

Beyond bricks

**Lessons learned on creating socially
inclusive housing developments**

Version 2



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In cooperation with:



General introduction and reading guide

New housing developments form an extraordinary environment. Everyone has to settle in while also learning how to deal with each other, all in an area where construction is still in full swing and amenities are often completed late in the process. This book focuses on the important role organisations and residents can take on in the formative phase of a new neighbourhood.

This is the second edition of 'Beyond Bricks'. The insights from the first edition (2023) have been supplemented, adapted and verified with the insights from a second pilot neighbourhood. Chapter 1 provides a concise description of the projects, the parties involved and the selected pilot neighbourhoods. Chapter 5 provides an afterword, and Chapter 6 includes an appendix with an overview of the work performed for each pilot neighbourhood.

During the many meetings and activities, we gradually came to understand just how unique the environment of new housing developments truly is. These lessons have been broken down into different perspectives in Chapters 2 through 4:

2 Social design of new housing developments (Spatial perspective)

3 Social dynamics (Residents' perspective)

4 Organisations in new housing developments (Organisation perspective)

- 4.1 Priority for new housing developments
- 4.2 Tips for good collaboration
- 4.3 Working in new housing developments
- 4.4 Dealing with residents' initiative

For the sake of clarity, the lessons learned are categorised by the theme they seem to fit best. However, there is most to be learned where different perspectives intersect. For example, the spatial perspective may also include a section about the social impact of an initiative. Interesting examples from Leeuwesteyn and Cartesius are highlighted in blue (Leeuwesteyn) and green (Cartesius) boxes to support the lessons learned. Examples highlighted in orange were applicable to both neighbourhoods.

It should be noted that these lessons learned are our observations and practical experience gained in these specific new housing developments. We are under no illusion that the lessons learned here are universally applicable to other new housing developments. Instead, we hope that this book will serve as an inspiration and that you will join us in further expanding our knowledge of the social side of new housing developments.

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Background

Living in a new housing development involves certain challenges. New housing developments in Utrecht have seen relatively high rates of loneliness. There were also signs that residents had difficulty connecting to health services and social amenities in the neighbourhood, and that they lacked a strong sense of connection to their new neighbourhood.

The 'Wij(k)Bouwen' (in English: 'Building a Neighbourhood Together') project started in 2020, funded by ZonMw. This project made it possible to focus on the topic 'Social and Healthy New Housing Developments' in Utrecht's Leeuwesteyn neighbourhood. The first edition of 'Beyond Bricks' was published following this three-year project and contained lessons learned about establishing social structures in new housing developments.

To apply the lessons learned in Leeuwesteyn, the ZonMw-funded project '[Bouwen aan een gezonde gemeenschap](#)' (in English: 'Building a Healthy Community') was launched in 2024.

Description of the neighbourhoods

Leeuwesteyn

The Building a Neighbourhood Together project took place in the new housing development of Leeuwesteyn. Leeuwesteyn is on the east side of Leidsche Rijn, between the Amsterdam-Rijn Canal and the A2 motorway tunnel. Around 1,100 housing units are being built here for a mixed target group between 2019 and 2028. Thirty percent of the housing units are social rent homes. The new residents are mostly from other parts of Utrecht, as well as from outside the city. Several blocks were completed during the Building a Neighbourhood Together project term. Courtyard housing is an important feature in Leeuwesteyn. The housing units form a unified perimeter, with their gardens oriented



The neighbourhoods of Leeuwesteyn (blue) and Cartesius (green) on the map of Utrecht.

toward the shared inner courtyard. The design of the central space in each residential block depends on the price range and features a courtyard garden, a parking lot, or a combination of both.

Cartesius

The Building a Healthy Community project took place in the new housing development of Cartesius. Cartesius is being developed on a former Dutch Railways site, between the tracks to Amsterdam and Rotterdam. Upon completion, the neighbourhood will feature nearly 3,000 housing units, ranging from social rent homes to high-end, privately owned homes. One of the guiding principles of the neighbourhood is equal opportunities for health, inspired by the concept of 'Blue Zones'. In 2023, stakeholders and Utrecht knowledge institutions signed the 'Building a Healthy Neighbourhood' covenant, which focuses on monitoring health interventions and strengthening the community. More than 300 of the new housing units were completed during the term of the Building a Healthy Community project, with three more blocks under construction. The entire area is expected to be completed by 2028.

The insights from the Building a Neighbourhood Together project in Leeuwesteyn served as a foundation for the further development of the community in Cartesius.

Target group selection

For both neighbourhoods, it was mutually agreed not to choose a specific target group as the focus for the projects, as all target groups benefit from social cohesion and contact in their living environment.

In Leeuwesteyn, partners indicated that there is already ample attention to Leidsche Rijn's more vulnerable residents. As such, these parties asked to focus the project on the broader population from a preventive perspective. Throughout the process, we continuously monitored whether various groups were sufficiently connected to the project.

Only the medium-rent sector housing was completed during the Cartesius project term. Throughout the process, both the project coordinators and the residents involved have taken into account the people who will be moving into the neighbourhood as much as possible.

Social design of new housing developments

spatial perspective

People's living environment affects the frequency and manner in which neighbours meet and interact with each other and local organisations. The overarching lesson from the spatial perspective:

Spacial design can either promote or limit social interaction. In other words, a social housing development starts at the drawing board.

A mix of functions makes a neighbourhood interesting. A combination of housing, business and social functions (e.g., a community centre or playground) draws people out and encourages them to spend time in their neighbourhood. This increases the likelihood of repeatedly meeting neighbours and establishing informal contact. In spatial design, try not to create 'sleeping' neighbourhoods that require people to travel outside the neighbourhood for services and amenities. In a large shopping centre, people tend to blend into the crowd and do not regularly meet their immediate neighbours. In spatial design, aim for a basic mix of functions at the very least. A bakery, pub or coffee shop can boost social interaction significantly.

Incorporate degrees of freedom into the spatial design. Neighbourhoods are often designed ten years in advance according to the prevailing design principles of that time. We don't know what the world will look like in ten years. By the time of completion, there may be an additional need for meeting spaces, heat mitigation measures, or an entirely new form of sports in public spaces. Planning and accounting for every square metre removes the flexibility to respond to such changes. Keeping an undesignated plot free can offer a solution, providing opportunities to work with the

new residents and social parties to design the final piece of the neighbourhood. If no suitable use is identified for the plot, it will, at worst, simply become an additional green space in the neighbourhood.

Be creative with temporary land use. Some building plots often remain vacant for years, while the surrounding blocks have already been completed. A temporary site cabin used as a meeting place, a vegetable garden or a dirt track can turn a vacant lot into a lively area that benefits the neighbourhood's first residents. Temporary designations also provide opportunities to test things with residents. Designing portable, adaptable or reusable facilities creates room for experimentation. If a temporary function is a success, a permanent placement for it can be considered. The temporary nature need not be a limitation; on the contrary, it can be a driver for dynamic and flexible neighbourhood development.



Portable raised vegetable beds in Cartesius

Construction was continuously underway during the project in Cartesius. As a result, amenities such as the picnic benches and raised vegetable beds were often temporary. As such, considerable work has been done with portable and modular elements in public spaces. This also allows temporary amenities to be reused in the area later.

New neighbourhoods, in particular, benefit from meeting spaces in the form of a community centre or youth hangout space. Such amenities provide a space for new residents to get to know each other and for resident initiatives to flourish. Such spaces should be planned, if possible, and efforts should be made to organise social activities there in the early years. If residents rely on amenities in other neighbourhoods, it helps to temporarily bring them closer. This could be a temporary community centre, for example. A few warmly furnished site cabins can do a lot in terms of visibility, bringing residents together, and organising initial activities. Once people are familiar with the options, it becomes easier to direct them to the permanent facility.

BOKS Jongerencultuurhuis has a facility about a kilometre away from Leeuwesteyn. Although the distance is minimal, they take the effort to bring activities and materials to the neighbourhood. This informal offering familiarises young people with the activities and the people who work there, providing an entry point for the staff to get to know the young people and encourage them to visit the permanent location.

Cartesius residents reported that it became more difficult to make spontaneous contact as more residential blocks were completed, leading them to feel more anonymous in their own neighbourhood. Consequently, they frequently expressed a desire for a common meeting place amid the residential blocks. Particularly in the early phase of neighbourhood development, there is an opportunity here for developers, municipalities and local organisations. Facilitating informal meeting places for residents early on enables the sense of community to develop together with the neighbourhood.

Amenities are more than capacity numbers and catchment areas.

There may be barriers that make it difficult to use an amenity. These barriers could be physical, such as busy roads, railways and waterways. Designers should also consider perceived barriers. Residents are unlikely to visit a community centre in 'a different neighbourhood'.

Neither Leeuwesteyn nor Cartesius have a community centre. In terms of capacity and proximity, residents have access to a community centre in an adjoining neighbourhood.

In both neighbourhoods, residents indicated that the busy road between the neighbourhoods is both a physical and a perceived barrier to leaving the neighbourhood. The physical and perceived barrier requires extra effort to get residents from Leeuwesteyn and Cartesius to the community centre.

In Leeuwesteyn, many parents do not let their children go to the community centre alone. Also, the community centre in Leidsche Rijn bears the name of the neighbourhood in which it is located (Buurtcentrum Hoge Weide). As a result, residents from Leeuwesteyn do not feel that the facility is intended for them as well.



The new skate track at Willem-Alexander Park

A large skate park has been built in Leeuwesteyn. Co-designed by skaters, the skate park accommodates skaters of all skill levels and has become extremely popular among its target audience. The social partners in the neighbourhood organised activities in the new park from the beginning. For example, they offer informal classes and loan equipment to children who want to learn to use a skateboard or children's scooter. Mutual agreements have been made with the parties involved to monitor the atmosphere in the park and prevent any one subgroup from dominating the skate park. This ensures the skate park remains a safe and enjoyable space for people of all ages and skill levels.

Construction of hardware also requires a commitment to software. A newly constructed playground or sports facility stands to benefit from activity planning by social partners in the initial months. This could include activities organised to draw attention to the playground, teaching children a new sport, or monitoring the atmosphere of a new place. Spatial and social parties must cooperate to make this work well together. A lot of the potential of a new place can remain untapped if only the spatial structure is constructed.

At Cartesius, a spontaneous resident initiative emerged for a Christmas social event. The project coordinators capitalised on this by placing picnic benches and Christmas trees in public spaces. Residents could write Christmas wishes on wooden baubles and hang them in the tree. This both shaped the location and gave it significance, serving as a compelling example of placemaking. The picnic benches were left in place after Christmas and are now used as a meeting place.

Courtyard housing with communal gardens encourages contact within each residential block. Residents can easily connect in the communal courtyard garden. However, the closed 'blocks' and the block-level split between social rent and private sector housing reduce the likelihood of contact between different residential blocks. The inward orientation of the homes and the lack of a mix within the blocks can even create an 'us vs them' feeling for some residents.



A courtyard block in Leeuwesteyn.

Provide safe play areas for children from the very beginning. A safe, dedicated playground is especially important during times of construction.



Temporary playground

In Leeuwesteyn, playgrounds are being designed in collaboration with residents to align as closely as possible with their wishes. One side effect of this is that the playgrounds are installed late in the process. This led to questions and concerns among residents about a safe playground for young children. Ultimately, a temporary play area was set up as a stopgap, using old equipment from the municipal depot. A fence around it kept the children out of the construction traffic.

Particularly in the first few years, many residents have questions about and an interest in the spatial developments in their new neighbourhood. The questions will mainly concern construction, construction nuisances, parking, lighting, modifications to public spaces, speed limits, trash and additional greenery. It is important to offer an easy way for people to learn more about these topics. In addition to an official website, it is also helpful to have a physical location people can visit. This could be a service desk, a weekly meeting at a community centre, or a dedicated site cabin. This approachable method of contact ensures that many questions and concerns can be addressed before they lead to greater annoyance and complaints.

Clean and safe are prerequisites for people to be socially active in a neighbourhood. If these aspects are not up to scratch, residents will be largely concerned with reporting and fixing problems and will not get around to the social aspects of the neighbourhood.



During the first 'A Clean Cartesius Together' cleanup campaign

In Cartesius, residents took the initiative to collect litter together every two months. This simple, informal activity not only contributes to a cleaner neighbourhood but also provides an opportunity to get to know each other better and share responsibility for the environment.

A visual logo helps to establish a new neighbourhood's identity. The logo can be used in spatial design elements throughout the neighbourhood. It helps if the logo also appeals to children, such as an animal or a boat. It can also help to assign a theme to a new neighbourhood. Examples include the 'Blue Zone' in Cartesius and the 'edible neighbourhood' in Rijnvliet. Try to incorporate this theme in the street design, street names and activities organised in the neighbourhood.



A mosaic made during the Leeuwefesteyn neighbourhood party. The five most beautiful mosaics have been installed in the public space around the primary school.

In Leeuwesteyn, the image of a lion was used. Large concrete lion statues are scattered throughout the public spaces and the local children's centre also has a logo featuring a lion. The logo is popular with the children, and lions are a common element in their artwork or crafts.



At home in Cartesius

During the Cartesius neighbourhood party, current and future residents could write or draw on tiles what 'home' means to them. The tiles will be given a permanent place in the neighbourhood in the future.

Not everyone consciously chooses to live in a specific neighbourhood. In times of housing shortage, many people have little choice: they are assigned to a social housing unit or selected for a rental property by lottery, which can result in them ending up in a neighbourhood they did not consciously choose to live in. For some, that means living in an 'edible' or 'car-free' neighbourhood - themes that may not appeal to everyone. This affects the engagement with which people enter their new living environment; it requires a conscious commitment to meeting each other and exploring the commonalities that connect residents, regardless of neighbourhood design or theme.

Communicate clearly about a neighbourhood's possibilities and limitations in terms of communication from the municipality, developers, and estate agents. For example, the limited number of parking spaces is not always emphasised equally by all parties. This can lead to unnecessary surprise and irritation among residents and is still sometimes overlooked in communication, especially with second or later generations of residents. It is also important to clearly distinguish between permanent and temporary facilities.

Be clear about the use and capabilities of communal areas. Residents are often interested in playing a role in things like tending to green spaces or celebrating a birthday in a communal area. If the options are not clearly communicated, residents may be hesitant to use them or feel awkward toward other residents. There is no need to lay out everything in detail, but provide direction with some clear guiding principles for the intended use.

Keep the visual differences between residential blocks with different housing types subtle. Some distinction is unavoidable, but residential blocks can be given a similar appearance through similar brick types and architectural styles. When designing courtyard gardens, strive to maintain a consistent level of functionality and quality.

The private sector residential blocks in Leeuwesteyn have a name for each block and cut-out letters on the facades. The social rent homes lack these features. Besides providing a visual distinction, this also affects the perception of identity of a block's residents. It is much more fun for a child to say, "I live in the 'Ronduit' block," than if their block lacks a name. Try to avoid these small visual differences.

The social dynamics of new housing developments

resident perspective

New housing developments are interesting habitats from a social perspective. New housing developments accommodate hundreds or thousands of people who suddenly become neighbours. What follows is a period of familiarisation with each other, norm setting and acclimatising to the new environment. Knowledge and awareness of these dynamics can help organisations address them effectively.

“Moving is a life change and often shapes behaviour in the years that follow.”

People fall into a variety of customs and patterns around the move.

Examples include the mode of transportation used, the route to work, and the manner and place in which people congregate and exercise. This is an excellent time to encourage people to use public transport, exercise more or play outdoors. If people have the opportunity to do this from the start, they can make it part of their regular patterns and customs. Don't wait two years to add a bus stop or children's sports activities; you will have missed the most crucial opportunity.

For the first few months, new residents are primarily concerned with preparing their own homes. Activities and events organised at this stage might elicit a limited response. However, residents do need basic information at this stage.

This need can be fulfilled by having a map of practical and social information ready at the time of handover, for example. This can be used to share information such as emergency numbers and garbage bin locations. This also provides an opportunity to introduce the organisations and amenities in the neighbourhood.

The move provides a natural opportunity for people to connect. Everyone is working on practical matters such as buying flooring, taking out internet subscriptions or borrowing tools. The garden fences have also not yet been built and the curtains have not yet been hung, making this an incredibly 'visible' period for new neighbours. This period can be supported digitally by having an application ready upon handover, with which residents can share practical questions concerning the move. Providing a neighbourhood tool shed or 'library' is also an easy way to facilitate contact.

Residents of a neighbourhood or residential block seek out shared norms and values. Until what time can children play outside? What kind of behaviour do we expect from neighbours? People's expectations, habits and perceptions will differ. The key lies in getting to know each other's expectations and taking them into account. While this is ultimately up to the residents themselves, professionals can play a role in facilitating the introduction.



Sports facilities at the Dafne Schippers Bridge

De belangrijkste waarden van een gezonde gemeenschap in Cartesius

- Inclusief**
 - Onzen naar elkaar
 - Open houding
 - Gehoord en gezien worden
 - Interesse in elkaar
 - Verschuiven
 - communicatie behoeftes
- Gedeelde ervaring**
 - Samen doen
 - iets nieuws creëren
 - Ontdekken
- Samen**
 - Ontmoeten
 - Verbinding
 - Samen klagen
 - Gezelligheid
 - Saamhorigheid
- Buiten**
 - Buiten zijn
 - Groen
 - Toegankelijke openbare ruimte
 - Sportactiviteiten
 - School
- Veiligheid**
 - Betrokkenheid
 - Vertrouwd
 - Toegankelijkheid
 - Sociale controle
- Vrij**
 - Laagdrempelig
 - Vrijwillig
 - Verantwoordelijkheid

Dit doen we:

- Sociale activiteiten
- Borrel
- Fest
- Samen yoga, hardlopen
- Actieve WhatsApp community
- Fysiek
- Speelplekken
- Moedertuinen
- Buurthuis
- Praktoord
- Picknicktafels
- Veiligheid
- Verkeersveiligheid
- Verlichting
- Bewegingsruimte
- Wonen
- Interne verhuizen

Randvoorwaarden:

- Duidelijkheid over welke organisatie waarover gaat.
- Aansprekingspunten
- Regels, afspraken, normen

We doen dit samen:

- Hof van Cartesius
- Bewoners in aangrenzende buurten
- Oekraïners

In Cartesius, residents attended creative sessions and shared their dreams and perspectives on what a healthy and pleasant neighbourhood could look like. This led to the above vision of the future, as well as a decision-making framework for choices and initiatives for the neighbourhood. This enabled residents to shape the development of their neighbourhood collectively.

The first few years after moving are perceived negatively by a portion of people. The house may have been purchased or rented with the artist's grandiose impression in mind, and that expectation will not be met in the first few years. Construction is ongoing all around you, and public spaces, amenities, and green spaces are often only completed toward the end of the development process. Not everyone is prepared for this, which can affect their quality of life. This is precisely the stage at which a community can make a difference. Sharing experiences, information and small victories can reinforce the sense of belonging.

For children, a move can be deeply impactful. They are plucked from their familiar surroundings and moved to a new neighbourhood. This often goes hand in hand with changing schools, sports clubs and friends. Some children deal with this smoothly, while others may feel lonely and exhibit deviant behaviour.

New housing developments or blocks can become a perceived ‘enclave’ among older neighbourhoods. New housing developments often feature a different architectural style and demographic. This can lead to anonymity and polarisation between areas. Be aware of this and try to bridge the familiarity gap between neighbourhoods. This could involve organising regular tours of the new area and inviting surrounding neighbourhoods to participate in activities. The same applies the other way around. When surrounding neighbourhoods are included in the development, they are often open to inviting residents from the new area to their own events. Try to do this on a small scale and offer help when a broader invitation creates barriers in aspects such as cost or capacity.

Living in a new environment can cause increased dissatisfaction with one's situation. People are abruptly implanted among a wide variety of new neighbours. There may be significant differences among residents in terms of their lifestyle, financial situation, and self-sufficiency. People may tend to compare themselves to their new neighbours, which can lead to dissatisfaction with their own situation. In sociology, this is also known as relative deprivation. In addition to dissatisfaction, this can also create a greater barrier to seeking help.

This is particularly true of financial aid. Where residents may previously have lived on a street where everyone had a similar financial situation, they may now live among ‘rich neighbours’. While the new front door looks nice, the financial situation behind it often remains unchanged. People are increasingly confronted with neighbours who are financially better off, which makes it harder to seek help. Consequences may include families from less affluent backgrounds not allowing their children to play with other children. It may even lead to increased spending on expensive items to make the financial situation appear better than it actually is.

The move may lead to a period of increased financial vulnerability. A move always involves costs, both expected and unexpected. Residents who are already in a financially difficult position are often unable to pay these additional costs, resulting in the accrual of debt. This can make the situation seem hopeless and stressful. In addition, many people lose part of their social safety net with the move and do not yet know how to find the available amenities in the new neighbourhood. For organisations concerned with people's income status, it is especially important to be visible and approachable in these first few months.

New residents sometimes come from priority neighbourhoods where numerous activities were organised. This is usually not yet the case in a new neighbourhood, which may cause residents to miss the old neighbourhood or simply become bored. This holds especially true for children. Getting organised activities going requires a more active, entrepreneurial attitude. People can be supported with additional guidance for resident initiatives and by actively communicating amenities and opportunities.

Sometimes, residential blocks in old neighbourhoods are demolished and residents are simultaneously offered housing in a new housing development. This can often even be in the same residential block. Be aware that residents who previously lived together will seek each other out again. This will create cliques within the new residential blocks. Existing dynamics will be preserved, for better or for worse, which can cause residents not from the former residential block to feel like outsiders.

Organisations in new housing developments

organisational perspective

Organisations can play a significant role in kickstarting socially inclusive housing developments and accelerating community formation. Kickstarting requires a different approach than in existing neighbourhoods. Building on the lessons from Chapters 2 and 3, this chapter describes how organisations can contribute to achieving social and healthy neighbourhoods. Our overarching lesson learned:

“By putting extra effort into new housing developments in the first few years, organisations collaborating with residents can make a major contribution toward achieving social, healthy and pleasant neighbourhoods.”

We start by sharing lessons learned about prioritising new housing developments (4.1) and lessons that can contribute to successful collaboration (4.2). This is followed by practical lessons on working in new housing developments (4.3) and dealing with resident initiatives (4.4).

4.1 Priority for new housing developments

Be present from the beginning. After the handover, a new housing development enters a formative phase. It pays for organisations to be emphatically present at this stage and to help residents form a social neighbourhood. This helps prevent problems pertaining

to social, safety and personal aspects later on. In practice, however, the social sector often responds too late. Only when problems arise do they become more vocal and take action, demanding attention at the decision-making tables. By that point, the opportunity has already been missed, and it takes more effort and money to repair the damage than would have been required for preventive measures.

Current distribution models are inadequate for addressing the needs of new housing developments. Working in a new housing development requires a different approach than working in existing neighbourhoods. The social infrastructure has not yet been established, and residents are not yet familiar with one another. For organisations, this formative phase is about getting to know residents, defusing tensions and helping residents' initiatives take off. This takes more time and attention in a new neighbourhood than in existing ones. Have capacity and assignments ready with community organisations as soon as the handover begins. Ensure that new housing developments are a strategic focus in project mandates and annual planning, avoiding reactive and retrospective approaches. In major cities with continuous development, stable, long-term funding is essential to prevent recurring disputes about resource allocation.

Look beyond numbers - stories are also data. Choices and urgency are often determined by quantitative data. Comparing data and identifying trends requires multiple measurement points. That data does not yet exist for new neighbourhoods, and there is a risk that they will be overlooked in the allocation of attention and resources within organisations. In addition, data doesn't say much while blocks are still awaiting handover. As such, in the early years, it is important to listen carefully to signals from residents and the organisations closely connected to them. Don't be afraid to make decisions based on those signals, even if the supporting quantitative data is still lacking.



One of the meeting events to establish informal contact with residents.

4.2 Tips for good collaboration

It pays to join forces as professionals and start a project team for the new housing development in question. The following lessons learned can contribute to successful collaboration.

Lay a foundation of enthusiasts who know each other and meet frequently. Good cooperation begins with people investing in each other. This could be youth workers, community connectors, sports organisations, housing corporations, developers, the municipality, resident platforms, and engaged residents who are committed to improving their community. Parties often have limited knowledge of each other's priorities and interests. Devote time and attention to this. When parties are aware of each other's mission and purpose, it becomes much easier to identify common interests and establish effective collaborations. You can then agree on principles of cooperation within this group. Simply reaching a set of agreements often produces insightful conversations and can lead to a group discussing expectations among each other.

For the parties involved, a new neighbourhood is a great opportunity to get to know each other better. While many parties claim to work well together, in practice, this is sometimes limited to having each other's phone numbers. Monthly meetings to share signals from the new neighbourhood, discuss cases and set out concrete actions can help to ensure good cooperation. The meeting frequency may vary, though experience shows that the less often people meet, the more attention is focused on the negative excesses. If you also want to discuss harnessing the positive potential of the new neighbourhood, a higher frequency is required.

During the Building a Neighbourhood Together project in Leeuwesteyn, the first three team meetings were spent getting to know the organisations. Each team member gave a brief ten-minute presentation on their own organisation, which was then discussed for twenty minutes. This led to numerous questions, new insights and mutual understanding. The parties found many similarities, which facilitated their collaborations.

There is always a history among professionals working in a neighbourhood. Parties have sometimes been working in overlapping areas for years, leading to both pleasant and less pleasant experiences. Prejudices and personal annoyances will exist between parties and can hinder cooperation in a new housing development. Try to gain insight into and discuss negative experiences while highlighting and building on the positive elements. A new neighbourhood offers a great opportunity for organisations to collaborate again, whether through familiar methods or by exploring a new approach.

Ensure a warm handover within and between organisations when moving. Residents may have already received support from the same health or welfare organisation in their old neighbourhood. Having a more complete understanding enables organisations to properly and promptly assist residents. Try to obtain consent to share the data, but also give people a chance to start with a clean slate if they want that.



Sports activity in Willem-Alexander Park, Leeuwesteyn

Having a project leader or community manager on the social side of a new housing development is essential. They can serve as a central coordinator, bringing the parties together and monitoring overall progress. If the social side is left to its own devices, the parties may not pay enough attention to new housing developments or may all tackle their aspects of it independently. Ideally, the project leader should have a collaborative mindset and a hands-on attitude. It is also important that they can connect the social and spatial sides and easily connect with residents.

In Cartesius, the community manager played a pivotal role in connecting and guiding the community to strengthen it. The manager kept in touch with active residents and organisations, listening to what was going on in the neighbourhood and helping steer initiatives in the right direction. In some cases, this involved providing residents with guidance when plans became too big or unrealistic.

Based on the principles of Asset Based Community Development (ABCD), the community manager worked with the resources available in and for the neighbourhood—such as facilitating a meeting space or providing food at meetings—to encourage meetings and collaboration.

The manager also monitored the process that residents went through, from funding to coordinating with landowners and other relevant parties. A key requirement for a strong community was to identify and address residents' questions and expectations promptly, while communicating honestly about what is and is not feasible.

When assigning the coordinating role, take the balance of power between organisations into account. Assigning the role to a party active in the neighbourhood may affect the balance of equality among social organisations, as, should it come to that, one party has the final say on budget spending. There is also a risk that other parties will rely too heavily on the coordinating party for practical execution.

The coordinating role can be assigned to anyone, but it may be best suited to the municipality. Although the municipality cannot be considered completely independent due to its position as financier and policymaker, it is often seen as a logical party to play a connecting role. A municipal official can also help clarify and navigate the often necessary bureaucratic processes surrounding citizen initiatives, as well as use project observations to enrich written policy, helping to bridge the gap between the neighbourhood and policy.

Developers play an important role. As a developer, consider the social side of the new housing development during the design phase, construction phase and post-completion period. For example, the developer can play a facilitating role for social activities in the neighbourhood, help with temporary uses for vacant plots, and clearly communicate spatial activities.

In Cartesius, the developers involved focus not only on the physical and procedural aspects of neighbourhood development, but also on the social dynamics. One of the developers served as the main point of contact for communication and was actively involved in the neighbourhood. Residents could approach them personally with questions about their living environment. This makes the developers' position in Cartesius unique.

Provide petty cash and ensure financial confidence for collaborative partners. Supporting resident initiatives often involves relatively small contributions. Not having to call the project manager for every €10 is liberating for the parties involved. This also accelerates the development of resident initiatives. A discretionary budget of a few hundred euros increases decisiveness and ownership, and instils confidence.

Provide resources to enable 'non-professional parties' to make a structural contribution. It is not fair to expect structural contributions to the work by a non-professional to be entirely voluntary.

Provide petty cash for minor expenses. This avoids excessive consultation and administration for relatively minor expenses such as a football or other incidental purchases. Ensure that residents are not hindered by red tape for small expenditures or forced to wait a long time for compensation. This can be a major obstacle to a resident initiative, especially for people with limited financial resources. Let people do the spending and transfer the total amount directly based on receipts.

4.3 Working in new housing developments

Organisations should pay extensive attention to getting to know the new residents. Create opportunities for people to connect and initiate informal conversations throughout the neighbourhood. As a team of professionals, try to engage in the overarching dialogue. Everyone is a point of contact in the early stages. In other words, a youth worker also listens actively to signals about adults, and a sports organisation also discusses topics beyond sports. It is fine for the initial conversations to involve a lot of small talk. It often takes until the third or fourth time before people feel comfortable to express their needs. Cases can then be shared and assigned to the appropriate party behind the scenes. Provide a warm handover

between organisations. When issues are brought to an organisation that isn't primarily responsible for them, it's important to provide as much context as possible upfront. This saves organisations unnecessary work and prevents residents from feeling like they are being given the runaround.

As a professional, also establish contact 'without an agenda'. This can be done by attending residents' evenings or events, or initiating spontaneous conversations in the neighbourhood. These are excellent opportunities to experience the atmosphere, pick up on non-verbal cues, identify needs and ask further questions where necessary. This will provide insight into how residents work to improve their community, where their shared interests lie and how their perception of 'living together' is evolving. Simply being present is also a way of showing your commitment, which residents see and often appreciate.

Combine the goals of organisations and residents. Investing in the network of professionals and residents reveals smart combinations, boosts the impact of individual measures, and makes the cooperation more rewarding.

The municipality of Utrecht built bee hotels throughout the city. During the search for locations, the official involved suggested the park in Leeuwesteijn.

In cooperation with the nature party 'Utrecht Natuurlijk' (naturally Utrecht), the largest bee hotel in Utrecht has been installed. The bee hotel is situated in the heart of a residential area, and people can walk through it.

The installation was accompanied by an educational programme at the nearby elementary school, effective communication about ecology to residents, and informational panels in the outdoor area. As a result, the spatial intervention has provided not only ecological value, but also educational and experiential value for the neighbourhood.

Regular walk-ins are more effective for some residents than emails or phone calls. Many residents would prefer an in-person visit to making a phone call. Consider holding a weekly consultation in a community centre or district office, for example. This applies to community workers, financial aid services, and social support services, for example. In addition to providing a low-threshold contact point, a regular presence at a central point increases the visibility of the service.

Proactive offerings are encouraged in the early stages of development. Once people have lived in their new neighbourhood for a few months, they start looking around to find out what is going on. This is a great time to work with residents



Flyer for initial contact in Leeuwesteijn.



Flyer for one of the activities organised by residents in Cartesius.

to organise a neighbourhood party, for example. This gives new residents a chance to meet one another, and initial needs and ideas can be assessed. Organising activities with residents creates a sense of responsibility and lays the groundwork for recurring events and traditions. It can also help to tie in with national initiatives or holidays. Consider, for example, Neighbours' Day, World Clean up Day, or an activity around a holiday.

Facilitate basic offerings for children in the neighbourhood from the beginning. This fosters friendships, helps organisations get to know the children and their parents, and helps the children settle into the new neighbourhood. This requires an upfront investment; accept that only a handful of children may show up the first few times. If you ensure continuity and good communication, the group will grow. Sports and culture are topics that appeal to many children. Be sure to organise activities during holidays, too. Not all children are in a position to be able to go on holiday. Use the contact as a starting point to hear from the children themselves what they would enjoy doing.



The weekly sports activity, Streetsports.

Development-focused sports activities in the park

In Leeuwesteijn, DOCK and SportUtrecht introduced the Streetsports programme. Every Friday, they offer a free sports activity in the park for children. In addition to sports, the activity also has a developmental purpose. The children recite the rules of the game together at the start of the activity and select a 'Legend of the Week' at the end. The Legend of the Week is a coveted title that can be won by demonstrating respectful behaviour. The methods and guidance provide a safe environment for new children to join a group and make friends. The activities help children and their families become better acquainted with each other and the youth organisations in the district; the children also discuss them at school, which increases awareness of these activities. In Leeuwesteijn, Streetsports attracted more children than the same activity in more established neighbourhoods. Nowadays, every Friday, a group of between twenty and fifty children gathers to play sports in the park.

Use children's events to get to know their parents. Talk to parents while they are dropping off and picking up their children, and encourage them to stay. One approach to this could be a cargo bike with coffee and tea. Frequently-seen parents may eventually be asked to play a small, informal role. This could be as simple as helping with cleanup or refereeing a game. Be realistic about expectations, however. Parents are often willing to help, but would rather not bear the official responsibility and have to be there week after week. It is rare for people to take on a structural role. Provide the opportunity to do so, but do not force it. Also, do not underestimate the role of schools as meeting places.

4.4 Dealing with residents' initiative

Play a supporting role in getting initiatives started. Where in other neighbourhoods, residents can join ongoing initiatives, these must be started from scratch in new housing developments. This requires a more active, entrepreneurial attitude from residents. Both the difficulty and the threshold to do so are much higher and sometimes unrealistic to expect. Organisations can play an important role here by actively communicating opportunities and providing additional guidance for resident initiatives early on. Keep an eye on residents' capacity in doing so. Do not overburden them, and be realistic in what they can contribute to a project in addition to their other daily activities.



Flyer for the vegetable gardening course that was available for a small fee at Cartesius.

Many residents (more than sixty) expressed an interest in vegetable gardening. Residents spontaneously started talking to organisations to see what they could do themselves and what the organisations could contribute to make this happen. The residents also received guidance from Utrecht Natuurlijk, an organisation with a lot of experience regarding community gardening. The combination of physical facilities and support gave residents the confidence and the skills to develop the initiative themselves.

Leave ownership with the resident initiative. Residents often know perfectly well what they want. Offer support, but avoid forcefully using the initiative to further your organisation's interests. Excessive pressure on an initiative to increase and expand can also cause residents to lose momentum and their sense of ownership. Residents often have ideas primarily to do something with residents from their own residential block or social group. That is fine—lean into that. However, if they indicate that they want to involve a wider group, social professionals can help coordinate that connection. Help establish contact and consider how the initiative could be expanded to appeal to a wider audience.

Neighbourhood party organised by residents In Leeuwesteyn, some of the residents had the idea to organise a neighbourhood party, and they set to work enthusiastically. The organisations only needed to remove a few obstacles and, upon request, provide parts of the programme. The result was the event Leeuwefesteyn, which featured a varied programme and many attendees from the neighbourhood. During the event, a social housing resident noted that he didn't see many residents from his own block. He was inspired to organise a smaller-scale event for his surrounding residential blocks. Together with a community connector, the possibilities were explored, resources were requested and the practical organisation was set up. The result was a fun summer evening barbecue with games for the children.



Programme elements of the Leeuwesteyn neighbourhood party.

In Cartesius, residents also took the initiative for a neighbourhood party. They thought carefully about communications and activities to engage as many people as possible. The developer also invited future residents to attend. It was a party by residents, for residents. With the support of the community manager and local parties, the day was a success, with numerous attendees. Residents have expressed a desire to repeat the event annually. Organising such an initiative takes time, but it provides connection, recognition, and the first shared tradition. Give residents room to initiate, guide them to financial opportunities, and ensure the availability of professionals as organisational partners. This helps build trust, connection and a shared neighbourhood culture from the start.

Contact with resident initiatives

The diversity of residents requires a diverse approach. If you want to get to know a diverse range of residents, utilise multiple communication channels. In addition to in-person contact, a digital infrastructure offers opportunities to connect residents and organisations.

| | | |
|-------|------------------------|---|
| 10:00 | 12:00 | Racefietsroute; trappen, lachen en samen genieten - pak je racefiets en kom mee op een sportieve fietstocht met je burens! |
| 10:30 | 11:30 | Bootcamp; zet je kracht in, daag jezelf uit en kom lekker zweten - doe mee met onze energieke bootcamp! |
| 13:00 | 14:30 | Wandeling Ontdek het Werkspoorkwartier; ga met Bepie Spruit op mee langs de 'rafelranden van de overkant'! |
| 14:30 | Start programma | |
| 15:00 | 17:00 | Buurtmarkt; doe mee met (interactieve) spellen, leer je burens beter kennen onder het genot van een drankje en muziek, en ontdek welke buurtinitiatieven er allemaal zijn! |
| 17:30 | 19:30 | Barbecue; van al dat spel en vertier krijg je honger - eet gezellig mee! |
| 19:30 | 21:00 | Pubquiz; verzamel je team en lest je kennis - strijd mee in onze gezellige pubquiz! |

Meld je aan voor 1 mei:
cartesius.community/buurtfeest

Mede mogelijk gemaakt door ZonMW en buurtbewoners

Cartesius neighbourhood party programme

- **WhatsApp groups** at the block or street level are established almost naturally and are, at a smaller scale, an effective way for residents to connect. For organisations, maintaining warm contact through a WhatsApp group can be helpful. Leave the WhatsApp group to the residents themselves. If your organisation wants to share a message in the group, ask a resident to do so.
- **A neighbourhood app can help establish contact with neighbours down the street, in another residential block or even several blocks away.** This also increases the likelihood of finding answers to more specific questions. For the digitally savvy population, simply making an app available is sufficient. Engaging groups of people who are less likely to install the app requires active outreach. This can be done by directing people to the app, helping them with the installation, and encouraging them to post their questions in the app.
- **Organisations can benefit significantly from an app.** An app provides an opportunity to gain insight into residents' questions and provide assistance where appropriate. The key here is to encourage residents to help each other as much as possible. However, organisations can serve as a backstop for questions that remain unanswered and monitor app security. In addition, being visible on an app offers an accessible way for people to connect with an organisation, such as through a private message.

At Cartesius, a mix of communication tools has been used from the start. Residents could post notices in the neighbourhood app, request or offer help, and report faults to the manager. WhatsApp was also used frequently. At the same time, residents reported feeling occasionally overwhelmed by the volume of messages. They expressed a desire to also use 'old-fashioned' flyers and bulletin boards for announcements and activities. Using different communication channels ensures that information reaches as many residents as possible.

Monitor the 'fairness' and 'inclusivity' of spatial resident initiatives.

Residents of more expensive residential blocks are often more likely to know how to contact organisations and authorities. If they request and receive a public space improvement, explore whether the same improvement may be relevant in other blocks. Keep an eye on the inclusivity of initiatives as well. It can be difficult for residents to raise this issue themselves, as they do not want to be seen as 'nagging neighbours'. There is a potential role here for organisations to amplify the voices that are often unheard.

In Leeuwesteijn, residents of a block of owner-occupied homes came up with an initiative to install flower beds along the edge of the park. They went through the appropriate official channels with the municipality, but this would only allow the flower beds to be installed in front of the owner-occupied homes. The relevant district office connected with the residents of the adjacent social housing units, after which the flower beds were extended across the entire strip.

One major concern in Cartesius was monitoring 'fairness' in spatial choices. In practice, residents of the first completed residential blocks—both in the middle-rent segment—had no trouble contacting organisations and government bodies with ideas for their living environment. The appointed community manager also played a connecting role in this regard. One of the residents' strengths was that they consciously considered whether the neighbourhood activities would also benefit future residents. For example, a variety of games were purchased for a New Year's activity. These are now available in public spaces for everyone to use. The games can be played either sitting or standing, are suitable for all ages, and range in difficulty from easy to challenging.

Be willing to allocate resources unevenly to accommodate varying levels of initiative.

Many residents will have the desire, resources and knowledge to take the initiative. In those cases, it is sufficient to be available and remove obstacles through an enthusiastic and supportive attitude. Others may need something more, extra or different to get their initiative going. This is where organisations can be particularly valuable. The

role of organisations here can vary from providing tips and establishing contact to guiding people through the development process. Be flexible in this; base your approach on opportunities instead of obstacles, and do it together. Bear in mind that not every resident is in a position to help develop their community. If people are facing urgent issues, such as financial insecurity, they may have other needs before engaging further with their community. As such, the level of initiative is related to the degree to which basic conditions are met. Do it together, being mindful of inequality and differences.

Dealing with residents' initiatives requires specific skills from the professional.

A professional involved with residents' initiatives should be someone who resonates with others' perspectives, communicates with ease, is dependable and familiar, and approaches things with a solution-oriented mindset. While some parties, such as youth workers and community connectors, are very adept at this, other organisations may lack personnel with these competencies. Try to be honest about this as an organisation and consider hiring a suitable person or enabling existing and willing staff to develop these competencies. Contact with residents is precious and delicate, and should be treated with care.



Residents collaborated with various parties to install insect hotels and neighbourhood library boxes.

Afterword

Local organisations, government bodies, and residents can do a lot together to foster contact, social cohesion, and resident initiatives in a new housing development. However, in many cases, a neighbourhood only receives extra social attention when problems arise. This creates a gap between the completion of spatial planning and the commitment of social parties. To achieve socially inclusive housing developments, spatial parties must adopt a more social perspective and social parties must adopt a more spatial perspective.

These first two pilot neighbourhoods solidified our belief in the added value of considering the social and community aspects in a new housing development from the outset. Despite not having all the hard data, we can see the preventive effect against loneliness and social problems, as well as the promotion of social cohesion. For social organisations, early contact with residents is highly beneficial. Organisations learn what is going on in a neighbourhood and can improve their services and awareness among new residents.

That early presence provides a form of trust, lowering the threshold for residents to ask for help in case of problems (with neighbours, work, loneliness or income). An early start also presents an excellent opportunity to not only initiate cooperation between social organisations, government bodies and residents, but also provide a solid foundation for years to come.

Some neighbourhoods will require such a presence longer than others. We share a responsibility in this regard to stay alert and keep each other focused. In our experience, this positive contact between social organisations, government bodies, and residents helps increase or regain trust in each other.

There will be numerous new housing developments in the coming years, and we believe that the social aspect should become a standard component of all new projects. We have learned a great deal in these first two neighbourhoods, but we are still far from finished or complete.

If you have any tips, comments or additions or simply an interest in getting started with socially inclusive housing developments in your area, please contact: martin.chaigneau@utrecht.nl

Appendices

These appendices provide more information on the work of the two ZonMw projects, Building a Neighbourhood Together and Building a Healthy Community.

6.1 Core teams

Core teams were used for the execution of the projects.

Leeuwesteyn core team

These professionals had experience in community-oriented care and social work, were well-acquainted with the district, and were connected to its local network. They coordinated collaboration during the process and took responsibility for implementing intermediate steps. The core team consisted of the following parties:

- DOCK (community connectors)
- SportUtrecht
- Indekerngezond (district platform)
- Wijkbureau Leidsche Rijn
- Jongerenwerk Utrecht

In addition to the core team, numerous other parties and residents were involved in the project on a project or topic-specific basis.

Core team principles

The core team decided on the following principles for cooperation and methodology:

- **Focus on the residents**

To achieve an effective approach, the focus must be on the residents. Projects are executed in co-creation with residents and local parties, which means that all projects

are based on current neighbourhood needs. This is not about simply executing requests; when executing projects, professionals should play a facilitating role and allow residents to take the initiative.

- **Serve the bigger picture**

Each partner should focus not only on completing its own work satisfactorily, but is also co-responsible for ensuring that the efforts of the other partners in the network operate smoothly. This also means that some work may fall outside the usual tasks or target audience of individual organisations.

- **Develop and experiment**

Our approach builds on what is already happening within our organisations. By working together, we learn from and with one another, thereby strengthening our cooperation. There is room to try new things—room for making mistakes, on the condition that we learn from those mistakes.

Cartesius core team and sub-core teams

In Cartesius, the lessons learned from Leeuwesteyn were applied by establishing a permanent core team, which was referred to as the project coordination group during the project term. The project coordination group consisted of the following parties: Wijkbureau West (municipality of Utrecht), Utrecht University, UMC Utrecht, University of Applied Sciences Utrecht and the Utrecht municipal health service. The coordination group maintained contact with the existing structure in the neighbourhood: the Cartesius covenant partners.

To reinforce the neighbourhood's social fabric, a common framework was created in collaboration with residents to identify shared values in their community. This led to several activities that were funded through the project, resulting in the emergence of several sub-core teams:

- Neighbourhood Party Team: residents, Wijkbureau West, DOCK social work.
- Vegetable Garden Team: residents, Wijkbureau West, green experts.

6.2 Activities under Building a Neighbourhood Together and Building a Healthy Community

Building a Neighbourhood Together started in December 2020 and was concluded in July 2023. Building a Healthy Community started in July 2024 and was concluded in July 2025. This chapter provides a brief description of the activities and an overall timeline of the projects.

Building a Neighbourhood Together

- **Formation of core team and initial planning**

The first three months were devoted to forming the core team and reaching a shared vision and commitment. Together, we developed a draft plan outlining the goals and methodology for the Building a Neighbourhood Together project.

COVID-19 lockdown measures presented a limitation in connecting with residents and organising activities together. At the same time, it offered additional urgency to the need for attention to loneliness and social cohesion in the neighbourhood. Many residential blocks in Leeuwesteyn were delivered during the COVID-19 measures and missed the natural contact moment that normally occurs with a large-scale move.

- **Getting to know residents and professionals**

Within the constraints of the COVID measures in effect, the core team went into the new neighbourhood as quickly as possible to establish informal contact with the new residents. They also worked to organise an online meeting titled “Working in New Housing Developments”. Existing knowledge about new housing developments was exchanged and retrieved during an interactive session with around forty professionals.

A session for residents and professionals was held in the summer of 2021 at the local high school. Ideas were obtained from residents using the simple question, “What do you think would be fun to do with your new neighbours?”. This resulted in an initial list of projects and names of residents and professionals who were interested in them. We set to work using that list.

- **Implementation of subprojects**

As the COVID measures were gradually reduced, the first subprojects were implemented. These included sports events, neighbourhood parties, cultural activities, coffee clubs, a Christmas tree drive, the development of a social map, the installation of a bee hotel, a neighbourhood barbecue, and a neighbourhood app. .

- **Conclusion and continuation**

A major final meeting was held in July 2023, where lessons learned were shared and the pilot phase was concluded. The core team has been tasked with continuing the project for the Leeuwesteyn neighbourhood. In addition, presentations will be held in 2023, 2024 and 2025 to raise awareness of the social component of new housing developments, obtain administrative commitment from the organisations involved, and apply and further develop the methodology in other new housing developments.

Building a Healthy Community

- **Formation of core team**

The first few months were used to form the project coordination group and write an action plan for each project component.

- **Connect with residents and create ownership**

We got to know the residents, researched where their energy lies, and let them determine the concrete actions we could take over the course of a year to foster connection and a sense of community. We held two resident meetings to this end:

- 1 Goal: Create a shared understanding of what is important to residents in a community. In other words, what are the most important values for a healthy community (see Figure 11)?
- 2 Goal: Have residents translate the shared values for a healthy community into concrete activities. This led to the creation of the Cartesius agenda for social activities by residents.

- **Organisation and execution of activities**

Aimed at creating connections, residents set about organising their own activities, sometimes with the support of professionals:

- 1 Christmas and New Year's activities:
 - Christmas social with a brightly lit Christmas tree and wooden baubles to write wishes on for your neighbours. As part of the project, we also arranged picnic benches, which are still widely used today.
 - New Year's activity on New Year's Day with chocolate milk and games. Residents can store the games and bring them out during future activities.
- 2 Raised vegetable beds: more than sixty residents actively participate in vegetable gardening. They worked hard with an active sub-core team to build raised vegetable beds. They also set up a vegetable gardening course with the help of professionals.
- 3 Neighbourhood party: a neighbourhood party was organised with another sub-core team on 17 May 2025. A wide range of activities were organised, including a tour of the neighbourhood, a boot camp, a creative activity, and a barbecue! Even Michel Poulain, one of the founders of the Blue Zones, was in attendance to open the neighbourhood party.

- **Completion and continuation** In June 2025, we held the Community Building Knowledge Workshop: From Meeting to Connection, where, among other things, we shared knowledge from this project. The project garnered national and international attention at conferences and conventions, in part because it was interwoven into the Building a Healthy Neighbourhood covenant. The covenant working group was tasked with taking over from July 2025 and maintaining activities in areas with a continued interest from the neighbourhood.

General overview of the projects
Building a Neighbourhood Together
and Building a Healthy Community





