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CITIES



## Amsterdam opens up democratic process

# Digital technology guides citizenship

Amsterdam has a vision to make local democracy more dynamic and interactive. Starting small, it is learning from pilot projects how best to mobilise citizens and enable participation in order to develop a toolbox for collaboration that will allow the scaling up of its open government approach.

In 2015 Amsterdam was named Europe's first 'Sharing City' by ShareNL, the Dutch network for the collaborative economy. This award recognised the city's open-minded approach to new, cooperative business models. It also prompted the city council to see that the sharing economy is not just about business and that it challenges government to consider its role in the new model too. It was already interested in finding more open ways of working with citizens, conscious that they can change the way they relate to government and develop distrust of politicians, despite their faith in democracy. At the same time, it was very aware that citizens were using digital platforms to connect more easily and create new neighbourhood networks online. These factors convinced the council to consider how it might apply the sharing economy's principles and technologies to bring greater transparency and flexibility to its own participation processes.

A project called OpenBorough was set up in the borough of Amsterdam-West to test the possibilities of using digital tools in combination with offline interaction to work more collaboratively with citizens. By enabling easier communication between citizens and state and focusing on the co-creation of solutions, OpenBorough aimed to stimulate people to share their ideas, vote or undertake action and mobilise their creativity and knowledge. The project also intended to enable civil servants to become more accustomed to these new working processes and methodologies.



We were completely surprised by the enormous creativity and energy neighbours of all backgrounds and ages have put into their designs. Apparently there are whole networks in the area that we didn't know about before!

*Petrina Groesbeek, area coordinator, Amsterdam-West*

## Design competition

Starting as a pilot project with a budget of €225,000, OpenBorough is run by a small innovation team that can be consulted by council colleagues looking to actively involve citizens in their projects. It also shares learnings between boroughs. The team starts by analysing the specific needs and motivations of the citizens involved and then translates these into the design of digital participation tools. The idea is that through an iterative process, OpenBorough experiments with stand-alone functionalities and simple prototypes with a view to building to gradually building the city's e-participative capabilities.

cities in action

November 2016

where: Amsterdam, Netherlands  
what: Participation  
when: 2016 - ongoing

The first experiment involved the redesign of the interior of a cyclists' tunnel. Rather than asking one or two artists for design proposals as it would in the past, the borough opened up the design challenge to everyone and created a tool for uploading and voting for designs. It also created an offline campaign to help less digitally-able residents create their proposals. Forty-nine designs were created by citizens aged from 9 to 60, 6,125 votes were received and the tool reached 12,629 unique visitors. These are impressive figures given the neighbourhood has a population of just 6,000 and a turnout of around 20 would have been expected for traditional consultations.



“Although we design and develop customised digital applications, OpenBorough is not about digital tools. We are mainly exploring what it means to work with these tools and how we can change the way we interact with citizens”

**May-Britt Jansen, project manager,  
OpenBorough, Amsterdam-West**

## Square refurbishment

Knowledge gained through this project directly influenced the next: the redevelopment of a residential square. As with the tunnel, the project was promoted through flyers, offline meetings, a banner at the square itself and an online discussion forum.

This forum enabled the 150 directly-affected households to upload ideas for new features for the square. Neighbours could then post arguments for and against these ideas. The most popular ideas were then transferred for implementation to the project leader responsible for redesigning the square.

The experiment was deemed a success, not only because the design proposal was enriched with 20 ideas directly submitted by residents, such as turning a derelict paddling pool into a fountain and water playground, but also because of the learnings derived from the project. These include how regular attendees of offline consultations react to the fact that their less active neighbours are now able to participate with an equal vote and how best to handle the council area teams' fears about transparent decisionmaking processes and the less predictable outcomes when involving citizens.

## Ultimate ambition

The city is confident that e-participation is in everyone's interests and that its role is to continuously experiment, refine and embed the process. To this end, OpenBorough is planning small-scale experiments on all aspects of local consultation and the scaling up of existing participation platforms created for specific projects.

As more people can engage in the consultation process, the city aims not only to enhance the legitimacy of its actions but also stimulate active citizenship in its boroughs. It also aims to generate evidence of the political and cost-effectiveness of participative democracy so that it becomes policy across all neighbourhoods in Amsterdam and every citizen knows that, 'On election day, every vote is counted. On all other days in between, we make sure every voice is heard.'

