

“Implementing public value management in municipal disability services through universal design: Evidence from Vilnius”

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IMPLEMENTING PUBLIC VALUE MANAGEMENT IN MUNICIPAL DISABILITY SERVICES THROUGH UNIVERSAL DESIGN: EVIDENCE FROM VILNIUS

Abstract

Shifting municipal disability services from new public management efficiency frameworks to public value management collaborative networks is essential to align local governance with human rights standards. This study aims to examine how formal rules, administrative routines, and stakeholder participation arrangements associated with Universal Design and Public Value Management evolved in local governance. Examining the Vilnius City Municipality (1999–2025) through a longitudinal single-case design, this study adapts the sector awareness framework to analyze a multi-source qualitative corpus of 122 administrative documents and participant observations from 52 working group sessions. The empirical analysis maps a non-linear institutional transition across five distinct phases, revealing a structural shift from terminology-level denial (the official use of “invalid” until 2017) to public value management-oriented integration in non-physical domains (cultural funding criteria requiring easy language in 2024). The findings demonstrate that while universal design functions as a practical mechanism to operationalize public value management, its implementation remains fragmented and constrained by a rigid “tick-box” compliance culture that privileges physical infrastructure over informational and cognitive accessibility. Furthermore, co-creation is obstructed by deeply rooted power asymmetries that position non-governmental organizations as passive funding seekers rather than equal strategic partners with binding decision-making authority. Ultimately, the study shows that sustainable public value management implementation depends on relationship-oriented metrics, formalized power-sharing safeguards, and the institutionalization of permanent, cross-sectoral participatory channels.

Keywords

public value management, universal design, municipal governance, disability services, co-creation, institutionalization, longitudinal case study

JEL Classification

H83, I38, O35

INTRODUCTION

Traditional new public management (NPM) models prioritize cost-efficiency, technical compliance, and standardized performance metrics, yet they often fail to address the complex, lived experiences of disability service users, leading to functional inaccessibility and social exclusion (Cluley et al., 2020; Dollery & Drew, 2023). Moving toward public value management (PVM), a collaborative, networked governance paradigm centered on collective preference formation, trust, and democratic legitimacy (Alford & O’Flynn, 2011; Sedlačko, 2020), is particularly critical in municipal disability services where needs are inherently cross-sectoral. In transition economies like Lithuania, this shift is severely constrained by fragmented service ecosystems and a persistent deficit of authentic stakeholder engagement in local decision-making (Bučaitė-Vilkė, 2019). Public administrators frequently operate within a rigid “tick-box” compliance culture, reducing acces-



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sibility to narrow, physical infrastructure checklists while neglecting the sensory, informational, and cognitive dimensions necessary for genuine inclusion (Nielsen & Landa-Mata, 2025; Østerud, 2020; Papanicolaou et al., 2025).

To address these limitations, universal design (UD) emerges as a proactive, system-level strategy that aims to make environments and services usable by all people from the outset, systematically removing upstream structural barriers and reducing reliance on reactive individual accommodations (Bang et al., 2024; Gupta et al., 2025). Consequently, UD functions as an operational governance mechanism to realize PVM objectives in alignment with the United Nations (2006) Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. To investigate these dynamics, this study examines how formal rules, administrative routines, and stakeholder participation arrangements associated with UD and PVM evolved in Vilnius municipal disability services (1999–2025) and identifies the factors that enabled or constrained their partial institutional embedding. Vilnius represents an exemplar case in a post-socialist context, being the only Lithuanian municipality implementing a dedicated UD strategy (“City for All”) (Staševičienė & Raišienė, 2025).

To analyze this non-linear transition, the study adopts the sector awareness framework developed by Edwards et al. (2016). This framework fits better than linear models like Lewin’s (1947), whose stages are too simplified for recursive institutional evolution, or Kotter’s (1995), which remains overly leadership-centric and underplays cross-sector power asymmetries (Burnes et al., 2016; Hughes, 2015). It is also preferred over Langley et al.’s (2013) because its pre-defined phased structure is essential for coding a large historical document corpus.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

To provide a theoretical foundation for the collaborative transformation of local governance, this literature review systematically synthesizes the shift from new public management (NPM) to public value management (PVM) paradigms and the proactive integration of universal design (UD), while revealing how institutionalization indicators, co-creation processes, and power asymmetries shape the contemporary management ecosystem of disability services. This paradigmatic change represents a fundamental reorientation in how public service delivery is conceived and executed, moving far beyond incremental technical adjustments, as argued by several prominent scholars (O’Flynn, 2007; Sedlačko, 2020; Stoker, 2006) who advocate for holistic administrative shifts. While NPM organized public administration around market mechanisms, competition, disaggregation, and strict performance targets (Kimmitt & Muñoz, 2024; Stroińska, 2020), PVM reorients the system toward collective outcomes, democratic values, and social impact, which forms the normative core of modern governance (Jensen et al., 2023). Under PVM, the primary goal of public service delivery shifts from producing outputs efficiently to creat-

ing public value, which encompasses substantive outcomes and processes that society collectively judges as valuable, such as trust, legitimacy, equity, and deliberative quality, as documented by Bojang (2021) and Virtanen and Jalonen (2023) across diverse administrative settings. Consequently, public managers move from being mere contract monitors and performance-target delivery overseers to value creators and stewards of democratic legitimacy who actively steer cross-sector networks, rather than managing organizations in isolation, as Stoker (2006) and Thabit et al. (2024) describe in their analyses of collaborative networks.

However, empirical studies demonstrate that this paradigmatic transition is rarely clean or complete, resulting in a hybrid administrative reality. Collaborative PVM ambitions advance within institutions still heavily structured by inherited NPM measurement routines, performance metrics, and conflicting institutional logics, a phenomenon several researchers (Brown, 2021; Kimmitt & Muñoz, 2024; Van Gestel et al., 2023) have observed across multiple public service sectors. Street-level evidence suggests that service-logic ideals and co-production remain hard to realize where performance measurement and

managerial control still dominate everyday work, a tension Eriksson and Andersson (2023) clearly document at the street-level interface. To navigate these horizontal and vertical value tensions, particularly in complex domains like municipal disability services, the institutionalization of PVM must be conceptualized as a non-linear, gradual process of embedding collaborative capacity and shared knowledge into routine municipal practices rather than a single, discrete reform event. This developmental path was highly emphasized by Alsheimer et al. (2025) and Edwards et al. (2016). Drawing on recent public management research, this institutional maturation cannot be evaluated through short-term program outputs; instead, it must be systematically measured through the formal embedding of collaboration into routine structures, budgets, and participation channels, which reflect durable structural shifts (Alsheimer et al., 2025; Islam, 2025) within the local authority.

To systematically assess this maturation process, contemporary literature highlights five explicit, observable structural indicators of PVM institutionalization. First, the establishment of permanent participatory channels ensures that stakeholder engagement is embedded in routine governance rather than occurring through ad hoc consultation, as Islam (2025) demonstrates. Second, cross-sector coordination mechanisms provide stable inter-organizational support and coordinating roles to reduce bureaucratic siloization, which Eriksson et al. (2019) identify as a major collaborative barrier. Third, dedicated budgets or funding shifts ensure that public value goals are backed by actual, unfragmented administrative resources (Alsheimer et al., 2025; Islam, 2025). Fourth, inclusive legal or policy embedding formalizes collaborative norms across electoral and political cycles, thereby securing long-term sustainability, an integration that Alsheimer et al. (2025) and Islam (2025) argue is essential for maintaining policy continuity. Fifth, administrative tracking systems enable municipalities to monitor continuity and substantive outcomes over time, as Islam (2025) describes in studies of local governance. Implementing and tracking these durable structural changes provides a more reliable signal of genuine institutionalization than short-term program outputs alone, as both Alsheimer et al. (2025) and Islam (2025) conclude in their evaluations.

Furthermore, authentic co-creation in public service delivery requires that citizens and civil society actors actively help define societal problems and shape their implementation, rather than merely appearing in tokenistic consultative forums (Baretta et al., 2024; Thabit et al., 2024). Despite inclusive municipal rhetoric, citizen participation often remains symbolic unless it is explicitly connected to actual decision-making authority, formal policy-making, and enforceable power-sharing arrangements, which Kiss et al. (2022) and Schiller (2023) identify as a critical threshold. Across participatory settings, power delegation is the most consistent design feature associated with stronger governance outputs, which Newig et al. (2023) empirically validate in their extensive meta-analysis. In many collaborative arrangements, marginalized groups and non-governmental organizations are frequently sidelined by stronger actors who manipulate agendas, restrict discussions, construct non-decisions, and exploit historical structural inequalities across administrative levels, as documented by Aleu et al. (2022) and Schiller (2023) in various governance contexts. Trust-building is crucial but remains insufficient to overcome these imbalances, as Ran and Qi (2018) emphasize, unless powerholders actively concede authority and resources. To mitigate these asymmetries, municipalities must integrate robust structural safeguards within their collaborative designs, such as protected spaces for engagement, anti-discrimination protections, and technical capacity-building to support effective stakeholder deliberation (De Souza, 2025; Schiller, 2023).

This requirement for shared authority and power delegation is further reinforced by international human rights mandates. The integration of accessibility and stakeholder participation in municipal governance is fundamentally rooted in the paradigm shift from a medical model of disability to a social and human rights-based model, a transition thoroughly explored by Lawson and Beckett (2020) and Mitra and Gao (2023) in contemporary social policy. This perspective, enshrined in the United Nations (2006) Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), recasts persons with disabilities from passive objects of charity, treatment, or welfare into active rights holders, as Degener (2016) and Liu and Coveney (2025) argue. Under this rights-based framework, disabil-

ity is understood not as an individual impairment, but rather as the interaction between impairment and the systemic environmental or attitudinal barriers that block equal societal participation, a core tenet of the social model of disability (Degener, 2016; Grue, 2023) that redefines public obligations. Consequently, local governments are legally and democratically obligated to act as territorial guarantors of equal rights, embedding accessibility and active consultation with representative organizations of persons with disabilities directly into ordinary local planning, budgeting, and decision-making structures, as highlighted by Houtzager and De Vos (2025) and Sapkota (2024) in local implementation contexts.

To operationalize public value in daily practice, contemporary literature distinguishes proactive, system-level design strategies from reactive individual adjustments. UD represents a proactive paradigm aimed at designing environments, products, and services to be usable by all people from the outset, thereby systematically removing structural barriers upstream and reducing the reliance on repetitive, stigmatizing accommodation systems, a benefit highlighted by Bang et al. (2024), Daly and Whelan (2021), and Gupta et al. (2025) across diverse fields of design. This approach fundamentally differs from standard accessibility compliance, which often focuses strictly on meeting minimum legal or technical checklists, as Gedminaitė-Raudonė and Belhaj (2025) point out. Furthermore, UD differs from the concept of reasonable accommodation, which merely provides individualized, retrospective adjustments after a specific barrier has been encountered, leaving the exclusionary system intact, as Jain and Scott (2023) critically analyze. Despite these systemic goals, municipal implementation of UD frequently suffers from a reductionist approach that narrows inclusion to technical and physical fixes, as Nielsen and Landa-Mata (2025) observe. When municipalities reduce accessibility to physical infrastructure such as ramps and construction codes, they fail to address the cognitive, sensory, and informational dimensions of inclusion, as Papanicolaou et al. (2025) conclude. Phenomenological research emphasizes that accessibility must be evaluated through embodied, lived use rather than abstract expert rules, as legally compliant spaces can still functionally un-

dermine user autonomy and dignity, a critical gap explored by Clifton et al. (2025) and Ferri (2024) in lived-experience research. Recognizing individuals with disabilities not as passive service users but as essential experts in the redesign process is therefore the only way to ensure that public infrastructure is genuinely accessible rather than merely compliant on paper, as Clifton et al. (2025).

To systematically analyze this complex, multi-level shift within municipal structures over time, this study adopts the sector awareness framework developed by Edwards et al. (2016), which offers a strong fit-for-purpose lens to trace public-sector transformation. While numerous change theories exist, traditional staged models like Lewin's (1947) are overly linear, assuming a rigid transition despite evolving, interacting barriers, which makes them poorly matched to long, recursive institutional change (Cinar et al., 2019; Singler & Guenduez, 2024). Similarly, prescriptive frameworks such as Kotter's (1995) remain overly leadership-centric and focused on internal organizational change, providing limited utility for field-level power asymmetries and cross-sector ecosystems co-shaped by municipalities, NGOs, and citizens, as scholarship on public entrepreneurship (Vivona et al., 2024) and organization. Furthermore, although urban transition governance frameworks capture co-creation and adaptation dynamics in cities, they lack the pre-defined phased structure necessary for systematically coding a large historical document corpus (Dóci et al., 2025). In contrast, the sector awareness framework, which tracks progress across phases of non-awareness, preliminary, growing, productive, embedded, and creative awareness, effectively monitors the shifting consciousness, capacity, and action of municipalities, non-governmental organizations, and citizens across sectors and time, a key strength noted by Ba et al. (2024) and Butkus et al. (2024) in transition governance. It offers a robust, non-linear analytical tool to assess the depth of collaborative transformation in public governance, building on Edwards et al.'s (2016) original application of the framework in the context of disability sector reform.

Bridging the gap between declarative inclusion policies and actual public value creation requires a critical examination of the mechanisms that em-

bed UD and authentic co-creation into local governance. Therefore, this study examines how formal rules, administrative routines, and stakeholder participation arrangements associated with UD and PVM evolved in Vilnius municipal disability services and identifies the factors that enabled or constrained their partial institutional embedding. To achieve this aim, the study establishes three core research objectives.

First, it maps the evolutionary stages of the institutional transition from NPM to PVM in the Vilnius City Municipality. Second, it identifies and evaluates the administrative enablers and barriers to co-creation and power-sharing in local governance. Third, it examines how UD functions as an operational mechanism for achieving PVM goals under fragmented implementation. By fulfilling these tasks, the paper provides a focused, empirically grounded evaluation of the municipal transition process.

2. METHODS

This study employs a qualitative, longitudinal single-case study design, selecting the Vilnius City Municipality as the primary unit of analysis to chart its institutional evolution from 1999 to 2025. To ensure thematic saturation, data collection involved three interconnected qualitative streams. First, a comprehensive analysis was performed on 122 administrative documents spanning the period from 1999 to 2025, retrieved from the Vilnius Municipality Legal Acts Portal. The search strategy employed targeted keyword combinations, including “universal design,” “accessibility,” “disability services,” and the historical term “invalid.” Documents were selected based on their direct relevance to municipal policy-making, resource al-

location, and organizational routines in disability services, excluding redundant technical annexes and simple procedural duplicates. Table 1 outlines the structural composition and analytical relevance of this corpus.

Second, systematic participant observation was conducted during 52 sessions of the Universal Design (UD) Working Group between September 2021 and January 2023. Each session lasted approximately 1.5 to 2 hours, generating diverse qualitative data types, including official meeting minutes and the principal researcher’s extensive field notes. While all 52 sessions were documented through detailed field notes and official meeting minutes, only 10 strategic sessions were audio-recorded and fully transcribed for verbatim discourse analysis. The specific selection criteria for recording and transcribing these 10 sessions required that the meetings focus on strategic decision-making rather than routine administrative updates, featured active debate on UD implementation, and included robust cross-sectoral participation (attendance across these transcribed sessions ranged from 14 to 19 participants per meeting). During the discourse analysis, we actively searched for negative or contradictory cases (such as instances where municipal officials strongly defended existing bureaucratic routines against NGO proposals) to ensure a balanced representation of the institutional struggle. For the remaining 42 non-recorded and non-transcribed sessions, detailed field notes and official minutes were integrated into the analysis through systematic qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2014). The codes derived from these notes were continuously triangulated against the transcribed sessions to ensure interpretive consistency. Table 2 provides a concise chronological inventory of these sessions.

Table 1. Structured overview of the empirical documentary corpus (1999–2025)

Document category	Time period	Primary analytical function and relevance to research	Exact count (N = 122)
Commission Protocols	2019–2023	Document the shifting administrative discourse, the integration of PVM values, and the formal inclusion of NGOs in municipal consultative arenas.	33 (21 Disability Commission; 12 Human Rights Commission)
Municipal Council Decisions	1999–2025	Establish broad strategic directions, approve municipal programs (such as the “City for All” strategy), and formalize transport and infrastructure regulations.	50
Orders of the Director of Administration	2005–2025	Mandate the establishment of specialized working groups, define operational budgets for housing adaptation, and adjust target accessibility criteria.	39

Table 2. Chronological inventory of the 52 Universal Design Working-Group Sessions (2021–2023)

Analytical block and period	Number of sessions	Core agenda items and shifting themes	Average attendance and composition	Recording and documentation status	Role in the qualitative coding framework
Block 1: Initial Alignment (Sept 2021 – Dec 2021)	18	Establishing working group protocols, defining baseline terminologies, and mapping physical accessibility gaps.	~16 participants (11 Municipal; 5 NGO representatives; drawn from the 22-member roster)	18 field notes; 3 sessions fully transcribed.	Open coding for structural barriers, terminology lag, and historical compliance routines.
Block 2: Strategy Drafting (Jan 2022 – Dec 2022)	28	Developing non-physical accessibility criteria (informational and cognitive UD), debating NGO power delegation.	~15 participants (10 Municipal; 5 NGO representatives; drawn from the 22-member roster)	28 field notes; 6 sessions fully transcribed.	Axial coding for systemic tensions, power asymmetries, and “tick-box” compliance behavior.
Block 3: Finalization (Jan 2023)	6	Final strategy coordination, resolving voting deadlocks on NGO authority, and strategic program approval.	~18 participants (12 Municipal; 6 NGO representatives; drawn from the 22-member roster).	6 field notes; 1 session fully transcribed.	Selective coding, validating thematic categories, and analyzing recursive feedback loops.

The collected data were subjected to a framework-guided abductive analysis combined with a temporal bracketing strategy to systematically trace the institutional transition. Instead of a purely inductive approach, initial empirical codes were generated from the raw data capturing specific administrative routines, funding allocations, and shifting terminologies. Next, they were subsequently mapped against the sector awareness framework developed by Edwards et al. (2016). The phase names used in this study were explicitly adapted from Edwards et al.’s (2016) original six-phase schema and refined abductively to accurately reflect the specific empirical realities of the Vilnius case. To demarcate the boundaries of each phase within the temporal bracketing process, the analysis identified distinct “breakthrough events,” defined as significant strategic shifts or legal acts that permanently altered the municipal operating logic. To ensure internal validity, the confirmation of any specific phase required triangulation across at least three independent sources; documentary evidence was systematically compared against observational discourse to ensure the traceability and robustness of the findings. Furthermore, to strengthen the qualitative credibility and interpretive trustworthiness of the analysis, the initial coding framework derived empirical codes, and thematic classifications underwent a rigorous peer review and systematic audit by the academic supervisor, resolving any interpretive discrepancies through iterative consensus-building. Additionally, the analysis actively sought contradictory or regressive evidence, such as policy setbacks, funding deficits, or instances of mere for-

mal compliance, to capture the inherently non-linear and contested nature of the institutional transition.

The study was conducted in strict accordance with national and international research ethics guidelines and the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). Under national regulations and institutional guidelines, formal ethical board approval was not required for this study, as it involved the observation of municipal working group sessions where participants acted exclusively in their official professional or advocacy capacities, and no sensitive personal or medical data were collected. Prior to data collection, verbal informed consent was obtained from all working group participants. This consent explicitly covered the audio recording of sessions, the use of anonymized direct quotes in academic publications, and the restricted processing of their data by the principal investigators; however, it did not grant permission for the use of their data in open-source AI training models or public raw data repositories. The author’s dual role as both an academic investigator and strategy facilitator was managed through strict reflexivity, ensuring that observational data were used exclusively for analyzing institutional transition phases rather than evaluating individual performances. This robust ethical framework guarantees that the privacy and dignity of all participants are fully protected throughout the research process.

To ensure full academic transparency and adhere to publication ethics, it is necessary to delineate the boundaries of the empirical data used in this

study. The historical context and the pre-strategy baseline for universal design in Lithuania were informed by an analysis of healthcare accessibility derived from 2019 focus groups (Staševičienė & Fatkulina, 2021). Furthermore, Staševičienė (2023a) examined UD's fragmented legal status from a juridical perspective, and Staševičienė (2023b) and Staševičienė and Raišienė (2025) shared preliminary observations on the strategy's development in conference proceedings.

Crucially, the present article does not reuse the empirical data (i.e., the 2019 focus groups) from these prior works. Instead, the novelty and core empirical contribution of this manuscript are strictly based on a new, distinct dataset: the longitudinal analysis of 122 municipal administrative documents and the systematic observation of 52 municipal working group sessions conducted between 2021 and 2023. The prior publications serve solely as the contextual baseline against which the administrative transition from NPM to PVM in Vilnius City Municipality is evaluated.

The raw qualitative dataset supporting the conclusions of this study (including verbatim meeting transcripts, observational field notes, and inter-

nal municipal administrative files) is not publicly available due to strict ethical constraints, participant confidentiality agreements, and compliance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). Because the analysis was conducted within a small, highly specialized working group of 22 participants, the publication of raw qualitative materials poses a significant risk of indirect participant re-identification. To protect the anonymity of both municipal officials and non-governmental organization representatives, all empirical evidence has been aggregated, and personal identifiers have been completely removed. Access to a minimized, fully pseudonymized summary of the analytical coding framework and the structured document index may be made available by the corresponding author upon reasonable academic request, subject to institutional data-sharing agreements.

3. RESULTS

The longitudinal evolution of disability services in Vilnius City Municipality demonstrates a highly non-linear institutional shift toward public value management (PVM) principles. To ensure empiri-

Table 3. Phase-evidence and breakthrough events matrix for Vilnius Municipality (1999–2025)

Phase and period	Dominant paradigm	Principal breakthrough event	Empirical indicators and shifting administrative routines	Triangulated qualitative sources for phase verification
PH 1: Misunderstanding (1999–2005)	Traditional / Early PVM	Municipal Council Decision No. 432 (1999) on public transport regulations.	Medical model dominance; continued official use of paternalistic “invalid” terminology; NGO participation is purely symbolic or absent.	Council Decision No. 432 + Early transport registries + Baseline historical context.
PH 2: Initial Understanding (2005–2010)	NPM Transition	City Council Resolution No. 1-981 (2005) on school network reorganization.	Transition toward community social integration; focus on baseline physical accessibility; NGOs treated as passive “funding seekers”.	Council Resolution No. 1-981 + Annual social integration plans + Early budget execution reports.
PH 3: Productive Consciousness (2010–2019)	NPM / Early PVM	Director of Administration Order No. 30-864 (2014) on mandatory NGO housing commission representation.	Institutionalization of physical accessibility (housing adaptation); systematic deinstitutionalization goals.	Social Services Plan (2010) + Commission meeting minutes (Nos. 1–3) + 2019 baseline report.
PH 4: Consciousness Integration (2020–2022)	PVM Transition	Mayoral Decree No. R-229 (2021) establishing the Universal Design Working Group.	Systemic priority claims; reactive implementation; active rejection of NGO strategic proposals; civil safety shelter accessibility gaps.	Working Group Session No. 24 (2022) + Municipal funding guidelines + Field observation notes.
PH 5: Creative Consciousness (2023–2025)	Strategic PVM	Council Decision No. 1-1743 (2023) adopting the “City for All” Strategy, and Order No. 30-2441/25 (2025).	Proactive, non-physical accessibility norms; drafting of the Human Rights Support Program; easy-language requirements in culture.	Cultural Funding Regulations (Annex 3, 2025) + Working Group Sessions (Nos. 48–51 transcripts) + Human Rights Commission protocols.

cal rigor and prevent the artificial imposition of theoretical stages, each phase boundary is defined by a documented “breakthrough event” – a permanent shift in strategic logic or formal administrative rules – and verified through multi-source qualitative triangulation. Table 3 synthesizes this phase-evidence and breakthrough event matrix, mapping the gradual and uneven embedding of universal design (UD) and PVM practices.

3.1. Phases of sector awareness in Vilnius City Municipality

To provide a granular, temporal account of this municipal transformation, the abductive analysis traces the governance transition across five distinct stages of sector awareness. These phases delineate how Vilnius City Municipality shifted from traditional, centralized administrative logics toward an emerging PVM collaborative paradigm, using UD as an operational vehicle to embed shared values in local disability services. While these stages suggest progress, the transition remains inherently non-linear and contested, characterized by ongoing friction between competing managerial logics.

Phase 1: Misunderstanding, avoidance, and denial (up to 2005). During this initial period, the municipality’s governance was characterized by a traditional, centralized administrative logic that failed to recognize accessibility as an enforceable human right. A primary empirical indicator of this institutional lag was the systematic use of the paternalistic term “invalid” in official records, which persisted in some municipal policy contexts until 2017. While early administrative acts, such as the regulations for scheduled public transport approved by Municipal Council Decision No. 432 (1999), signaled nascent efforts toward transport adaptation, these measures remained symbolic. Public services and infrastructure remained segregated and institution-centric, confirming that a proactive UD strategy was conceptually absent under the dominant medical model of disability.

Phase 2: Initial understanding (2005–2010). This phase marked an early, new public management (NPM)-driven transition toward social integration and equal opportunities. Institutional mech-

anisms aligned with early collaborative principles emerged, such as the general school network reorganization approved by City Council Resolution No. 1-981 (2005), which aimed to improve baseline physical accessibility for local communities. However, co-creation was severely constrained by a persistent NPM-style vertical power dynamic. Municipal officials predominantly perceive non-governmental organizations (NGOs) as passive “funding seekers” or grant recipients rather than strategic partners. Furthermore, severe municipal funding deficits restricted progress, with only 40% of planned integration measures successfully realized by 2009.

Phase 3: Productive consciousness (2010–2019). The strategic transition was formalized in municipal planning, moving toward broader social integration goals. This shift was evidenced by the 2010 Social Services Plan (Order No. 30-1453), which prioritized deinstitutionalization. Physical accessibility became a focused administrative goal, particularly through the mandatory inclusion of NGO representatives in the municipal Housing Adaptation Commission, formalized by Administrative Director’s Order No. 30-864 (2014). Despite these structural advancements, UD implementation remained fragmented and physically reductionist. Municipal departments focused almost exclusively on visible physical infrastructure adaptations (such as ramps and stair lifts), while systematically neglecting sensory, cognitive, and informational accessibility dimensions in public services.

Phase 4: Consciousness integration (2020–2022). In this stage, the municipality declared UD principles a systemic municipal priority for strategic funding allocation. This integration was catalyzed by Mayoral Decree No. R-229 (2021), which established the dedicated Universal Design Working Group. However, participant observations revealed that actual implementation remained reactive. NGO representatives identified a persistent failure in authentic co-creation, noting that their strategic proposals for the annual Social Services Plan were routinely dismissed. A critical gap emerged in civil safety and emergency infrastructure, where the lack of accessible shelters highlighted a failure to integrate informational and sensory UD into municipal risk-management routines.

Phase 5: Creative consciousness (2023–2025). This phase represents the strategic attempt to transition UD from a declarative policy aspiration to a routine administrative practice, anchored by the adoption of the “City for All” Strategy (Council Decision No. 1-1743, 2023). The municipality began integrating UD principles into non-physical domains, such as municipal cultural project funding regulations requiring easily understandable language (Order No. 30-2441/24, 2024). Strategic efforts also led to the drafting of a Human Rights Support Program to structurally institutionalize PVM co-creation. Nonetheless, empirical data show that implementation barriers persist, including NGO anxieties over the transition to a rigid service accreditation model and the continued bureaucratic perception of strategic plans as static “results reports” rather than dynamic, collaborative roadmaps.

3.2. Qualitative analysis of systemic barriers to public value co-creation

The abductive thematic analysis of the observed working group sessions and municipal planning records indicates that the transition toward PVM-oriented routines is severely constrained by three deeply rooted administrative and cultural friction points. These barriers demonstrate that formal policy adoption does not automatically translate into joint decision-making or power-sharing routines.

3.2.1. *Inter-institutional fragmentation and data silos*

The empirical evidence reveals a profound deficit regarding horizontal coordination across municipal departments and external public entities, creating significant operational redundancies. Observed planning routines indicate that instead of maintaining integrated, cross-sectoral service pathways, municipal agencies operate as fragmented bureaucratic silos, generating extensive paper-based correspondence to manage standard service transitions (such as transferring service users from healthcare facilities to social care systems). This inter-institutional friction creates substantial administrative delays and mismanages both public funds and personnel resources.

This coordination failure is further compounded by the absence of precise, qualitative data registries. Rather than utilizing unified, multi-dimensional databases capable of capturing complex, cognitive, or developmental disability profiles, municipal departments rely on highly aggregated, static medical-demographic statistics. This data deficit directly restricts the municipality’s capacity to engage in proactive, needs-based strategic planning, forcing administrators to allocate resources based on historical budgets rather than the actual functional requirements of the local population.

3.2.2. *The saturated “tick-box” compliance culture*

A dominant barrier identified during the observed sessions is the persistent reliance on minimum technical regulations over functional usability. Qualitative findings demonstrate that while public infrastructure projects strictly satisfy national building and accessibility codes on paper, the resulting environments frequently remain unusable in practice. This disconnect occurs because municipal engineers, planners, and contracted professional designers operate within a rigid “tick-box” compliance paradigm, lacking the empathetic and experiential competence required to understand the lived reality of disability. Consequently, significant public investments are directed toward non-functional adaptations (such as ramps lacking safe clearance or uncoordinated transport boarding points).

Furthermore, standard-driven compliance routinely fails because physical adaptations are decoupled from informational and operational accessibility. Lived usability is frequently compromised when physical ramps are rendered inaccessible due to a lack of clear signage, uncommunicated operational hours, or restricted access rules outside standard business times. The qualitative data also highlight that rigid technical checklists fail to resolve the inherently conflicting functional needs of different stakeholder groups. For instance, the elimination of sidewalk curbs to facilitate wheelchair and physical mobility simultaneously removes the essential tactile and contrast boundaries required by visually impaired pedestrians for safe navigation. Resolving these overlapping tensions requires establishing cross-disability deliberative arenas rather than relying on fragmented, standardized execution.

3.2.3. Frontline attitudinal barriers and stigmatization

The empirical data indicate that physical and technical accessibility adaptations remain superficial unless accompanied by systematic attitudinal changes within municipal institutions, particularly public educational environments. Observed discussions reveal that the physical adaptation of school infrastructure is frequently undermined by a lack of pedagogical preparedness and methodological training among educators. In several documented instances, this deficit manifested as active resistance from school personnel, who actively sought the administrative exclusion of children with developmental or cognitive needs from mainstream classrooms, thereby perpetuating social stigma.

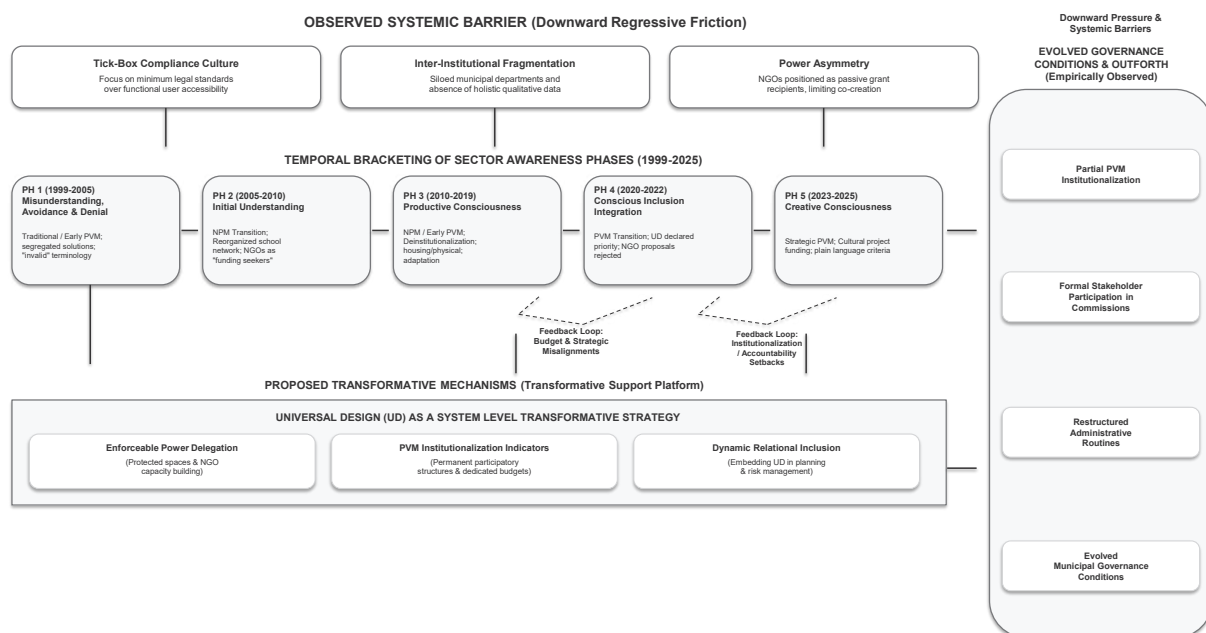
This deficit in professional empathy is equally prevalent during frontline administrative and intake interactions. Strategic observations indicate that social service procedures often treat disabled individuals and their families as passive clinical cases. Lived challenges are frequently discussed insensitively in the direct presence of the service users, undermining personal dignity and generating substantial emotional distress, which further alienates vulnerable citizens from municipal collaborative networks.

The thematic analysis of the observed working group sessions and municipal strategic planning files indicates that the transition toward PVM-oriented disability services remains constrained by three deeply rooted administrative and cultural friction points. These systemic barriers illustrate that formal policy adoption does not automatically result in procedural routine or equitable partnership.

3.2.4. Conceptual synthesis: The PVM–UD integration model

To systematically integrate the empirical findings of this longitudinal case study, Figure 1 presents a multi-layered conceptual model mapping the pathways, enablers, and structural constraints that shape the partial institutional embedding of PVM practices through UD.

The base layer (observed empirical findings) synthesizes the five historical phases of sector awareness (1999–2025) and maps the three core systemic barriers – inter-institutional fragmentation, a “tick-box” compliance culture, and attitudinal barriers – with these constraints acting as continuous regressive friction against progressive change. Counterbalancing this friction, the intermediate layer (proposed transformative mechanisms)



Note: Delineating observed empirical findings, transformative mechanisms, and measured institutional outcomes (Vilnius case study).

Figure 1. Conceptual model of integrating UD into PVM

outlines the operational bridges required to advance the transition, including a proactive municipal UD strategy, structural PVM indicators (earmarked budgets and permanent participatory channels), and formalized administrative safeguards for NGO power delegation. The top layer (evolved governance conditions and outcomes) strictly limits its scope to empirically verified, qualitative outcomes, specifically partial PVM integration, formalized stakeholder representation, and restructured administrative routines, deliberately excluding unmeasured societal outcomes.

The non-linear, contested trajectory of this municipal transition is dynamically captured by two recursive feedback loops. The first loop (institutional friction/accountability setbacks) illustrates how progressive, non-physical accessibility practices (Phase 5) encounter bureaucratic risk aversion and NPM-style performance targets, driving a regression to symbolic, on-paper compliance in Phase 4. The second loop (budget and strategic misalignments) maps the gap between declarative policy and resource allocation: when strategic UD commitments in Phase 4 lack dedicated budgets, persistent efficiency-driven targets force a retreat to Phase 3, reverting to fragmented, physical-only accessibility projects.

4. DISCUSSION

The shift from new public management (NPM) to public value management (PVM) marks a fundamental paradigm breakthrough in public administration, where institutional success is evaluated through the collaborative creation of public value rather than isolated technical efficiency metrics. This longitudinal study validates the sector awareness framework developed by Edwards et al. (2016) as a robust, non-linear analytical lens for documenting this systemic transition within the municipal disability services sector. This is particularly salient in post-socialist administrative settings, which are characterized by deeply entrenched, path-dependent bureaucratic structures. The empirical findings from the Vilnius case study directly complement and extend the foundational research conducted by Edwards et al. (2016) in Western Australia. While the Western Australian reform focused on eliminating restrictive practices through a clinical framework, the Vilnius case

empirically demonstrates that PVM objectives (specifically accessibility and co-creation) were practically operationalized through the structural adoption of the “City for All” UD strategy. In this light, the strategy functions as the primary policy vehicle that carried UD principles into municipal administrative routines, rather than a static compliance checklist. Both cases confirm that municipal transformation is inherently relational, depending on shifting cross-sector consciousness and multi-level dependencies rather than top-down administrative mandates alone.

However, the empirical evidence demonstrates that the transition to the “Creative consciousness” phase remains incomplete and highly contested due to persistent institutional inertia and conflicting managerial logics. As argued by Van Gestel et al. (2023) and Eriksson and Andersson (2023), collaborative PVM ambitions are often forced to advance within public institutions that remain heavily structured by inherited NPM measurement routines and performance-driven accountabilities. In Vilnius, despite declarative strategic goals, municipal administrators continue to navigate horizontal and vertical value tensions, where the systemic pressure to meet standardized, short-term plans restricts the administrative capacity for proactive, system-level design. This hybrid reality confirms theoretical critiques that PVM’s collaborative ideals are frequently constrained by the compliance-oriented control mechanisms of older administrative paradigms. Consequently, to genuinely institutionalize PVM, local authorities must transition from short-term program outputs to observable structural indicators, such as permanent participatory channels and dedicated administrative funding shifts.

A core theoretical contribution of this study is the critical empirical exposure of a pervasive “tick-box” compliance culture in municipal universal design (UD) implementation, which represents a systemic public administration failure rather than a mere technical deficit. This finding directly supports the arguments of Nielsen and Landa-Mata (2025), who contend that local governments frequently reduce accessibility to physical infrastructure checklists while neglecting the sensory, cognitive, and informational dimensions of inclusion. Drawing on Merleau-Ponty’s (2010) phenom-

enological concept of embodied perception, these findings can be interpreted as a manifestation of “institutional blindness,” where environments designed to satisfy technical specifications remain functionally exclusive and restrictive in practice. Lived experience must therefore be treated as a rigorous form of empirical knowledge that directly challenges abstract expert rules. Furthermore, the analysis reveals that physical UD adaptations remain necessary but entirely insufficient unless integrated with professional empathy and systemic training to dismantle emotional and attitudinal barriers within local service delivery systems.

Finally, this analysis exposes profound power asymmetries that obstruct authentic co-creation

at the street-level interface. Despite formal inclusion devices, civil society actors in Vilnius are frequently sidelined and positioned as passive “funding seekers” rather than equal strategic partners, mirroring the collaborative barriers documented by Baretta et al. (2024) and Schiller (2023). As Liu and Coveney (2025) argue, the human rights model mandated by the UN CRPD (United Nations, 2006) requires a fundamental redistribution of authority, transforming persons with disabilities from passive objects of welfare into active rights holders and co-creators of policy. The empirical evidence demonstrates that formal participation without enforceable power-sharing arrangements results in tokenistic engagement that leaves core bureaucratic authority intact.

CONCLUSION

The primary aim of this study was to examine how formal rules, administrative routines, and stakeholder participation arrangements associated with universal design (UD) and public value management (PVM) evolved in Vilnius municipal disability services (1999–2025), and to identify the factors that enabled or constrained their partial institutional embedding. By addressing three core research objectives, mapping the non-linear evolutionary stages of transition, evaluating the administrative barriers to co-creation, and examining how UD functions as an operational mechanism under fragmented implementation, the study provides a synthesized, evidence-based account of municipal governance transformation.

The paper reveals a non-linear institutional evolution through five phases of sector awareness. Rather than establishing systemic, municipality-wide PVM institutionalization, the findings demonstrate a partial and uneven embedding of UD-related, PVM-oriented practices, concentrated primarily in formal stakeholder representation and selected funding and accessibility criteria. While UD serves as an operational mechanism that carries PVM principles into practice, local implementation remains fragmented and dominated by a rigid “tick-box” compliance culture. This bureaucratic orientation privileges baseline physical infrastructure over sensory, cognitive, and informational accessibility, thereby limiting the holistic creation of anticipated public value. The empirical evidence identifies the hybrid governance conditions and persistent institutional barriers that shape the further development of these collaborative practices. The primary constraint is a deeply rooted power asymmetry across administrative levels: despite the adoption of formal inclusion mechanisms, such as joint working groups and strategic commissions, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are still frequently positioned as passive grant recipients or funding seekers rather than equal co-creators with genuine decision-making authority. In practice, this study serves as a cautionary guide for local authorities pursuing inclusive governance. Further institutionalization of PVM requires transitioning from reactive legal compliance and individual reasonable accommodations to proactive, system-wide UD partnerships. This shift demands dismantling deeply entrenched bureaucratic silos, shifting from performance-only metrics to relationship-oriented indicators, and establishing formalized administrative safeguards to empower NGOs as equal partners in joint decision-making.

While this study provides a longitudinal, multi-source qualitative analysis of the municipal transition from new public management (NPM) to PVM, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the

single-case study design constrains the research, focusing exclusively on Vilnius City Municipality. Although Vilnius is an exemplar case in a post-socialist transition context because of its dedicated UD strategy, the findings may not generalize directly to other local government contexts with different socio-political legacies, resource capacities, or civil society dynamics.

Second, the study is subject to partial discourse capture. Out of the 52 observed sessions of the Universal Design Working Group, only 10 strategic sessions were fully transcribed for detailed discourse analysis, while the remaining 42 sessions were incorporated using meeting minutes and the author's detailed field notes. This approach, while resource-efficient, may have missed subtle linguistic and conversational nuances that were not captured in the written minutes or field notes, as these 42 sessions were not audio-recorded.

Third, despite rigorous triangulation against 122 administrative documents, the author's dual role as both an academic investigator and the strategy facilitator introduces potential reflexivity and subjective interpretation risks. Future research should expand beyond a single-case boundary by conducting comparative, cross-jurisdictional studies of UD and PVM integration across different Baltic or European municipalities and specifically examine structural power-rebalancing strategies that can systematically empower vulnerable stakeholder groups in joint decision-making local governance networks.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

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DECLARATION OF GENERATIVE AI IN THE WRITING PROCESS

In the preparation of this manuscript, the authors utilized generative AI tools (NotebookLM (Google)) exclusively to assist with language editing, stylistic improvements, and the conceptual visualization of Figure 1. The authors rigorously reviewed, edited, and validated all AI-generated text and visual outputs, taking full and sole responsibility for the final content of the publication. No AI tools were employed in the data collection, coding, or qualitative analysis phases of this research; all empirical analyses were conducted manually by the researchers to ensure absolute methodological integrity and data privacy.

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