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## Utrecht's City Talks on Sustainable Energy

# Creating an energy plan together

Utrecht initiated a democratic experiment to share and broaden responsibility for creating an energy plan to help it become climate neutral by 2030. Entrusting this task to citizens has shaken up traditional thinking, generated novel ideas and created ambassadors for sustainable energy.

As part of its healthy city concept in which sustainable and affordable energy is a high priority, Utrecht has set ambitious renewable energy targets. By 2020 it aims to increase supply of sustainable energy to 20% and fit solar panels to 10% of its buildings. The city recognised that these goals required the overthrow of existing systems and structure and support and changes in behaviour by residents and firms. As a result, it became convinced that its new energy plan must have democratic legitimacy.

After deciding to hand over responsibility for the drawing up of its new plan to citizens, the city undertook a random selection process. As well as ensuring a mixed representation in terms of age, area, gender and income, this process also overcame a problem common to participatory projects: people with a special interest tend to put themselves forward. If the plan was to fit the city and deliver results, it had to be developed by those representative of the silent majority.

### Rising to the challenge

The city initially contacted 10,000 people from its database. Around 1,000 of these said yes to taking part and another lottery reduced this number to 200. In the end, 165 citizens attended all three sessions of the City Talks. They were compensated for their time and could choose between vouchers worth €600 for energy reduction measures or €300 gift certificates. Revealingly, as the participants gained a better understanding of the city's energy challenge and their responsibility to rise to it, many swapped their gift certificates for energy reduction measures.



We had been working for a couple of years on our sustainable energy ambitions and knew from calculations that we couldn't rely solely on the support of frontrunners. It is about getting everyone involved - so we had to reach the silent majority.



*Monique Hoogwijk, programme manager, 'Utrecht Energy!'*

cities in action

March 2016

where: Utrecht, Netherlands  
what: environment  
when: 2014-2019

Over the course of three Saturdays the group took part in discussions and workshops, facilitated by the city and led by an independent moderator. An 'information market' helped them understand and make choices about the city's energy options. Energy experts were on hand to explain the practical realities of their ideas. And representatives from energy companies, social housing associations and the local university were also involved as speakers, advisors and, in a 'fish bowl session', as participants.

## Thinking outside the box

The first Saturday was a knowledge-sharing day during which participants were encouraged to dream and think creatively. Components of their 'dreams' ranged from a smart plan for energy prices that rewards 'leaders' with financial benefits and 'loafers' with high costs, to a maze made of solar panels designed as a tourist attraction. In the second session, experts introduced two scenarios based on the dreams. Experts were called on to answer specific technical and cost queries and the measures were ranked based on constraints and time.

The resulting draft plan was reviewed and refined at the final City Talk. The city council then worked through the plan, assessing what is possible legally and what action can be taken by the municipality itself. This contributed to the learning process for all contributors. Both the energy plan and the plan for municipality action were presented to the city council for formal agreement. What has already been broadly agreed is that residents have added value to the process. By thinking afresh and in an integrated way about energy from the user's perspective, they have generated ideas that the city council would not have thought of itself.

## Daring to be different

The plan also benefited from the enthusiasm and commitment of participants. Most have become ambassadors for sustainable energy and some implemented ideas generated during the City Talks in their own homes and neighbourhoods.

Their resulting energy plan also includes proposals the city would not have dared suggest, such as forcing entire areas to switch to alternative fuels rather than renovate existing

gas pipelines. Participants have even drawn up actions for implementing behavioural change among fellow citizens.

The city has been well rewarded for its €400,000 investment in the project. Council departments are now working together in a more coordinated way and it has stronger connections with the city's energy players. For these partners, experiencing citizens' perspectives and the plan's development has given them a sense of ownership that can only be positive as they play their part in its implementation.

A formal evaluation revealed that 97% of participants were happy with the organisation of the City Talks. This success has encouraged Utrecht to involve citizens in decision making in a similar way in other policy areas. In the meantime it has 165 citizen 'ambassadors' ready to help implement their energy plan and another City Talk to set up in early 2016 to look at early results and next steps. Utrecht has been asked by several other interested cities in the Netherlands to run workshops so they can learn how to hold their own City Talks.

The initiative was shortlisted for a EUROCIITIES award in 2015.



“I really liked this initiative, that instead of coming up with ideas and then asking citizens afterwards if they like them it involved them in the process from the start. This approach saved the city a lot of time and money because they now know what the population wants.”

**Niels Alebrechtse, City Talks ambassador and PhD researcher, Utrecht University**

