Citizens' assembly on Waste

Municipality of Groningen

INTRODUCTION

Groningen has set itself an ambitious sustainability goal: **zero waste by 2030**. The municipality already had a **roadmap** toward that target, but by 2025 it still **lacked a concrete set of actions** for the final stretch, from 2026 to 2030.

Reducing waste is a **behavioural challenge** more than an engineering one. It comes down to how people sort, buy, and dispose of things every day. So instead of designing that final stretch of policy internally, Groningen decided to **ask its own residents directly: what would actually get them to waste less?**

In 2025, that question became a **full citizens' assembly on waste**, one of several ways Groningen has been experimenting with deeper resident involvement, alongside its neighbourhood teams and the "Voice of Groningen" digital platform. The goal here went further than gathering input though. It was **genuine participative policy-making**: the assembly's task was to hand the municipality concrete, actionable **policy proposals**, not just opinions or general feedback.



THE NETHERLANDS



ENGAGEMENT LEVEL

- ○ Inform
- ○ Consult
- ○ Involve
- ● **Collaborate**
- ○ Empower

MANDATE

Groningen's **executive board**, made up of the mayor and vice-mayors, proposed the assembly. The **municipal council**, the city's elected decision-making body, formally adopted that proposal, and **committed in advance to following up on its recommendations**, within the **boundaries of financial constraints, feasibility, and effectiveness**.

Political support was broad: the council approved it on 2 October 2024, with 37 votes in favour and 7 against.

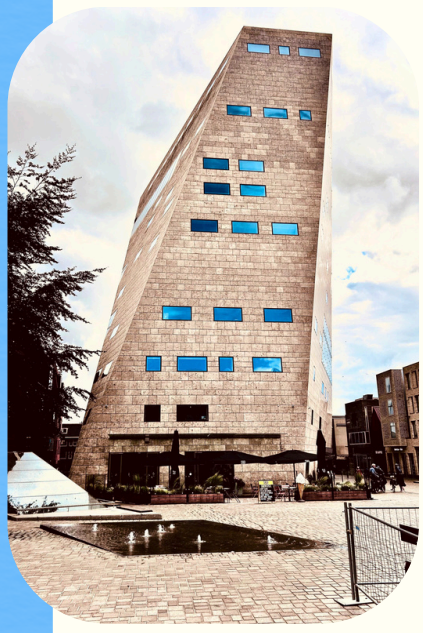
The proposal itself set clear terms. **€300,000 was earmarked** for running the assembly, involving **120 randomly selected residents**, chosen proportionally by age, gender, postcode, and housing type (living in a single home versus a multi-unit building).

Before the assembly started, the municipality **formally laid out in advance** what question participants would answer, and how their recommendations would be handled. Participants knew what to expect from day one.

RECRUITMENT AND PARTICIPATION

The municipality contacted a **random sample of 15,000 residents** by **letter,** inviting them to **sign up online**. Everyone who signed up received a **questionnaire**, used to check both eligibility and how well the group matched the required demographic proportions. From that pool, **120 residents were drawn at random** to actually join the assembly.

Participation was made accessible through **compensation**: €75 per meeting, €7 for travel, and €7 per hour for childcare.





PROCESS DESIGN

The whole process ran **just over a year**, from the initial council decision to the final evaluation.

The assembly itself met **six times**. The **first three meetings** focused on **learning**. Participants **talked with experts**, both from inside and outside the municipality, and **visited places relevant to waste management**, including a waste-processing plant. The **final three meetings** were where **recommendations took shape**. After the fourth session, municipal waste specialists reviewed the emerging recommendations and gave feedback, before the group finalised its work.

Municipal staff designed and led the process. **Consultants** only helped facilitate part of it.

The University of Groningen monitored the whole process throughout, as part of the Speak Up project, tracking both the assembly itself and how well communication about it reached the wider public.

OUPUT AND FOLLOW-UP

The assembly delivered **30 recommendations**. The municipal council **adopted 25 of them**, which are now being translated into actual policy.

The process and its outcomes were **communicated widely across the municipality**: press releases, videos, and social media posts. How well those communications actually reached people, and what response they got, was itself part of the university's evaluation.





RESOURCES

The assembly's core budget was €300,000, with an **additional €25,000 from the Interreg Speak Up project**, covering evaluation and sharing the results more broadly across Europe.

Two staff members worked on it full time to guide the assembly. **Many others contributed** as experts or facilitators, though exact numbers for that group weren't tracked.

The University of Groningen completed its formal evaluation in December 2025, and the municipal council has since accepted it.



STRENGHTS

- **High quality deliberation**, grounded in a **genuine learning phase**: expert talks and site visits, before any recommendations were drafted.
- **Strong political follow-up**. 25 out of 30 recommendations were adopted, entering the actual municipal policy process.
- A **built-in feedback loop**: waste specialists reviewed the emerging recommendations, so proposals stayed realistic and grounded in practical expertise.
- **Clear growth in participants' own sense of belonging and responsibility**, along with a lasting shift in how they talk about waste and sustainability in their own daily lives.
- A **clear, upfront framework** for what would and wouldn't be accepted, reducing the risk of participants feeling misled about how seriously their work would be taken.

CHALLENGES

- A **time-intensive** and **expensive** process to run.
- **Reaching residents beyond the assembly itself proved difficult.** It's one thing to engage the 120 participants, another to bring the wider public along.
- **The effect stayed largely personal.** Participants became more aware and talked more about waste reduction within their own networks, but that didn't translate into wider, population-level behaviour change.
- **Not every recommendation made it through.** Five of the 30 weren't adopted, a reminder that managing expectations matters just as much for what doesn't get taken forward as for what does.

FINAL RECOMMENDATIONS

- Don't be afraid to invest in a full assembly process. Done well, it produces genuinely **high-quality recommendations**.
- **Take residents seriously.** When people feel their input is genuinely valued, they're willing to commit **real time and effort in return**.
- **Plan communications early.** Reaching a broader public takes real, deliberate effort, not just an afterthought once recommendations are ready.
- Save the full assembly format for **questions that really warrant it**. It's expensive and time-consuming, so it isn't the right fit for every participation need.



Interreg North Sea
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