (Zimmermann et al., 2012).

Instead of framing the transfer of results from LL Riksten as a stand-alone event occurring at the end of the program period, we approached the workshop-series as a process of brokerage and engagement running in parallel to the LL. The workshop-series was therefore introduced as an extension of the LL activities. The workshops were framed as a forum to: 1) extend the knowledge production taking places as part of the LL; 2) engage public actors throughout the research programme instead of communicating results at the end of the four-year programme period, and; 3) use the theme of citizen participation to explore the intersection between the role of the municipality and role of citizens in sustainable transport futures.

The workshop method used has been influenced by literature on policy labs as engagement activities (Hinrichs-Krapels et al., 2020; Wellstead et al., 2021) as well as critiques that LLs have overlooked the “involvement of and embedding of lessons with key local governance stakeholders” (Scholl et al., 2018; p. 83). In line with this literature, the series can be described as “university-driven knowledge exchange activity [operating] at the intersection between academia, policy and

³ In parallel, an on-demand solution for care workers with irregular work hours was set up to tackle transport disadvantage. This part of the LL was not in focus of the workshop-series analysed in this paper.

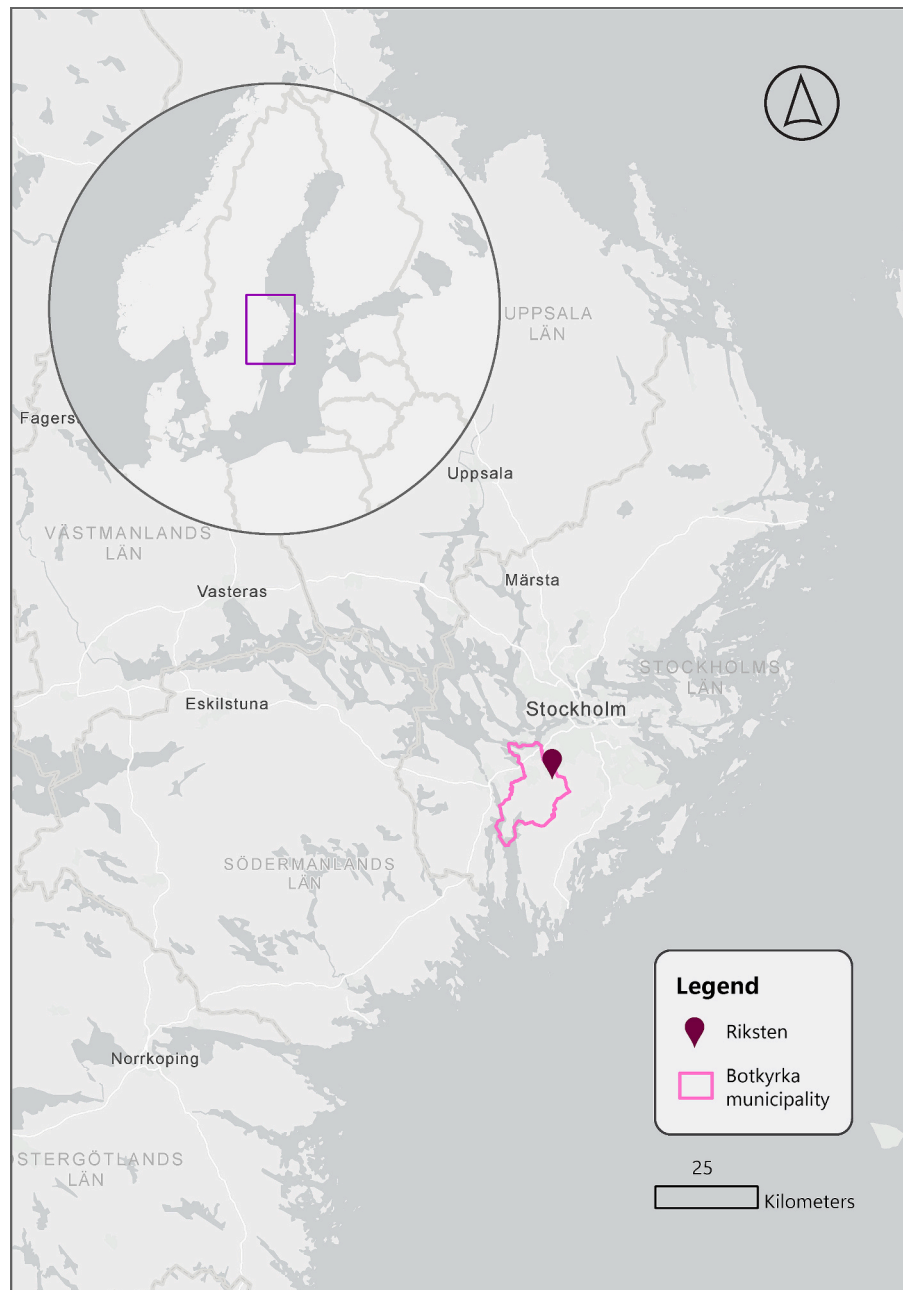


Fig. 1. Map showing location of Botkyrka municipality and Riksten. Authors' elaboration on open geodata on administrative boundaries (Statistics Sweden, 2023). Basemap: Light Gray Canvas. Basemap sources: ESRI, TomTom, Garmin, FAO, NOAA, USGS.

societal impact" (Hinrichs-Krapels et al., 2020; p. 2). There are many methods that provide techniques that engage experts, such as planners, in more or less structured discussions about transition processes. Workshops allow for group interaction with the possibility for in-depth discussion and an exploration of complex topics (Landeta et al., 2011). Workshops can be described as semi-structured, face-to-face discussion groups, similar to focus groups (ibid.; Zimmermann et al., 2012), that are exploratory and encourage co-operative approaches which are key in transition processes (Quist et al., 2001).

2.2. Analysing the content of the workshops

In order to analyse the content of the workshops for research purposes we explained to the participating officials that each workshop would be recorded and used as part of research, which they accepted and

gave verbal consent to. The recordings were transcribed after the workshops. The analytical procedure, focusing on a qualitative thematic analysis, was inspired by Braun and Clarke (2006). Using the analytical framework presented in Section 3 as a theoretical departure for identifying themes for the analysis, both authors made individual readings of the transcriptions and sorted the material into different narratives on citizen roles (RQ1). This means that the analysis was clearly theoretically driven, a strategy that provides detailed analysis of some aspects of the data rather than a rich description of the overall data (Braun and Clarke, 2006; p. 84). The individual reading of each author was followed by a joint analysis, where we compared and challenged the initial analysis. In this step we also identified themes in the workshops and the surrounding context related to RQ2, regarding the ways the workshop-series can contribute to transformation processes. The themes related to RQ1 or RQ2, that we identified in the analytical procedure, were then

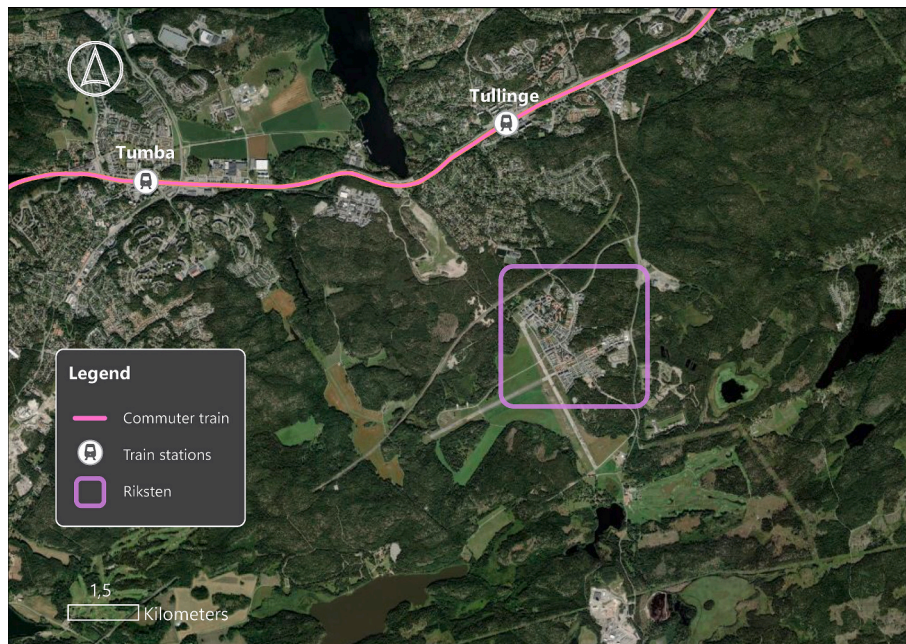


Fig. 2. Map showing the area of Riksten and the nearest commuter train route and stations. Authors' elaboration on GTFS data on public transport routes (Trafiklab, 2023). Basemap: Imagery. Basemap sources: Maxar, Microsoft.

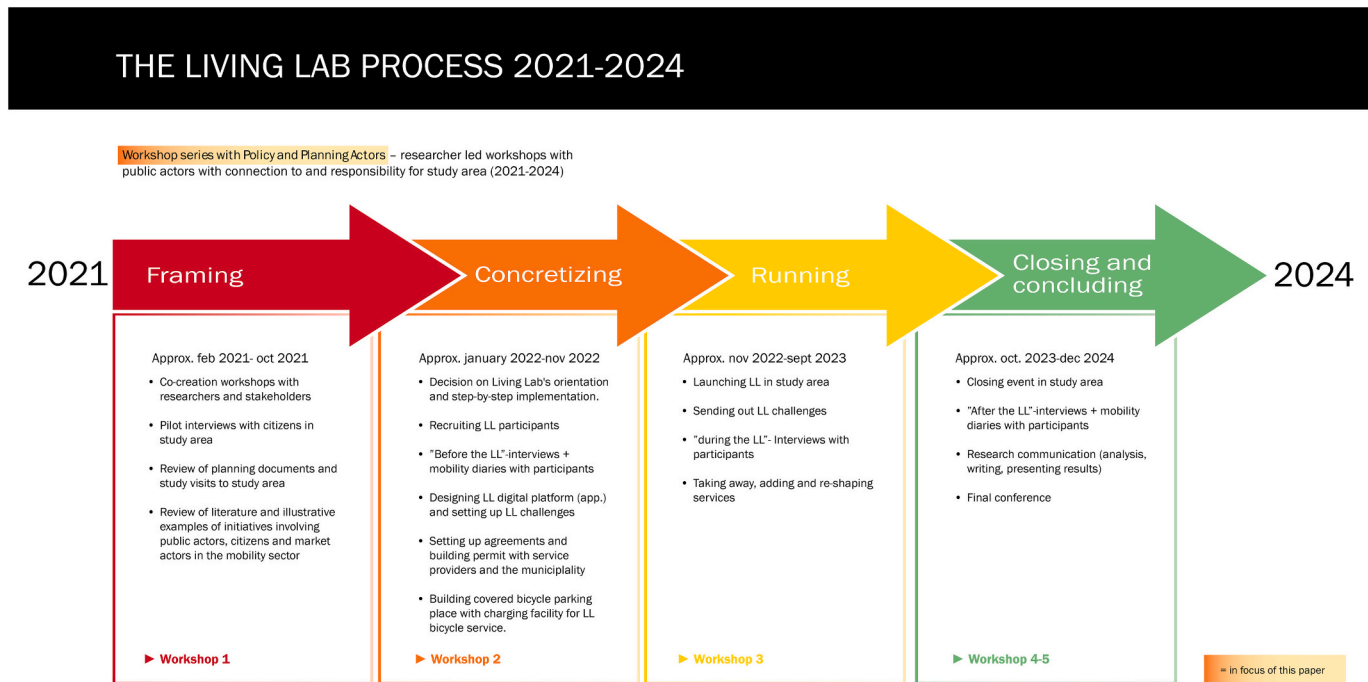


Fig. 3. The diagram gives an overview of the Mistra SAMS Living Lab in Riksten, including the workshops covered in this paper (Workshop 1–5) to show how they occurred in relation to each stage of the Living Lab.

used to structure the results in Section 4. In this section, we combine descriptions of the workshop discussions with quotes (translated from Swedish to English) from participating officials to support our analytical claims and to give concrete examples of how the participants reasoned, using their own formulations (Rockmann and Vough, 2024).

Our research activities are part of a governance and planning landscape which seeks to produce knowledge and explore issues with the aim of supporting public actor capacity to manage societal challenges. In terms of situating this work as part of the policy landscape, LLs are part of a general turn to experimental activities (Eneqvist and Karvonen,

2021) which, in different ways, aim to contribute to sustainability transitions and public actor responses to these challenges. Research has found that the “involvement of and embedding of lessons with key local governance stakeholders” has been overlooked (Scholl et al., 2018; p. 83). This research therefore had normative ambitions regarding transformative change and the role of the research programme in intervening in practice to explore citizen roles (Wittmayer et al., 2024). We therefore use our second research question (RQ2) to reflect on the broader implications of our methods within ongoing discussions about LLs and transformative change.

Table 1
Summary of workshop-series.

Workshop (WS) theme	Participants	Basis for discussion / key themes	Questions for discussion
WS 1, December 2021. The role of citizen participation in transport planning and in Riksten. Duration: 2.5 h	Botkyrka municipality: 5 municipal officials with responsibility for strategic and operative climate and transport planning (3) or citizen dialogues (2). Region Stockholm: 1 official from the regional public transport agency. Swedish national transport agency: 2 officials. Researchers: 4 researchers (the authors and two additional Mistra SAMS researchers).	Introduction by the researchers on citizen participation as a key for transformation processes in transport planning, with examples from a literature review (see Witzell et al.; 2022).	Which citizen participation method(s) could be suitable for Riksten? Followed by idea generation exercise. How to approach and implement the most promising method? Are you willing to work with this method in practice going forwards?
WS 2, April 2022. The role of experimentation in planning for sustainable mobility. Duration: 1.5 h	Botkyrka municipality: 3 municipal officials with responsibility for strategic transport planning (1) and operational transport planning (1), and citizen dialogue (1). Private land developer: 1 representative. Researchers: 2 researchers (the authors).	Introduction by the researchers on experimentation as a tool for transformation processes in research and practice.	What are your experiences of experimentation? What role can citizens play in experimentation?
WS 3, March 2023. Living and travelling in Riksten – results from focus groups with citizens. Duration: 1.5 h	Botkyrka municipality: 3 municipal officials with responsibility for strategic transport planning (1) and operational transport planning (1), and dialogue processes (1). Researchers: 4 researchers (the authors and two additional Mistra SAMS researchers).	Research presentation on results from focus groups conducted in Riksten with inhabitants, focusing on conditions for sustainable mobility (based on Ihlström et al.; 2025).	What are your reflections on the results? How can these results inform planning practices in the municipality?
WS 4, October 2023. Results	Botkyrka municipality: 6	Presentation by SAMS researchers	What are your reflections on the

Table 1 (continued)

Workshop (WS) theme	Participants	Basis for discussion / key themes	Questions for discussion
from Living Lab Riksten – set up, usage and reflections regarding the potential of mobility- and accessibility services as a means to reduce everyday car use. Duration: 2.5 h	municipal officials with responsibility for strategic and operational transport planning (2), climate and environmental issues (2), and citizen dialogue (2). Researchers: 4 researchers (the authors and two additional Mistra SAMS researchers).	on Living Lab Riksten with a focus on Living Lab set up, service usage, and households' experiences of (not) reducing car use (see Henriksson et al., 2024 and Hesselgren and Ihlström, 2026).	results? If you were to set up a process for dialogue concerning the traffic situation in Riksten, what methods would you use? How could you use the result of the dialogue-exercises in planning? Idea generation exercise using input from LL households to discuss a hypothetical dialogue process concerning the traffic situation in Riksten.
WS 5, January 2024. Summing up the workshop-series – what can municipalities learn from experimentation? Duration: 1.5 h	Botkyrka municipality: 5 municipal officials with responsibility for strategic transport planning (1) and operational transport planning (3), and citizen dialogue (1). Researchers: 3 researchers (the authors, and one additional Mistra SAMS researcher).	Presentation by SAMS researchers on experimentations as a site for learning for municipalities – and the roles they can take in experiments.	What have you learned from the workshop-series and from Living Lab Riksten? What are your takeaways and advice to other municipalities that are interested in experimentation?

Methodologically, this article straddles both authors' roles in constructing and leading the workshop-series and our roles as researchers analysing the content of the workshops. Researchers working with experiments increasingly have roles that include facilitating and participating in learning processes connected to the experiment itself, while at the same time analysing these processes ([Wittmayer and Schäpke, 2014](#); [Scholl et al., 2018](#)). As a result, the research process is not linear, but rather emerging throughout, where the researcher(s) adapt to new circumstances. This has influenced how we have adjusted the ambitions of the workshop-series and our own expectations of the public actors engaged. We therefore include the ways we ourselves envisioned citizens roles in the workshop-series in the analysis, primarily in Section 4.1.

3. Analytical framework

To explore the different understandings of citizen roles that emerge in the LL workshop-series we draw on research on citizen participation from energy systems research and a framework consisting of six different narratives about how citizen roles are constructed by public actors ([Dunphy and Lennon, 2023](#); [Mullally et al., 2018](#)), see [Table 2](#). These narratives are not mutually exclusive and there is no watertight line separating them ([Mullally et al., 2018](#)). To develop the narratives, [Mullally et al. \(2018\)](#) draw on three questions posed by [Fung \(2006\)](#) in a

Table 2
Summary of narratives about citizen roles in transport planning, building on Mullally et al. (2018) and Dunphy and Lennon (2023).

	Narrative	Description/ key characteristics
Generally represent top-down approaches	Paternalist	Role of citizen in transport system determined by politico-technical elite (policy/business/science experts). Citizens framed as ill-informed. Persuasive techniques, i.e. education and information, encourages the “right” course of action and behaviour change.
	Majoritarian	Politico-technical elite represents the majority public opinion (e.g. measured via opinion polls) in decision-making. National level concerns overrule local concerns in the implementation of transport and infrastructure projects. Majority public option often framed in relation to a vocal minority.
	Consumerist	Citizens viewed primarily through their role as consumers and participate through consumer choice and exert influence through market mechanisms. While agenda-setting and policy processes for transport exist, the individual choice (s) of the citizen-consumer is highly influential on the outcome or realisation of public goals.
Generally appeal to a deliberative vision	Constitutionalist	Citizen role framed foremost through a right-based legalistic perspective. Citizens have legally mandated rights to be upheld in transport planning and infrastructure projects (e.g. through public consultation). Citizen involvement beyond legal channels is often absent. Citizen role is performed through re-active formal, legal, or consultative channels.
	Communitarian	Citizen role situated in relation to a community context where citizens may act both collectively and individually. Citizens and the communities they form have the right to participate in, and benefit from, transport and mobility projects.
Represent bottom-up ambitions	Deliberative	Citizens have a role in contributing to and shaping the transport and mobility system. Citizens are capable of and have the right to be involved in problem identification and problem solving. Citizens

Table 2 (continued)

Narrative	Description/ key characteristics
	are involved across all levels of governance and practice on decisions related to mobility and transport.

paper on institutional possibilities for public participation, namely: who participates, how and where do participants communicate and make decisions, as well as how discussions link to public policy and action. We have applied these questions in our analysis of the material, specifically in relation to links with public policy and action.

Our study focuses on the municipal level in connection to a specific area for urban development, Riksten in Botkyrka municipality. We understand the constitutionalist narrative primarily as the municipality’s legal obligation to carry out public consultation in line with Swedish legislation as part of spatial planning laws (Wänström., 2013). Additionally, we have interpreted the communitarian narrative in relation to the LL setting in Riksten, interpreting Riksten as a specific community context. We have also included ideas under the communitarian narrative which concern initiatives potentially initiated and implemented by citizens themselves (such as car-sharing between neighbours). We use this framework to answer our research questions regarding the narratives about citizen roles that emerge in the content of the workshop-series and as a base to reflect on how a workshop series contributes to transformation processes at the intersection between an experimental setting and ordinary planning processes.

4. Results and analysis

This section analyses the narratives about citizen roles that emerged in the workshop-series, based on how the workshop participants approached the topics discussed (see Table 1). In the workshops a range of different narratives about citizen roles came into play. To understand why different narratives became more central or peripheral, it is important to understand how we as workshop leaders and researchers approached citizen participation in the workshops, which we discuss in Section 4.1. We then focus on two overarching themes in relation to narratives about citizen roles: firstly, citizen roles and the complexities of ordinary planning for sustainable mobility in Section 4.2, and secondly narratives about citizen roles and experimentation as a site for learning and transformation in Section 4.3.

4.1. From initiating to mediating

The arc of the workshop series reflected a move from an initial effort by us as researchers to try to establish a deliberative process connected to Riksten in Botkyrka municipality, to us instead deciding that the role of the workshop-series would be to mediate knowledge created in the LL with key public actors from the municipality. This shift took place between workshop 1 and 2. Workshop 1 focused on existing examples of citizen participation, such as citizen panels and other participatory planning processes, as inspiration material for group discussion,⁴ to spark interest amongst the participants and explore the possibility of launching a deliberative participatory process (e.g. a citizen panel). Previous research has emphasised the importance of considering which actors lead or own the process in question (Wittmayer and Schöpke, 2014). Therefore, we viewed the municipality as the most relevant actor to lead a deliberative process with the capacity to take results further

⁴ Examples were taken from the chapter on citizen participation in a SAMS report from Witzell et al., 2022.

because of municipal responsibilities and legal mandate in relation to traffic planning and citizen engagement. However, reflecting on the possibility for the participants from the municipality to take on such a responsibility within the timeframe of LL Riksten, there seemed to be neither a mandate nor time to carry out such a task.

As the LL framing was finalised in 2022, we saw an opportunity to contribute to bridging the experiences and insights from the LL in the workshop-series. Therefore, we had to reconsider our initial ambition to establish a deliberative process, which framed citizen roles in line with the deliberative narrative where citizens are involved in problem identification. Research on LLs and urban experimentation has raised shortcomings regarding the connection to ordinary planning processes and the difficulties for municipalities and other public actors to learn and embed knowledge from experiments (Scholl et al., 2018). Based on our knowledge of this shortcoming, we decided to establish the workshop-series as a bridge between the LL and the broader municipal institutional setting. In workshop 2, we therefore presented the finalised plan for the LL and a suggestion that the workshop-series would be a forum for knowledge exchange during the programme. The workshop participants were able to give feedback on the services to be tested in the LL, as well as on a goal to reduce car use, but were ultimately not invited to influence the overall framing and content of the LL.

In summary, while workshop 1 introduced a strong deliberative narrative on citizen participation, from workshop 2 onwards the workshop-series worked as a forum for knowledge exchange between the LL and municipal planning processes, instead of as a forum to work with citizen participation methods in practice. By adjusting the aim and function of the workshop-series, the narratives around citizen roles adjusted to a more constitutionalist narrative as we connected to the municipality's legally mandated role and responsibilities regarding dialogue processes and other channels for input and consultation. The workshop-series created a channel of input for municipal decision-making where the citizen views and ideas on mobility in Riksten gathered from the LL were mediated and presented for municipal officials by SAMS researchers. Our framing of the workshop-series as a forum to bridge the LL and municipal planning processes included elements of a communitarian narrative, since the LL research activities framed the participating citizens as local experts with knowledge and experiences of living and travelling in and around Riksten. Through this framing, the LL acknowledged the importance of listening to and making room for citizen perspectives on their local environment but did not create a space for citizen involvement in decision-making within the SAMS programme. The initial deliberative ambition we explored in workshop 1 became more truncated as citizens were ultimately not involved in the research programme as decision-makers. However, throughout the workshops 2–5 we continuously posed questions regarding how the input from the LL could link to public policy and action, an approach which aligns with a combination of the communitarian and constitutionalist narratives.

Overall, this process highlights that the workshops were also a forum where researchers were negotiating their own role in knowledge transfer in connection to a LL. Furthermore, the process also highlights that in transformative settings, the research process is not linear, but rather emerging throughout, where the researcher(s) must adapt to new circumstances. Researchers need to be flexible with this changing context, seeing this as an inevitable part of the transformative research process (Wittmayer et al., 2024).

4.2. *The existing complexities of ordinary planning*

Overall, the discussions in the workshop-series highlighted the extensive ways in which the municipality works with different forms of participation in relation to traffic planning and planning in general. One municipal official mentioned that inhabitants have the possibility to express their opinions “twenty-four seven” (Workshop 4). Officials from the municipality also shared examples of dialogue meetings for citizens

from different age groups, such as senior-citizens and successful methods such as “traffic walkalongs”, where citizens could share their experiences directly with officials during a group walk (Workshop 4).

Some of the local officials expressed a frustration concerning car dependency in Riksten, and specifically feedback they have received from citizens in the past about the lack of parking spaces, since this input does not align with municipal goals for reduced car use. One neighbourhood strategist described it as a “tricky challenge to listen in and have participatory processes and at the same time fulfil municipal goals” (Workshop 1), when the citizens express a desire for more parking spaces. Discussions of citizens behaving “incorrectly”, and that participation can lead to conflicts regarding the “best” way to steer towards sustainable mobility can be described as illustrations of a paternalistic narrative on citizen roles, within which experts are seen as the best suited to govern the mobility system.

Discussions in the workshop-series also highlighted that municipal officials understood the challenges of living without a car in Riksten in practice, which can also be interpreted as an acknowledgment that it is the built environment that does not support sustainable mobility, rather than citizens behaving incorrectly. While the discussions had some elements of a paternalist narrative, officials from the municipality acknowledged the tension between their ongoing responsibility for planning the built environment and infrastructure and how this influences the capacity of citizens to react in line with public goals. For example, one municipal traffic planner reasoned that, if Riksten had been planned as a “whole community” (Workshop 4), meaning a full-scale neighbourhood with shops and workplaces in the vicinity, people would travel more sustainably. The mismatch between what inhabitants do, and the goals the municipality is working towards, can also be understood as a frustration for municipal planners regarding the difficulties of planning in line with goals, while simultaneously lacking the tools and political backing to make actual change.

In workshop 1 and 2, local officials also brought up that while some citizens make suggestions based on their present needs of parking, in their experience many citizens also wish for improved walking and cycling infrastructures and more accessible public transport. Some workshop participants tapped into a paternalistic narrative when they framed the suggestions from citizens as unrealistic. Others argued, in line with the deliberate narrative, that citizens have important input and that their wishes correspond to their actual needs, and willingness to contribute to sustainability transformations. At the same time, a general opinion amongst the participants from the municipality was that investments in sustainable mobility are not always feasible due to budget restrictions. For instance, in workshop 4 a transport planner said that even though citizens contact the municipality with good ideas, and that their suggestions are very welcome, the limited municipal budget does not always allow for new measures. Workshop participants also reflected on existing dialogue methods used by the municipality which cover transport, along with other themes. One workshop participant, a climate strategist, reflected on the continued willingness to give feedback amongst citizens: “The thing is that we've kind of abused dialogue processes so much, so I'm fascinated that people answer at all anymore” (Workshop 1).

In Sweden, local, regional, and national actors have different mandates and responsibility for transport issues. This multi-layered governance structure is therefore another issue that complicates the municipality's opportunities to respond to and implement citizen ideas and feedback regarding prerequisites for sustainable mobility. While the municipality has the overall responsibility for walking and biking infrastructure, and land usage (including parking), the regional level plans and provides public transport services. One transport planner said that the municipality knows that improved public transport is a request from many of Riksten's inhabitants, but the municipality has little control over the public transport network (Workshop 5). Along similar lines, another recurring topic in the workshop-series concerned the difficulties local residents have understanding which level of governance is

responsible for different transport issues. During some discussions the long timespans of infrastructural planning and investment processes were described as hard for residents to grasp. In workshop 1, an official from the national traffic administration explained that since the time horizon they work with is sometimes “40, 60 or even 100 years from now”, it is difficult to connect infrastructural planning to the everyday lives of citizens. “A person might have wished for this, and it might be his grandchild that will live to see the change”, she added. The belief that it is difficult for citizens to grasp the complexities concerning traffic investments bears traces of a paternalistic narrative where experts have the overarching grasp on planning timelines. However, elements of the discussion concerning the long-time frames of infrastructure planning and challenges regarding governance complexities also contain aspects of deliberative and constitutionalist narratives, where citizens are involved in giving input on future investments and are knowledgeable about the needs of the local context.

To summarise, reflections from workshop participants stemming from their experiences of ordinary planning processes highlight how narratives about citizen roles are interdependent with the specific character of different mobility and transport issues. On the one hand these are closely related to the everyday life of citizens, and on the other hand they are characterized by complex institutional and organisational issues where governance structures and budget limitations make it difficult to meet the needs and desires of citizens. These complexities are sometimes used as arguments against inviting citizens to partake in decision-making. At the same time, municipal officials described how there are many channels for citizen feedback. This can be interpreted as a constitutionalist approach, where it is a requirement to invite citizen input, but discussions in the workshops highlight that there are challenges translating citizen input into practice.

4.3. Experimentation as a site for learning and transformation

Throughout the workshop-series we discussed different methods for citizen participation in experimental processes, and these in turn connected to different narratives about citizen roles. In workshop 1, the participants from national, regional and local organisations responsible for transport planning were divided into groups and tasked with formulating an idea for citizen participation in Riksten. Inspired by the concepts presented by researchers at the workshop (see [Witzell et al., 2022](#)), one group suggested trying out a citizen panel. In line with a deliberative-communitarian narrative this method involves citizens being invited to formulate ideas about how to steer future transport. The same group also suggested a mobility hub where citizens would be motivated to change travel behaviour by trying new mobility services. The mobility hub idea taps into framings of experiments as sites of knowledge production and learning, but lacks elements of a deliberative narrative, where listening to citizens and involving them in decision-making is key.

Workshop participants made distinctions between what can come out of different forms for (existing) participation that the municipality works with compared to experiments. One official from the municipality reasoned that experimental approaches provide an opportunity to do something visually noticeable for those living in a particular neighbourhood, “in real life” (Workshop 1). Another illustrative example was given by a traffic planner reasoning about the value of testing a mobility hub concept, where mobility services are offered via a digital platform, through which the municipality can “find out how citizens move and cycle”, instead of having “citizens who come into the office and shake their fists” (Workshop 2). Here a comparison is being made between how different kinds of information is collected, either through data from a digital application or through citizens themselves coming to make complaints in person. While data about how people travel can be a new resource in traffic planning, thinking about data as an information source for experts to use can be seen as part of a paternalistic narrative about citizen roles. Within this narrative, citizens are limited to the role

of consumers of mobility and producing data that is interpreted by experts. A similar way of reasoning about citizen roles was made by an official from the regional administration for public transport when describing how to work with citizens, where she sees their role as “real people” to test concepts and solutions developed by experts (Workshop 1). We can also add that the overall framing of citizen roles presented in the workshop-series about the LL was also expert driven, with researchers being responsible for presenting results and no citizens involved in the workshop series itself.

Through these examples, it is clear that workshop participants viewed citizens as having an important role to play in experimental settings. This role is framed primarily in connection to testing solutions in line with a paternalist-consumerist narrative. Another way to describe citizens roles in line with a paternalist-consumerist narrative is to describe citizens as in need of incentives, rewards, and persuasion to change travel behaviour in a desirable direction. Elements of such a narrative were expressed by participants during the workshop-series. For example, one traffic planner emphasised the need for incentives in experiments saying, “it is not enough to just request that citizens participate, to make suggestions, you also have to reward them” (Workshop 2).

Other suggestions for methods to work with as part of an experiment in Riksten moved beyond a paternalistic-consumerist narrative. One example came from a neighbourhood strategist who proposed a platform for co-ordinating children's bicycle trips to school, where parents can take turns to be the “bus driver” (Workshop 1). She explained that since there are concerns about traffic safety issues in Riksten, parents tend not to let their children go to school or after school activities by themselves. This suggestion can be understood as part of a communitarian narrative about citizen roles since it is based on the present needs and concerns of Riksten's inhabitants, and intends to involve them, not just as consumers of a service provided by a public or commercial actor, but through a self-organised initiative within the community.

In the workshop-series, we also shared results from the LL, with a focus on how LL-participants reasoned about everyday travelling but also about transport policy and initiatives that could support sustainable mobility (Workshops 3–4). In general, the workshop participants reacted positively towards these findings. They reflected upon how planning practices contribute to both changing and reinforcing travel behaviour, and upon how they could use the insights generated in the LL as input in planning. One take-away from the workshop-series was that the insights from the LL confirmed what municipal officials already knew about how citizens travelled, based on e.g. travel surveys and existing contact or complaints from Riksten's inhabitants. The workshop participants from the municipality expressed that it was valuable to have their existing knowledge confirmed by research. For example, one participant thought that results presented in workshop 4, namely that mobility and accessibility services tested in Riksten were ultimately used to a limited extent by the LL-participants, was an indication of the need for both policy tools to encourage the use of sustainable modes of travelling and restrictions regarding car use (or “sticks” and “carrots” as she phrased it), adding that this was however difficult on a political level. Therefore, as mentioned in section 4.1, the aim of the workshop-series to communicate results from the LL to planning and policy actors at the municipal level aligned with constitutional narrative of citizen roles and provided insights from the LL methods based primarily on this framing of citizen roles.

Overall, the workshop participants, researchers, and we as workshop organisers, deemed experimentation as an important method to collect insights, experiences, and feedback from residents. This can be interpreted as part of a communitarian narrative on citizen roles, since this framing shed light on LL-participant perspectives on how to develop their local environment and community. However, since these discussions rarely included ideas on how to involve citizens in decision-making processes based on their local knowledge, the narratives represent a predominantly top-down approach, with narratives on citizen roles that

align with the paternalistic and consumerist narratives as described in the analytical framework.

5. Summarising discussion and conclusions

The first research question this paper aimed to explore concerned the narratives which emerged about citizen roles in a research-led workshop-series primarily focused on municipal level public actors connected to a research-led LL. The results suggest that there is not one dominant narrative, but a spectrum of narratives on citizen roles exists in tandem. Our findings mainly cluster around the paternalist and consumerist narratives, as well as the constitutionalist narrative which we find often intersected with degrees of both communitarian and deliberative ideas about citizen roles in the transport system. The decision to frame the workshop-series at the intersection of public actor responsibilities for citizen constituents aligned our roles as researchers and insights from the LL in relation to a constitutionalist narrative. The deliberative narrative is the only narrative in the analytical framework used which emphasises citizen participation in final decision-making processes. We find that this aspect of the deliberative narrative is largely absent from the material analysed in this case. Ideas presented by researchers in workshop 1 touched upon potential processes for joint decision-making through discussions of citizen panel methods. However, the mandates and time constraints for the actors involved made it hard to realise these ideas within the timeframe of the Mistra SAMS programme. This finding reflects the challenges of the normative orientation transformative research has (Wittmayer et al., 2024), where researchers start from a normative position (e.g. “how can we develop citizen participation as part of transformation processes”) and must challenge and rephrase this position as part of engaging with research participants and their reality, for example institutional spaces.

Our findings regarding narratives on citizen roles also connect to broader critiques on how citizen involvement in decision-making processes is not an aim and solution in itself. Fung (2006, p. 68) describes an idealised image of citizens engaging “with one another directly as equals to reason together about public problems”, as the ‘deliberative ideal’, noting that this is not the way in the vast majority of public institutional decision-making occurs. Fung (2006) raises whether it is mainly through complaints from citizens that public actors and policy actors are made aware of the issues that citizens are most concerned about. Aspects of our results reflect this tension, with complaints being discussed in the workshop-series as a recurring channel of input from citizens to municipal actors. This element of citizen roles is not clearly represented in the narrative framework used, but links to the municipality’s legal responsibilities towards citizens on a local level. It also highlights how the workshop-series was a window for researchers into the existing processes through which the municipality gathers and receives input from citizens. Looking at existing input municipalities and other actors receive through complaints could therefore offer a future avenue of research.

The second research question aimed to provide insights into the ways in which a workshop series contributes to transformation processes at the intersection between an experimental setting (such as a LL) and ordinary planning processes. Building on previous literature regarding the role of researchers using workshop processes at the intersection of academic, planning, and societal impact (Hinrichs-Krapels et al., 2020); our intention was to inspire and push public actors to test methods for citizen participation. The shift in our ambition from initiating to mediating citizen participation methods was made because we became aware of the challenges of researchers pushing certain approaches, without adopting to institutional settings. As a result of the research process, we came to situate the workshop-series as an ‘inter-boundary space’ (von Wirth et al., 2020) for investigating the merits and limits of key themes related to LL research, in this case citizen participation. It can, as in our example, also build an important bridge between an LL and ordinary planning processes.

Overall, the study emphasises how LLs exist in a broader landscape of participatory processes. We argue that the role and contribution of LLs in transformation processes should be approached as such. The study emphasises that researchers and public actors draw on various narratives about citizen roles, which influence how citizens are framed in both experimental settings and existing planning processes, and that we can be mindful of this when approaching processes of citizen participation. Finally, our study demonstrates how LL methods can be extended in practice to actively engage public actors of relevance for the aims and ambitions of the LL in question, thus expanding the methodological toolbox for LL methods and contributing to the scientific discussion how LLs can function as arenas for transformation.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Kelsey Oldbury: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Malin Henriksson:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

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Data availability

The authors do not have permission to share data.

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