

The Utrecht Standard for Participation

Public participation leads to better projects, better appraisals, better decision making and greater support. For every project, the question is when and to what extent residents should be involved. The Utrecht Standard for Participation gives you an answer to this question: [this is how we do it in Utrecht](#). The Utrecht Standard for Participation was established in April 2010 by Utrecht's municipal council.

The Utrecht Standard for Participation is made up of five steps:

- 1) Analyse the field of strength
- 2) Determine level of participation
- 3) Identify actors with core message
- 4) Draw up a timetable
- 5) Identify means of participation

By [participation](#), we understand 'the involvement of residents and other stakeholders at the earliest possible stage in drawing up, preparing, implementing and evaluating policies.'¹

In addition to public participation, the concept of public consultation is also important. [Public consultation](#) is the formal opportunity for the parties and stakeholders involved to make their opinions known to policy makers.

Under the Utrecht Standard for Participation which is described here, participation occurs as early as possible in the process. Public consultation is the formal, final stage of this process, when every individual resident or party involved has a last chance to respond in specific terms. Public consultation occurs according to legally prescribed norms or, in the absence of such norms, according to the Utrecht public consultation regulations.

Guideline

The Utrecht Standard for Participation provides a guideline for officials who are responsible for ensuring public participation in policy-making and projects.² The standard can be customized according to the project, but it also delivers an improvement in the quality of participation and enables standardization.

The standard is not a strict protocol, but it does provide guidance in the right direction. If everyone observes this standard, there will be fewer variations, and less confusion and unpredictability. Additionally, the standard aims to involve residents and other stakeholders at an earlier stage and create a form of participation that involves face-to-face meetings. If stakeholders are taken seriously from the outset, their input can yield greater dividends. After all, it is early in the process that there is the most room for manoeuvre and those who become established as partners in the dialogue will be the most likely to make a constructive contribution.

The Five steps

Conduct a force-field analysis

For every project or policy development plan, it is necessary to conduct a force-field analysis. This analysis looks at all the stakeholders, what their interests are, what influence they have, their opinion

¹ This does not refer to participation in the sense of playing a role in the society, also known as social participation or labour-market participation. That involves encouraging citizens to play as independent a role as possible in society, and taking responsibility for contributing to society to the best of their ability.

² The specialist services are responsible for participation in policy and projects. The neighbourhood offices play an advisory role in this at the neighbourhood level.

of the project and how important they will be to the success of the project. For this, you can speak to the (assistant) neighbourhood manager for advice, and make the most of his/her local knowledge and experience, and contacts with residents, interests groups and other networks.

Stakeholders include, for example: current residents, future residents, those living nearby, business people, students, sportsmen and women, the project developer, action groups, social organizations, advisory boards and neighbourhood councils. Neighbourhood councils focus on general local interests and on the policy-making and planning process more than, for example, neighbourhood committees and interest groups. Bodies such as the Municipal Executive, the Municipal Council, specialist services and other departments can help you to develop the force-field analysis.

2) Determine the level of participation

Determine the overall level of participation in the project or policy plan. The Utrecht Standard for Participation differentiates between four levels of participation: information, consultation, advice and co-production.

3) Identify the actors and a core message for each

On the basis of the force-field analysis, identify which actors will be involved in the participation phase. In principle, the level of participation determined earlier will continue to apply to these actors, but of course it is also possible that a specific target group will exert greater or lesser influence within the project than was envisaged at the outset. For example, the neighbourhood council may be asked for its advice, even though its overall participatory level has been classified as 'information'. A core message needs to be formulated for each actor.

4) Draw up a timetable

Draw up a timetable on the basis of the various stages in the project. We ask residents and stakeholders for input at those moments when their input can still be acted on more easily. Some phases lend themselves better to participation than others. Identify which phases the project will consist of and in which phase you currently are: initiation phase, definition phase, design phase, preparation phase, implementation phase.

Neighbourhood councils are always asked to give their opinions or advice in the first phases of the project or policy preparation. In the initial phase, it is important to ensure that you know whether public consultation is legally required and, if that is not the case, whether it is advisable for opportunities for public consultation to be incorporated anyway.

5) Identify which means of participation and methods you will use

Once the actors have been identified and the timetable has been drawn up, the means of participation then need to be chosen. The desire of residents and the municipality to involve stakeholders more closely also has implications for the means of participation. As well as the traditional methods (such as local newsletters, consultation evenings and sounding board groups), you can also think about using more innovative methods such as internet panels, digital debates or 'pressure cookers' to reach out to other target groups and gain better results. A neighbourhood council advisory paper is also a possibility. More information about means of participation can be found on www.participedia.nl.

Work arrangements

The Utrecht Standard for Participation also has a place in the work processes of all the services. This involves the following specific work agreements.

A) **Every time the municipality issues advice and the Municipal Council makes a proposal**, a participation section must be added. Depending which phase the project is in, this should be a statement of intent relating to participation, or a statement on the results of participation and how these have been used. The Executive and the Council can then make a decision on the basis of the best possible information.

B) At the start of each project / policy development plan, draft a communication and **participation/public consultation section**³ that explains the main points in the following areas:

- who the stakeholders for this project/policy development plan are;
- the general level of participation;
- whether there is a legal requirement for public consultation, and if not, whether public consultation will occur anyway;
- when, how and in what form a communication and participation plan will be written;
- the advice of the neighbourhood office.

C) Having finalized the initial document, make sure that a **communication and participation plan** is written. This will include the following points:

- the results of the force-field analysis;
- the various actors involved;
- the core message (for each actor and each phase);
- the objectives (for each actor and phase);
- the level of participation (for each actor and phase);
- the means of participation (for each actor and phase);
- the timetable (including both the formal public consultation procedure and decision moments, and the communication and participation with residents and stakeholders).
- the budget (including contingency cover).

D) In each subsequent phase, it is important to look at whether adjustments are necessary to **the communication and participation plan**. Is the timetable still feasible? Are there new actors? Is more funding needed? If necessary, conduct a new force-field analysis.

E) In written communication and at large-scale meetings, an overview is provided of what has happened previously in terms of communication and decision-making moments and what is yet to happen (known as **public consultation/participation information procedure**).

The levels of participation

Residents and other stakeholders need to be kept well-informed about every plan, but some plans lend themselves more to face-to-face meetings than others. Residents and neighbourhood councils have indicated that they would like greater involvement. This can sometimes conflict with the wish (also on the part of residents!) to make progress as quickly as possible. It is therefore important that participation is used in a focused way and a clear assessment of this needs to be made in advance.

The Utrecht Standard for Participation differentiates between four levels of participation: information, consultation, advice and co-production.

1. Information

The municipal council will set the agenda for decision-making itself, and keep the involved parties well informed. The involved parties will not be asked for their input. They play a listening role. In actual fact, this is not a form of participation.

Plans are drawn up by the municipality without the stakeholders having any influence. They will however be kept updated by means of – for example – a neighbourhood newsletter, an information evening or a website.

2. Consultation

The municipality determines the agenda itself, but enters into a dialogue with the parties involved when developing policy. Opinions, experiences and ideas are noted, but the municipality is not obliged to take account of them. The role of the participant is consultative.

³ You can find a useful template for the communication/participation section in Word. Go to 'new document' and then choose 'participation section'.

Plans are drawn up by the municipality and then put before the stakeholders. The reactions of the stakeholders are taken forward as part of the subsequent process.

3. Advice

The municipality sets the agenda, but involved parties can add problems and solutions. Their ideas play a full role in the development of policy. The municipality commits itself to the results, in principle, but may also depart from these, if it provides a reasoned argument for doing so. The role of the participant is to give advice.

The parties involved can also make proposals on their own initiative. These need not correspond to the plans of the municipality of the developer. The neighbourhood council always has the right to advise, whether this advice is solicited or not.

4. Co-production

The municipality and those involved set the agenda and search for solutions together. The municipality commits itself to accepting these solutions when making its decisions. The role of the participant is that of full partner.

The parties involved sit around the table together to discuss basic principles and develop the plan or design together. This often occurs at a very early stage in order to help shape the process. This is known as an open-plan process.

The special role of the neighbourhood council

The neighbourhood council always has the right to advise the Municipal Executive, whether this advice is solicited or not. Additionally, other levels of participation may also apply to the neighbourhood council. Together with the neighbourhood council (via the neighbourhood office), determine whether and when they will be asked to give their advice. The covenant between the municipality and the neighbourhood council is included as an attachment.

Selecting the level of participation

The questions below will help to determine the desired level of participation. These questions can also be reviewed on www.participedia.nl (only in Dutch). By translating these questions into your project/policy development and then following them step by step, you will be able to compile global recommendations for all the actors involved. This will enable everyone to see why you have chosen a particular level of involvement. Once the questions have been answered, advice on the desired level of participation can be read in the answer tables.

This advice serves as a guideline and will require further development with the neighbourhood office and the communication bureau. Other factors may also play a role in determining the final level of participation. The municipality makes the final decision on the level of participation.

- A. What is the importance of realizing the project: is it in the interests of the neighbourhood or of the city/region? For projects that are in the interests of the neighbourhood, the influence of local residents will be greater than those of city-wide/region-wide importance.
- B. How great is the (expected) effect on the living environment and safety? If a project will have a significant effect on the local living environment and safety, the parties involved may be accorded more influence than where the effect is limited.
- C. Is the knowledge input from the target groups necessary? Some projects are very difficult to realize without using the knowledge of the various parties involved. For those projects, a form of participation that involves face-to-face meetings is the most appropriate.
- D. How much scope is there for influence? What has already been decided within the legal or municipal policy frameworks? If everything has already been decided, participation can only create

a false expectation of influence. The earlier in the process that you think about this question, the more scope you can offer in many cases.

- E. Are there factors that stand in the way of participation, such as time or money? For some projects, the pressure to achieve tangible results quickly is greater than the need to take account of the wishes of local residents. In such cases, time is a restrictive factor in participation. A lack of money or a lack of interest in participation can also influence the level of participation.

A In whose interests is the project: neighbourhood													
B	Effect on living environment and safety?	high	high	high	high	high	high	low	low	low	low	low	low
C	Knowledge input and experience required?	yes	yes	no	no	no	yes	yes	no	no	no	no	no
D	Scope for influence	yes	yes	yes	no	yes	no	yes	yes	yes	no	yes	no
E	Limiting factors	yes	no	yes	yes	no	no	yes	no	yes	yes	no	no
	Advice on participation level	3	4	3	2	3	2	3	4	2	1	3	1

A In whose interests is the project: city													
B	Effect on living environment and safety?	high	high	high	high	high	high	low	low	low	low	low	low
C	Knowledge input and experience required?	yes	yes	no	no	no	no	yes	yes	no	no	no	no
D	Scope for influence	yes	yes	yes	no	yes	no	yes	yes	yes	no	yes	no
E	Limiting factors	yes	no	yes	yes	no	no	yes	no	yes	yes	no	no
	Advice on participation level	3	4	3	1	2	1	2	3	2	1	2	1

More information

On www.participedia.nl you can find a useful summary of the five steps, the participation wizard, working procedures, tips and tools and example projects from colleagues (only in Dutch).

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