

How the Municipality of Zeist harnesses the ideas of ‘citizen-experts’

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Organisation: Municipality of Zeist

Country: Netherlands

Level of government: Local government

Sector: Economic affairs

Type: Partnerships, Public Service

Launched in: 2010

Overall development time: 9 month(s)

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Description

Like many other municipalities in Europe the City of Zeist in the Netherlands was faced with the challenge of achieving budget savings. Based on the belief that citizens have expertise, experience and skills to find new solutions, the City of Zeist launched a citizen engagement process to close a fiscal gap of EUR 6 million.

During a period of three months, two hundred 'citizen experts' discussed new solutions related to eight topics, based on their personal expertise. As a result of this targeted co-commissioning process, ninety-five per cent of all citizen proposals were adopted by the local council without changes.

Why the innovation was developed

- Like the UK, the Netherlands has a centralised fiscal regime. Although roughly a third of the budget is collected by municipalities, only eight per cent of a municipality's budget is available for discretionary services.
 - In the Netherlands, municipalities are heavily dependent on transfers from higher levels of government, which form two-thirds of the budget. Moreover, local government has limited options for expanding the local revenue base. Other locally collected revenue comes from charges for waste collection and sewer maintenance.
 - In 2010 Zeist, as everywhere in the Netherlands, faced a period of fiscal austerity. Although there were many uncertainties, the estimate was that over 10% of the discretionary budget would have to be reformed in order to restore the balance between income and expenditure.
 - This meant a challenge to reduce the budgetary deficit by EUR 6.2 million. The 2010 coalition programme included a commitment to involve citizens in finding new solutions to this budgetary challenge.
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Objectives

Enhance public trust, Enhance transparency, Improve efficiency, Increase citizen engagement, Support economic growth

- The idea of a traditional budget consultation where citizens would be consulted on government-made austerity scenarios was inconsistent with the coalition programme, which included a commitment to citizen engagement.
 - Within the organisation there was concern as to whether the austerity scenarios would find support in local communities.
 - Finally, a couple of public officers had visited Brussels and learnt about the EU decision making process where diverse interests are brought together at an early stage of the decision-making process.
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Main beneficiaries

Civil Society, General population, Government bodies, Government staff

- Citizens
- Local government
- Public services

Results

Efficiency

- Nine months after the start of the process, the local council agreed over two hundred proposals. Apart from a dozen, these proposals were adopted without changes. The net worth of the decided proposals was enough to restore the balance between income and expenditure in the structural reform of the budget.
 - The proposals added up to EUR 7.6 million. While the challenge was only EUR 6.2 million, the committees enabled the council to make additional reforms. In the final decision making process, ninety-five per cent of all proposals were adopted by the local council. During the final discussions and decisions of the local council, only fifteen councillors objected to the proposed measures.
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Service quality

Responsiveness:

- In Zeist, the austerity dialogue is regarded as a good example demonstrating the value of society in solving local problems. Local politicians feel strengthened in their belief that it is right to involve citizens in solving the most important challenges. New networks originated from the process and there is now a better relationship between local communities and the municipality.
- Some proposals focused on making savings by increasing the entrance fees for the local swimming pool, or reducing the grants to cultural and welfare organisations. Others, however, were more complex and aimed at transforming the relations between society and government, such as a sweeping reform of the funding of sports organisations.
- The participation process was completed within a period of three months. Around 80% of the 'citizen experts' remained involved throughout the process. This process resulted in an overall White Paper, including 217 proposals from eight expert committees. There was large variation in the proposed measures. Some focussed on making savings by increasing the entrance fees for the local swimming pool, or reducing the grants to cultural and welfare organisations. Others, however, were more complex and aimed at transforming the relations between society and government, such as a sweeping reform of the funding of sports organisations.

Development

Design

Originally, the idea was to 'consult citizens on different scenarios developed by public officers'. However, it quickly became apparent that this route was not in line with the organisational values of the City of Zeist. The board of aldermen decided to launch an intensive process of citizen engagement. Other local stakeholders bought into this idea as well.

Testing

- The co-design process was based on the following principles: citizens have the expertise, creativity and strength to find solutions to the current challenges.
 - The owner of a problem is also the owner of the solution.
 - Bring together all key stakeholders - do not exclude anyone.
 - First try to understand, then to be understood.
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Implementation

Tools used:

- Citizen Experts: Using an open call (both online and in the local press) everyone who felt engaged with the municipality and wished to respond to its austerity challenge was invited to participate in the so-called 'austerity dialogue'. About two hundred 'citizen experts' were involved in the process. The citizens who wished to participate were divided into eight committees based on their specific expertise, experience and interest. For example, both the street-level social worker and the jobless single-mom participated as experts in the Social Care and Welfare Committee. As a result, each committee consisted of 'experts by experience' rather than every citizen discussing all kinds of issues outside of their expertise.
- Politicians: Although the local councillors were not involved in the discussions held by the 'citizen experts', they had an important role at both initial and final stages of the process. In the initial stage, the council set out a clear framework and the policy issues to be discussed and the financial savings to be achieved by each committee. At the end of the process, the council had the final say as to whether to adopt or reject proposals and had to give feedback on the decisions taken. Although the aldermen mostly had an ambassadorial role during the process, they also had a role in approving the strategic plans of each committee (the 'green papers').
- Public officers: Two officers per expert committee had the responsibility of facilitating the dialogue and of keeping the debate moving - a so-called chef de dossier and an assistant. The public officers were chosen on the basis of their enthusiasm and competencies, and not on the basis of their professional track records or expertise. Their role was explicitly limited to facilitating the process, while the contribution of ideas was reserved to the 'citizen experts'.

Resources used:

- The co-design process has resulted in a structural budget reform of EUR 6.2 million. In the first fiscal year after the participation process the budget reform resulted in savings over EUR 1 million. The savings target was able to be achieved four years after the start of the participation process.
- The direct costs of the participation process were EUR 50 000. These costs included costs for facilitating the expert meetings organised at several locations in Zeist, costs of communication and external consultants (to replace the Chefs de Dossier if necessary). The 'citizen experts' were not paid any fees. The costs of the austerity dialogue consisted of less than 2 per cent of the reform process.
- The staff time of the 16 officers involved in the dialogue were funded through the mainstream budget.

Lessons Learned

Lessons Learned

- Zeist found some difficulties in involving young people. Believing that they also had an important role if the choices made were to be sustainable, extra effort was put into attracting adolescents and students as well. For instance, a contest was launched to capture their best ideas.
 - Many experts argued that the process took place under serious time pressure. Some results of the expert committees might have been better if more time had been available for reflection. On the other hand, the time pressure may well have been necessary to keep things moving.
 - Some experts have suggested that the open and sincere attitude of local councillors came under pressure at the final stage, when they had to make hard decisions within the context of political competition. Furthermore, some 'citizen experts' were a bit put off by how their 'citizen expert' proposals were translated in generic policy documents, as well as by the political jargon being used. However, apart from a dozen proposals, the solutions of the expert committees were adopted without any adjustments. The rejected proposals did not meet the initial framework (e.g. "we should not cut back on social benefits") or had an uncertain fiscal contribution.
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Conditions for success

- Looking at the success factors, two aspects should be emphasized. First, without the sincere belief of the local politicians in the strength, expertise and creativity of the citizens in solving local problems, this process would have been doomed to fail. As the mayor said, "The strength of society lies within people. By giving them confidence and allowing them to get close to us, this strength grows to ultimate levels." - Koos Janssen, Mayor of Zeist.
 - The intrinsic motivation of politicians to leave the challenge to society and of public officials to listen to the people in the street was crucial. The extent of this far-reaching paradigm shift was clearly articulated by one of the participating public officials in the journey: "And what if I don't trust the people in the street? Then it's time to look out for a new job." - Municipal staff member.
 - A second success factor was the flexibility of the approach. Apart from a set of guidelines from the council (containing limitations and criteria), there was no blueprint for realizing the goals of rebalancing and participating. There was no template describing how to roll out the ideas. As the city managers argued: "The world is far too complex to change it using a blueprint. Besides that, we want to use and develop talent." - Ineke Lissenberg, City Manager of Zeist.
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Other information

The key resource was a couple of intrinsically motivated officers, who truly believed in the challenge and who were appointed to manage the process. Every decision they made was associated with underlying belief in the dialogue (WHY) and its principles (HOW). The process was managed incrementally and adjusted gradually, using only the proceedings of the dialogue. A special committee which was appointed to be responsible for unforeseen issues did not come together once during the journey.

The success of the austerity dialogue in Zeist shows that citizen participation has added value. Although citizen participation is time-consuming for citizens, and therefore has to be used selectively, citizen participation has become 'a way of life' in Zeist.

Where we believe in the strength, expertise and creativity of citizens, co-design is a good way to develop better policy alternatives, instead of focussing on cuts. However, it is important to limit the influence of citizens to areas in which they can use their own expertise, experience and interest.

Where we believe in the strength, expertise and creativity of citizens, dialogue is a good instrument to enlarge the support for policy alternatives in local communities.