Participative budgetting project ‘Sterk Hoogkerk’ (‘Strong Hoogkerk’)

Municipality of Groningen

INTRODUCTION

Since 2023, **Hoogkerk**, a village with its own distinct identity, on the edge of the city of Groningen, has run its own **participatory budgeting project: “Sterk Hoogkerk”** ("Strong Hoogkerk"). It's now in its **third round**.

The idea came from **Hoogkerk's own residents' association**. Representatives of that association, together with civil servants and politicians from Groningen, visited a similar participatory budgeting initiative in Antwerp. Based on what they saw there, the municipality decided to test the concept in Hoogkerk.

Each round, residents get a **budget of €300,000** to spend on **grassroots initiatives** of their own choosing. The aim goes beyond funding a few local projects. It's about giving residents **real influence** over their own surroundings, and strengthening the **sense of belonging** and **social ties** within the community.



THE NETHERLANDS



ENGAGEMENT LEVEL

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

MANDATE

The participatory budgetting project took shape after that shared visit to Antwerp. **Political backing was strong** from the start. The **municipal council** formally adopted the initiative, and set aside €300,000 in **real, out-of-pocket funding**, not just a symbolic budget.

The promise to residents was direct: after a few rounds to introduce and select viable local projects, carried out by residents themselves and supported by the municipality, residents would get to **democratically decide** which projects actually receive funding. It's your money, and yours to use as you see fit, **as long as the project is feasible**.

That makes Sterk Hoogkerk a **genuinely citizen-led initiative**. The municipality's role stays purely supportive.

RECRUITMENT AND PARTICIPATION

Sterk Hoogkerk was **communicated broadly throughout the community**: flyers, billboards, the local weekly newspaper, a dedicated website, and a visible presence at community events. However, getting the word out is only half the work. The logic behind Sterk Hoogkerk is simple: projects only succeed if people in the community actually have the **energy and drive to make it happen**, no matter how good the idea sounds on paper. Because residents themselves choose the themes each round, they've repeatedly shown a **real sense of responsibility** toward including the whole community, especially **groups with fewer chances in life**.

One outcome stood out. The **Moluccan community** in Hoogkerk, a group that has historically felt excluded from Dutch society, became actively involved. At first, their projects aimed mainly to benefit their own community. But they soon discovered other groups could benefit too, and started connecting with them instead of competing. Today, they see that shift itself as one of the project's biggest wins.





PROCESS DESIGN

Choosing projects follows **five steps**, **repeated each year**, for a **€300,000 budget**: theme selection, budget division, project ideas, final selection, and implementation.

First, residents **choose themes**, things like youth, sports, or traffic, through both online and offline elections. Then comes **budget division**: at a physical meeting, residents literally place poker chips on the themes they want funded most. From there, residents can **submit project ideas** of their own, and present them to a wider audience. A **final online and offline election** narrows these down to the winning proposals. **Implementation** follows, and depending on the project, that can take anywhere from a few days to a full year. **The whole cycle takes about a year.**

Behind it sits a **layered organisational structure**: a **small core group** of five people, mixing municipal staff and residents, a **“building group”** of residents, politicians, and civil servants who meet every six weeks to track progress, and a **“development group”**, mostly civil servants, focused on evolving the programme itself. Beyond these three groups, **volunteers** from the community help staff the actual events, like the theme elections and project presentations.

OUPUT AND FOLLOW-UP

The first round produced **42 proposals**, 16 of which received funding and were carried out. The second round grew to **74 proposals**, with 26 selected for execution. The third round started on 10 March 2026, with theme elections, and will close with the final vote on proposals on 31 October 2026.

The **voting** itself runs through **Groningen Stemt ("Groningen Votes"), the municipality's own online participation platform**, which handles the popular vote and displays the results publicly.

Results are shared through social media, local press, the website, but also directly in public space. Finished projects carry small signs reading "this flowerbed is the result of Sterk Hoogkerk!", **making the initiative visible in everyday life**, not just online.

The initiative was **formally evaluated in January 2026**, using a method called **"leergeschiedenis" ("learning history")**, based on interviews and a range of **personal perspectives from people involved**. The evaluation is still being finalised, but early findings already point to **a growing sense of belonging, growing responsibility, and stronger ties between different groups in the community**. And, not to be overlooked: **plenty of small local projects** have genuinely flourished.





RESOURCES

The **€300,000 participatory budget** is **spent entirely on executing the winning proposals**. Other costs, such as organising events, staffing, and so on, come out of the **municipality's regular budget for "gebiedsgericht werken" ("area-based governance")**, the way Groningen normally manages its villages, districts, and neighbourhoods.

STRENGHTS

- **Puts residents themselves in charge**, rather than the municipality.
- Builds **real civic energy and initiative** within the community.
- Strengthens **local identity** and a **sense of belonging**.
- Gives villages and districts room to **make their own choices**, rather than applying the same policy across a large, diverse municipality.
- **Keeps risk limited**, since individual projects work with relatively small budgets.

CHALLENGES

- Building and maintaining a successful participatory budgeting system takes **real time, money, and effort**.
- **Tension can arise between municipal policy and citizen-led choices**. Local wishes don't always win. Sometimes they clash with the broader public interest, and the municipality has to make a choice. For instance, a neighbourhood might want a specific change to a street or intersection, but that has to be weighed against how traffic works across the whole city.
- **Small investments can carry disproportionately large long-term costs.** For instance, a modest park bench needs maintenance that can end up costing far more than the original investment.

FINAL RECOMMENDATIONS

- Participatory budgeting genuinely works. It's a strong instrument for **building a sense of belonging within a community**.
- **Plan for sustained investment.** Participatory budgeting needs ongoing time, money, and effort, not just a one-off push to get it started.
- **Life-cycle costs need to be assessed and factored in** before awarding a project, something residents don't always see or expect, which calls for careful communication.
- **Careful communication** and **managing expectations** are key to success.



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