



Rotterdam Neighbourhoods in Action: Exploring the Transformative Impact of Neighbourhood Councils in Rotterdam

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Abstract

This research examines the ‘Wijk aan Zet’ (Neighbourhood in Action) initiative, a neighbourhood council model launched in 2022 in Rotterdam, the Netherlands. It focuses on the impact these councils have on urban policy and neighbourhood development. The main research question is: *To what extent do neighbourhood councils under the ‘Wijk aan Zet’ initiative influence urban policy and contribute to transformative changes in Rotterdam’s neighbourhoods?*

Written for the Global Markets, Local Creativities (GLOCAL) master program, this thesis explores how global challenges—like resident engagement, neighbourhood resilience and local governance—play out on a local level. Its findings are relevant for neighbourhood council members, municipal staff and neighbourhood residents in Rotterdam, while also offering insights for building effective neighbourhood council models worldwide. As the ‘Wijk aan Zet’ initiative is still relatively new, having existed for only three years, and with new elections scheduled for March 2026, now is an ideal moment to study these councils.

The research uses a mixed method approach by combining in-depth interviews with neighbourhood council members and municipal staff with document analysis via topic modelling and thematic analysis with the use of RStudio. The key findings of this research show that neighbourhood councils primarily address hyperlocal issues. Their influence on broader urban policy remains limited due to institutional constraints and unclear boundaries between neighbourhood and city governance. However, neighbourhood councils do play a meaningful role in shaping their communities and have the potential to make transformative impact on their neighbourhoods. Key challenges they face include navigating the complex bureaucratic municipal system, managing unclear expectations and sustaining resident engagement. To unlock their full potential, neighbourhood councils need the municipality to provide more trust, improved collaboration, additional training, better tools, and—most importantly—a mindset shift: it is time for the **neighbourhoods to take action**.

Keywords: local governance, neighbourhood council, municipality, urban development

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Chapter I: Introduction

The 16th of March 2022 marked an important election day for the city of Rotterdam. On this day, residents not only voted to elect their City Council representatives for the next four years but also witnessed the launch of a new form of local democracy—the ‘Wijk aan Zet’ (Neighbourhood in Action) initiative. This project, developed by the municipality of Rotterdam, established 37 elected neighbourhood councils and 2 village councils.¹ The neighbourhood councils are made up of elected members, with elections held every four years starting from March 2022. The neighbourhood council plays a crucial role in fostering collaboration between neighbourhoods and the municipality. They build networks within their communities, facilitate public participation, and provide both solicited and unsolicited advice to the city government.² Now, in June 2025 the project has run for a little over three years, an ideal time to make an evaluation on the impact of these councils. This MA thesis will explore the impact these councils make on the city and their neighbourhoods. It will explore the history of neighbourhood councils in Rotterdam, the issues they focus on, how they engage residents, their influence on urban decision-making, and the nature of their working relationship with the municipality. The main readers of this MA thesis will be neighbourhood council members, municipal staff and neighbourhood residents. This research will offer new insights into the ‘Wijk aan Zet’ initiative and provide guidance on improving the model. Moreover, it will have broader relevance beyond Rotterdam by highlighting how to effectively establish neighbourhood councils worldwide. This MA thesis will contribute to existing research on neighbourhood councils, democratization of urban planning and inclusive governance.

Research Question and Sub-questions

In order to explore the Rotterdam neighbourhood councils and their transformative impact on neighbourhoods and urban policy, the following research question was formulated: *"To what extent do neighbourhood councils under the 'Wijk aan Zet' initiative influence urban policy and contribute to transformative changes in Rotterdam's neighbourhoods?"* This MA thesis will specifically focus on the history of the neighbourhood council system, the topics these councils address, how they manage resident participation, their influence on urban policy and decision-making and the working relationship between the municipality and the neighbourhood councils.

¹ ‘Wijk aan Zet’, Gemeente Rotterdam, accessed 20 November 2024, <https://www.rotterdam.nl/wijk-aan-zet>.

² ‘Vanaf maart 2022 is de Wijk aan Zet’, *Gemeente Rotterdam Persberichten* (blog), 17 September 2021, <https://persberichtenrotterdam.nl/persberichten/vanaf-maart-2022-is-de-wijk-aan-zet/>.

In order to further structure the research, four sub-questions have been formulated:

1. *To what extent do the issues addressed by the neighbourhood councils align with the most pressing needs and concerns of the neighbourhoods in Rotterdam?*
2. *What role do neighbourhood councils play in encouraging participation, and how effective are their efforts in stimulating local engagement?*
3. *What kind of influence do neighbourhood councils have on urban policies or decision-making processes?*
4. *What is the nature of the working relationship between neighbourhood council members and municipal workers/city officials, and how does this relationship affect the implementation of council initiatives and local policy decisions?*

These sub-questions were chosen to explore both the local impact of neighbourhood councils on their communities and their broader role within the municipal governance system, including their influence on urban policy and decision-making. These sub-questions provide a comprehensive framework for exploring both the local impact of neighbourhood councils on their communities and their role within broader municipal systems by examining their internal functioning and external influence.

The structure of this study follows the four sub-questions that guide the research. Each chapter addresses one of these sub-questions in detail:

Chapter II: focuses on the first sub-question which examines the issues that neighbourhood councils prioritize and whether these correspond with the actual needs and concerns of the communities they represent.

Chapter III: addresses the second sub question which discusses resident participation, investigating how the councils engage citizens and foster local participation.

Chapter IV: discusses the third sub-question which explores the broader tensions and contradictions between neighbourhood-level initiatives and urban development and decision-making.

Chapter V: examines the final sub-question which discusses the working relationship between neighbourhood councils and the municipality—an essential component of the ‘Wijk aan Zet’ initiative. This includes their interactions with municipal staff, as well as with the city council³ and the municipal executive⁴.

³ City council (Gemeenteraad) is the legislative and highest governing body of the municipality. Its members are elected by the residents of Rotterdam. For more information see: <https://www.rotterdam.nl/gemeenteraad>.

⁴ Municipal executive (College van Burgemeester en Wethouder) is the executive body of the municipality and responsible for the day-to-day administration of the city. In Dutch quite literally called ‘College of Mayor and Alderman’, which indicates who are a part of this council. The members of the city council elect these aldermen. For more information see: <https://www.rotterdam.nl/college-van-b-en-w>.

Chapter VI: consists of a conclusion and discussion which answers the main research question.

Main Theoretical Concepts

The first important theoretical concept that will be discussed in this MA thesis is *vital citizenship*. Van de Wijdeven and Hendriks define this concept as a form of citizenship where people actively participate in their neighbourhood in a viable and productive way.⁵ As populations grow, they become more independent, as a result democratic legitimacy has become ever more challenging.⁶ Faced with crises of legitimacy, democratic leaders have increasingly encouraged interest groups and citizens to participate more directly and continuously in political decision-making, including areas traditionally managed by specialist administrators. *Citizen participation* can be used as a strategy to safeguard an organization's stability, as a tool for shifting attitudes, or to help an organization define its goals and objectives.⁷ In order to define the levels of citizen participation Arnstein (1969) created the *Ladder of Citizen Participation*. Arnstein (1969) states: "*There is a critical difference between going through the empty ritual of participation and having the real power needed to affect the outcome of the process.*"⁸ In order to conceptualize this difference she defined 8 levels of citizen participation, from nonparticipation to degrees of citizen power.

The second theoretical concept is *local democracy*, which forms a vital foundation for broader democratic participation, enabling citizens to develop political skills, engage more directly with decision-making, foster social inclusion, and strengthen democratic culture at all levels of government.⁹ The third theoretical concept is the *neighbourhood*. The neighbourhood can describe spatial, socio-spatial as well as functional entities.¹⁰ Additionally, it is often used interchangeably with community. The

⁵ Ted van de Wijdeven and Frank Hendriks, '6. A Little Less Conversation, a Little More Action: Real-Life Expressions of Vital Citizenship in City Neighborhoods', in *City in Sight: Dutch Dealings with Urban Change*, ed. Jan Willem Duyvendak, Frank Hendriks, and Mies van Niekerk (Amsterdam University Press, 2009), 121–40, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9789048511211-008>.

⁶ Matt Ryan. *Why Citizens Participation Succeeds or Fails*. Bristol University Press. 2021.
<https://doi.org/10.51952/9781529209938>

⁷ Sherry R. Arnstein. 'A Ladder Of Citizen Participation'. *Journal of the American Institute of Planners*, 34, no. 4 (July 1969): 216-224. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01944366908977225>.

⁸ Arnstein, 216.

⁹ Lawrence Pratchett, 'Local Autonomy, Local Democracy and the "New Localism"', *Political Studies* 52, no. 2 (2004): 358–75, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9248.2004.00484.x>.

¹⁰ Mike Jenks and Nicola Dempsey, 'Defining the Neighbourhood: Challenges for Empirical Research', *Town Planning Review* 78, no. 2 (March 2007): 153–77, <https://doi.org/10.3828/tpr.78.2.4>.

neighbourhood people live in may affect them on a social, economic or environmental level.¹¹ Even in a comprehensive welfare state, like the Netherlands, the neighbourhood context plays a role in shaping the socio-economic opportunities and behaviour of those who are part of the neighbourhood.¹²

The fourth critical theoretical concept is *neighbourhood councils*. These councils come forth of the aspiration to include more citizens in decision making. Neighbourhood councils have different forms across the world; however, a common denominator is that they form an intermediary between the local government and communities.¹³ They have a significant influence or authority in shaping decisions that affect the urban areas and are uniquely positioned to influence city policy on a neighbourhood level. In theory, they foster greater citizen participation in local affairs and play a vital role in society.

The last theoretical concept is *transformative governance*. Defined by Healey, it is a concept in urban planning and governance that emphasizes collaborative, inclusive and participatory approaches to decision-making.¹⁴ This form of governance seeks to reshape power structures, institutions and cultural norms to achieve lasting, meaningful change in communities. Healey discusses *institutions* as the norms, rules and practices that structure action in social contexts.¹⁵ For transformative governance to work, it must go beyond just short-term actions or isolated policy changes; it must engage with and shift deeper institutional power structures and cultural norms. In this research transformation is defined as a lasting and notable change—which occurs when communities mobilize around a shared vision of place, altering its meanings, structures, or functions in response to complex and sometimes conflicting understandings of what that place is or should become.¹⁶

¹¹ Sako Musterd and Fenne M. Pinkster, ‘Unraveling Neighborhood Effects: Evidence from Two European Welfare States’, in *City in Sight*, ed. Jan Willem Duyvendak, Frank Hendriks, and Mies van Niekerk, Dutch Dealings with Urban Change (Amsterdam University Press, 2009), 41–60, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt45kczp.6>.

¹² Musterd and Pinkster.

¹³ Gillad Rosen and Nufar Avni, ‘Negotiating Urban Redevelopment: Exploring the Neighborhood Council Planning Model’, *Journal of Planning Education and Research* 43, no. 2 (1 June 2023): 416–27, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0739456X19884100>.

¹⁴ Patsy Healey, ‘Transforming Governance: Challenges of Institutional Adaptation and a New Politics of Space1’, *European Planning Studies* 14, no. 3 (April 2006): 299–320, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09654310500420792>.

¹⁵ Healey.

¹⁶ Niki Frantzeskaki, Frank van Steenbergen, and Richard C. Stedman, ‘Sense of Place and Experimentation in Urban Sustainability Transitions: The Resilience Lab in Carnisse, Rotterdam, The Netherlands’, *Sustainability Science* 13, no. 4 (2018): 1045–59, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11625-018-0562-5>.

Literature Review

Citizenship

Vital citizenship is a form of engagement where individuals contribute to the common good or help advance the public interest.¹⁷ The way vital citizenship is nowadays discussed and theorized could not exist without the participatory turn of the 1960s, which aimed to give citizens a greater impact on political and bureaucratic decision-making processes.¹⁸ This relates to the idea of good governance, which believes that participation makes governments more transparent, responsive and efficient regarding public spending. Additionally, it makes public decisions more socially and politically acceptable. In the 1960s the participatory democracy projects had a radical angle, it involved a transformative dimension with the idea that participation could transform the inegalitarian relationship between the state and society.¹⁹ Furthermore, it would help emancipate and empower citizens in every sphere of their daily lives. Over the years, the participatory turn has led to a wide range of participatory practices implemented by different organizations, governments and groups across the political spectrum. One of the best-known practices being the neighbourhood council.

A key academic work on citizenship is the book *A Theory of Citizenship* by Van Gunsteren, which challenges traditional views on citizenship, advocating for a fluid, practice-oriented perspective that aligns with the complexities of contemporary pluralistic society.²⁰ Van Gunsteren observes a trend of redemocratization, where citizenship has reemerged on the political agenda. He emphasizes that citizenship changes with usage, it is what people make of it. Van Gunsteren states that in a republic the functions of authority are exercised by cocitizens, in this sense the citizen is both the ruler and the ruled.²¹ To fulfil this double function citizens should have a minimum of autonomy, judgement and loyalty. Van Gunsteren introduces the concept of neorepublican citizenship, a form of citizenship where citizens actively participate in civic and political life, where personal autonomy is emphasized, where there is collective responsibility and where diversity is managed. This form of citizenship is a response to modern developments like globalization and multiculturalism and the challenges these developments pose to society and citizenship.²²

¹⁷ Wijdeven and Hendriks, ‘6. A Little Less Conversation, a Little More Action’.

¹⁸ Laurence Bherer, Pascale Dufour, and Françoise Montambeault, ‘The Participatory Democracy Turn: An Introduction’, *Journal of Civil Society* 12, no. 3 (2 July 2016): 225–30, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17448689.2016.1216383>.

¹⁹ Bherer, Dufour, and Montambeault.

²⁰ Herman R. Van Gunsteren, *A Theory Of Citizenship: Organizing Plurality In Contemporary Democracies* (New York: Routledge, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429502583>.

²¹ Van Gunsteren.

²² Van Gunsteren.

Participation in the Dutch Context

With new definitions regarding citizenship and the emphasis on the importance of vital citizenship came new ways of thinking about citizen participation. Michels discusses how citizen participation in the Netherlands has historically been decided by pillarization, in this system citizens advanced their political or social interests through organizations aligned with specific religious or ideological groups.²³ By the 1970s, there were more possibilities for citizens to influence policies, marking the emergence of first-generation citizen participation. This phase mostly took the form of public consultation, in which stakeholders are given the opportunity to express their views on policy proposals. In the 1990s, municipalities became aware of the limitations to public consultation and wanted to add more interactive means of participation, thus marking the start of second-generation citizen participation.²⁴ From the 2000s onward, participation took on new forms, driven by both government initiatives and grassroots efforts. Third-generation citizen participation is typified by resident-led initiatives, such as citizen councils and participatory budgeting.²⁵ Additionally, deliberative democracy emerged as a significant innovation, emphasizing informed discussion and debate among citizens to enhance decision-making. This progression highlights the process of the Netherlands towards deepening democratic participation driven by historic factors.

While the research by Michels explores various forms of citizenship and participation there is a lack of attention given to practical implementation of participation and citizenship in real-world settings, especially with a focus on ways that empower citizens to enact transformative change. Drawing on the concept of vital citizenship, Van Gunsteren's concept of citizenship and the historical setting drawn by Michels, this research fills the gap in the literature by focusing on neighbourhood councils in Rotterdam and how different forms of citizenship and participation are practically used to influence decision-making, address local challenges and foster transformative change in communities. This literature review draws on three interrelated perspectives: theories of citizenship and participation, governance structures, and the practical functioning and challenges of neighbourhood councils around the world. Together these perspectives offer an understanding of how citizen engagement is institutionalized, challenged, and negotiated at the neighbourhood level.

²³ A. M. B Michels. 'Burgerparticipatie in het beleid, bewonersinitiatieven, en de rol van de gemeenteraad'. In *De Gemeenteraad. Ontstaan en ontwikkeling van de lokale democratie*, edited by Joop van den Berg, Hans Vollaard, Job Cohen and Geerten Boogaard. Boom geschiedenis, 2018. <https://dspace.library.uu.nl/handle/1874/420183>.

²⁴ Michels.

²⁵ Michels.

Neighbourhood Councils Around the World

To facilitate citizen participation in local government the neighbourhood councils were developed. Internationally, extensive research has been conducted on various forms of neighbourhood councils, each offering a unique perspective.

Gendered Participation

The research done by Şenol focuses on gendered local participation in governance in Izmir, Turkey.²⁶ She discusses how both men and women's experience with participation in neighbourhood offices, were shaped by both formal and informal power dynamics, like those within families, communities and neighbourhoods. Within these mechanisms, men operated naturally and collectively, while women tried to get support through their networks. In order to get elected they were expected to act according to traditional gender roles.²⁷

Top-down/Bottom-up

The research done by Yinon-Amoyal and Kallus studies neighbourhood councils in Israel through a comparative analysis with a focus on how councils mediate between 'bottom-up' and 'top-down' planning.²⁸ They discuss how neighbourhood councils act as a mediator between municipal authorities and residents and combine both local and professional knowledge. The neighbourhood councils highlight the need to combine these two approaches. Within the city, the neighbourhood is often seen as inferior to the city, however, they are actually mutually dependent.²⁹ Moreover, the influence of the neighbourhood on the city is undeniable. The study highlights the crucial role of neighbourhood councils in fostering dialogue between urban and local planning. While this dialogue varies across cities, the councils' impact within the municipality indicates the importance of separating city-wide planning from area-specific planning. The findings further acknowledge the importance of professional approaches that focus on the community to create better social, cultural, and physical spaces. In the complicated power structures of cities, these approaches should combine decisions made by authorities with input from local people, allowing for discussion and compromise.³⁰

²⁶ Fatma Şenol, 'Elected Neighbourhood Officers in a Turkish City (Izmir): Gendered Local Participation in Governance', *Urban Studies* 50, no. 5 (1 April 2013): 977–93, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0042098012458004>.

²⁷ Şenol.

²⁸ Einat Yinon-Amoyal and Rachel Kallus, 'The Neighborhood Council: Where "Top-down" Engages with "Bottom-Up"', *GeoJournal* 64, no. 2 (1 October 2005): 91–104, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10708-005-4092-1>.

²⁹ Yinon-Amoyal and Kallus.

³⁰ Yinon-Amoyal and Kallus.

Effectiveness

The study done by Li, Wen and Cooper focuses on neighbourhood councils in Los Angeles (LA) and their perceived effectiveness.³¹ They distributed a questionnaire survey among 80 neighbourhood councils. The results of their research were that the effectiveness of these councils depends on how well they promote internal governance, navigate the external environment and turn ideas into actions. The internal effectiveness relates to the way the councils organize meetings, recruit and manage volunteers and define goals. The external effectiveness involves the way council members use their connections with other organizations. The way they turn ideas into action relates to how well the councils' actions align with the issues that are at hand.³²

Policy Advocacy

Another research that focuses on neighbourhood councils in LA is the research done by Collins and Medrano. Their ethnographic study of two neighbourhood councils in LA examines policy advocacy focusing on socio-economically different neighbourhoods.³³ Some key findings are that the neighbourhood councils prioritize local control, they oppose top-down planning and seek autonomy for their neighbourhood council.³⁴ Additionally, neighbourhood councils across socioeconomic statuses show progressivism by supporting racial justice and environmental protection measures. They also back policies protecting vulnerable tenants and increasing affordable housing. Lastly, neighbourhood councils collaborate to influence officials, sharing strategies and taking common stances on citywide issues. They form coalitions to impact policy at city, state, and federal levels.³⁵

The research on neighbourhood councils gives an impression of what kind of knowledge has already been gathered on these councils worldwide. The studies provide insights into neighbourhood councils in the contexts of Israel, Turkey, and the United States, offering valuable knowledge on their effectiveness, various forms of participation, and the potential transformative impact they may have. These different insights will be combined in this MA thesis research. Notably, most of the existing research has relied on quantitative, data-focused methods, except for Şenol that uses a qualitative approach and Yinon-Amoyal and Kallus, who adopted a mixed-methods approach. While quantitative

³¹ Hui Li, Bo Wen, and Terry L. Cooper, 'What Makes Neighborhood Associations Effective in Urban Governance? Evidence From Neighborhood Council Boards in Los Angeles', *The American Review of Public Administration* 49, no. 8 (1 November 2019): 931–43, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0275074019854160>.

³² Li, Wen, and Cooper.

³³ Brady Collins and Angel Medrano, 'From Parochial to Policy Advocate: Examining Policy Advocacy among Neighborhood Councils in Los Angeles', *Cities* 130 (1 November 2022): 103882, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cities.2022.103882>.

³⁴ Collins and Medrano.

³⁵ Collins and Medrano.

methods are effective in identifying broad trends, they often overlook the deeper qualitative aspects of local dynamics. A strong approach would be to combine both and get a more personal as well as broad overview into neighbourhood councils through a mixed method approach.

Neighbourhood Councils in the Netherlands and Rotterdam

Governmental decentralisation has a long history within the Netherlands, with neighbourhood councils existing in Rotterdam since 1947.³⁶ These councils had advisory power to the city council. This form of intermunicipal decentralisation in Rotterdam is the result of historical factors.³⁷ The decentralisation process, driven by the politically established neighbourhood councils on one hand, and neighbourhood development bodies and recognised residents' organisations on the other (all receiving municipal subsidies), highlighted the need for a more consistent approach at the neighbourhood level.³⁸ Additionally, neighbourhood bodies continuously demanded more administrative authority, with the goal of enhancing resident involvement.

Various research was done on neighbourhood councils in the Netherlands, most of them executed in the 1970-1980s. Research on municipal decentralisation in the Netherlands by Zuurmond and Berdowski examines governmental efficiency and participation in sub-municipal councils in Noord and Osdorp, Amsterdam.³⁹ Their study compares districts with a sub-municipality to those without, focusing on the period between 1981 and 1985. The researchers analysed the perspectives of different stakeholders involved in a sub-municipality, including residents and their participation.⁴⁰ The study explores two types of participation. The first type is participation organised from the council, this focuses on residents' contact with, and knowledge about the council as well as residents' general thoughts on participation. The second type is the participation from residents' own violation, this part focuses on grassroot forms of organization and if residents are politically active. The findings reveal that while residents perceived an increase in governmental efficiency and felt more empowered, overall participation levels did not rise. Moreover, those actively engaged were typically higher-educated individuals with average or higher

³⁶ M. A Beukenholdt-ter Mors et al., *Binnengemeentelijk Gedecentraliseerd: Een Kleinere Raad?*, Governmental (Centre for Local Democracy (CLD) & Faculteit Sociale Wetenschappen, Erasmus Universiteit Rotterdam, 2002), <https://repub.eur.nl/pub/1187/BSK-CLD-006.pdf>.

³⁷ Beukenholdt-ter Mors et al.

³⁸ Beukenholdt-ter Mors et al.

³⁹ A. Zuurmond and Z Berdowski, *Binnengemeentelijke Decentralisatie in Amsterdam 1981-1985 : De Bewoners* (DANS Data Station Social Sciences and Humanities, 1986), <https://ssh.datastations.nl/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.17026/dans-zv4-dv79>; A. Zuurmond and Z Berdowski, *Binnengemeentelijke Decentralisatie in Amsterdam 1981-1985 : De Ambtenaren* (Vakgroep Bestuurskunde en Publiek Recht, Universiteit van Amsterdam, 1986).

⁴⁰ Zuurmond and Berdowski, *Binnengemeentelijke Decentralisatie in Amsterdam 1981-1985*.

incomes, aged between 30 and 50 years. The second part of Berdowski and Zuurmond research focuses on the municipal workers.⁴¹ The research looks at the reasons for municipal workers to decentralize and their view on efficiency and participation. Their conclusion was that in areas with a council, municipal workers were more positive about their working situation and the governmental efficiency. Furthermore, their attitudes toward participation were more favourable compared to those working in districts without councils.

Van Ostaaiken conducted research specifically focused on Rotterdam and its neighbourhood councils. His work examines government decentralization in Rotterdam, particularly the history of ‘intermunicipal decentralization’, which describes a scenario where a municipality is divided into subsections, each often governed by separate authorities.⁴² He then shifts the focus towards neighbourhood councils which he concludes are mostly top-down. Municipalities are still leading; they give the councils financial means, and the councils are dependent on how much the municipality involves them in decision making.⁴³ It remains a challenge for municipalities to stimulate bottom-up initiatives. The focus is still too often on increasing support for municipal policies rather than promotion of citizens’ own responsibility.⁴⁴ To achieve the latter it is important to have open-minded policymakers and trust needs to be built between citizens and policy makers to facilitate a do-democracy.⁴⁵ However, it is important to note that this research was conducted before the current system of neighbourhood councils in Rotterdam were installed.

These studies done on governmental decentralisation and neighbourhood councils in the Netherlands offer a critical take on the effects of councils. Yet, the state of academic research on neighbourhood councils in the Netherlands is quite poor, most in-depth research was done in the previous century. Van Ostaaiken does offer a more contemporary view, yet even this dates from before the current structure of neighbourhood democracy and the ‘Wijk aan Zet’ initiative. There is a clear demand for more research on the contemporary state of neighbourhood councils in the Netherlands.

⁴¹ Zuurmond and Berdowski, *Binnengemeentelijke Decentralisatie in Amsterdam 1981-1985 : De Ambtenaren*.

⁴² J.J.C. van Ostaaiken, ‘Afrekenen Met de Deelgemeenten: Het Functioneren van Binnengemeentelijke Decentralisatie in Rotterdam En Antwerpen En Een Vergelijking Met Dorps- En Wijkraden’, *Bestuurswetenschappen* 2013, no. 5–6 (2013): 94–114. <https://research.tilburguniversity.edu/en/publications/afrekenen-met-de-deelgemeenten-het-functioneren-van-binnengemeente>

⁴³ Van Ostaaiken.

⁴⁴ Van Ostaaiken.

⁴⁵ Van Ostaaiken.

Innovative Aspects

In a time of changing climate and increasing inequalities, it is necessary to reconceptualize neighbourhoods as units for equitable resilience.⁴⁶ Achieving this equitable resilience necessitates empowering disadvantaged residents and placing a strong emphasis on stimulating participation and strengthening neighbourhood self-governance. As external pressures intensify, the responsibility for resilience will increasingly shift to the neighbourhood level—making it all the more critical to explore and enhance models like neighbourhood councils that can support local self-governance.

This research looks at neighbourhood councils through the lens of their potential for transformative impact. The focus lies on their effectiveness, efficiency and ability to address relevant issues for their communities. The research focuses on the ‘Wijk aan Zet’ initiative, where for the first time in Rotterdam the neighbourhood council members were elected. An innovative aspect of this research is therefore the focus on a new form of local democracy. These councils have a system in which they can provide solicited and unsolicited advice to the municipality but do not have their own budget. The research explores the benefits and limitations of this type of neighbourhood council, offering insights with significant societal relevance. The findings provide practical recommendations on how to improve a system that is of great importance to neighbourhood residents. The most important readers of this MA thesis will therefore be neighbourhood council members, municipal workers, and neighbourhood residents.

Another innovative aspect of this study is the mixed methods approach which combines data analysis with in-depth interviews. The data analysis focuses on the advices, as well as year action plans and neighbourhood accords written up by the neighbourhood councils. The interviews were conducted with neighbourhood council members and municipal staff. Most previous research limits themselves to the use of only one method, mostly quantitative. This research adopts a comprehensive research approach by combining a more distanced method—data analysis—with a more personal, though time-consuming, method: interviews. This combination seeks to create a balance, allowing the research to consider personal experiences while also analysing broader trends in neighbourhood councils in Rotterdam. Lastly, this study will contribute to the study program for which this thesis is developed — Global Markets, Local Creativities. This research examines topics that have global relevance like neighbourhood resilience, citizen participation and transformative urban governance. These global themes will be researched in the local setting of Rotterdam neighbourhoods, adding to a discussion on how big global themes can be successfully implemented on a local level.

⁴⁶ Zachary Lamb and Lawrence J. Vale, ‘A Neighbourhood Unit for Equitable Resilience’, *Built Environment* 50, no. 1 (1 April 2024): 185–210, <https://doi.org/10.2148/benv.50.1.185>.

Sources and Source Criticism

In March 2022, the 'Wijk aan Zet' initiative was launched in Rotterdam, leading to the creation of 37 neighbourhood councils and 2 village councils.⁴⁷ These neighbourhood councils consist of elected officials, elected every 4 years. They were established together with the municipality who works closely together with these councils to be sure that they properly perform their work. The neighbourhood councils write a neighbourhood accord at the beginning of their term and a year action plan every year. Additionally, they give solicited as well as unsolicited advice to the municipality, which are all shared with the public on the websites of the municipality.⁴⁸ One of the primary sources used in this research will be the documents written by neighbourhood councils: neighbourhood accords, year action plans of 2024 and solicited and unsolicited advices.⁴⁹ The advices cover a wide range of issues, from neighbourhood beautification to addressing crime. This research looks at the advices written between March 3, 2022, to March 20, 2025, a total of 542 advices written over a span of more than 3 years. Additionally, 77 documents consisting of neighbourhood accords and year action plans from 2024 were analysed.

My second primary source are interviews conducted with neighbourhood council members. Every neighbourhood council exists of 7 members or more, depending on the amount of people that live in the neighbourhood.⁵⁰ This MA thesis research is based on interviews conducted with elected officials serving on neighbourhood councils. The study compares three neighbourhood councils in Rotterdam, focusing on neighbourhoods with different socio-economic characteristics. Given the spatial inequalities within Rotterdam, interviews were conducted with one representative from a neighbourhood council in the city centre, one from the eastern area, and one from the southern area. Additionally, two interviews were conducted with municipal employees from the city of Rotterdam. Furthermore, a Neighbourhood Council Coordinator working for the municipality participated in an interview alongside a Neighbourhood Council member.

⁴⁷ Gemeente Rotterdam. 'Wijk aan Zet'.

⁴⁸ Gemeente Rotterdam. 'Wijkraadadviezen RotterdamRaad - iBabs Publieksportaal', accessed 4 December 2024, <https://gemeenteraad.rotterdam.nl/Reports/Details/85c7d75a-22d0-497e-ae8e-8d993f41ed32>; Gemeente Rotterdam. 'Mijn Rotterdam - Home', accessed 25 May 2025, <https://mijn.rotterdam.nl/>.

⁴⁹ Gemeente Rotterdam. 'Wijkraadadviezen RotterdamRaad - iBabs Publieksportaal'.

⁵⁰ Gemeente Rotterdam Persbericht. 'Vanaf maart 2022 is de Wijk aan Zet'.

List of Interviewees:

- Interview 1: Elin Wanng-Dedert, transition manager for the ‘Wijk aan Zet’ initiative, she works for the municipality of Rotterdam.
- Interview 2: Marco Kole and Jeroen Oppelaar. Kole is president of the Neighbourhood Council of Cool, Scheepvaartkwartier and Stadsdriehoek. Oppelaar is Neighbourhood Council Coordinator for the same Neighbourhood Council, he works for the municipality of Rotterdam.
- Interview 3: Ron Davids, president of the Neighbourhood Council of Het Lage Land, Prinsenland and ‘s Gravenland.
- Interview 4: Angela Stolwijk-Kramer, president of the Neighbourhood Council of Oud Charlois and Wielewaal.
- Interview 5: Paul Hulsebosch, Neighbourhood Council Coordinator for the Neighbourhood Councils of Blijdorp, Bergpolder, Liskwartier and Mathenesse. He works for the municipality of Rotterdam.

The interviews concentrate on the ‘Wijk aan Zet’ initiative and cover various topics, including how neighbourhood councils engage residents, their influence on urban policies and decision-making, and their working relationship with the municipality.

One limitation of the sources is the small sample size. Only a limited number of neighbourhood council members and municipal staff were interviewed, which may result in a partial understanding of their experiences. Similarly, the document analysis focused specifically on neighbourhood council advice reports, yearly action plans, and neighbourhood accords. Expanding the document corpus to include more materials related to neighbourhood councils could yield more generalizable findings. Furthermore, these documents represent only a portion of the councils’ activities and do not indicate which recommendations were actually implemented at the neighbourhood level; they merely reflect the topics discussed.

Methodology

The structure of the methodology was inspired by the research ‘Assessing the Effects of Neighborhood Councils on Urban Policy and Development: The Example of Tacoma, Washington’ by Dierwechter and Coffey.⁵¹ This research focuses on the transformative effects of neighbourhood councils with the use of a mixed method approach, combining qualitative and quantitative analyses. They focused on resource

⁵¹ Yonn Dierwechter and Brian Coffey, ‘Assessing the Effects of Neighborhood Councils on Urban Policy and Development: The Example of Tacoma, Washington’, *The Social Science Journal* 47, no. 3 (1 September 2010): 471–91, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.soscij.2010.01.007>.

allocation by neighbourhood councils and compared this with the socio-economic character of the neighbourhood. Dierwechter and Coffey divided spending into nine categories: recreation, street/pedestrian safety, special needs, beautification, environmental improvement, blight removal, education, crime/security, and other. Additionally, they included interviews with council members and municipal workers to further research the relations between the councils and the municipality as well as the added value of the neighbourhood councils.

Unlike Tacoma's neighbourhood councils, which have substantial budget authority, Rotterdam's neighbourhood councils do not possess such budgetary control. Consequently, it was chosen to focus this research on the themes addressed in neighbourhood council documents. A total of 619 documents were analysed, comprised of 542 solicited and unsolicited council advices dated between March 3, 2022, and March 20, 2025, as well as 77 neighbourhood accords and year action plans of 2024. The analysis was conducted in RStudio, applying topic modelling on both unigrams and bigrams. This research employs Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA), a technique used to uncover hidden patterns within texts. To complement this, a thematic analysis based on the themes identified by Dierwechter and Coffey was conducted. These two approaches work well together: topic modelling offers a computational, unsupervised, data-driven exploration of large text corpora without preconceived notions, while thematic analysis is a more targeted, theory-driven method focused on predefined themes. Additionally, the study includes five in-depth, semi-structured interviews with three members of neighbourhood councils and three municipal workers. While guided by prepared questions⁵², the interviews allowed participants to elaborate on their responses. Key topics included the nature of their work, resident engagement, neighbourhood councils' influence on urban policy and decision-making, and the working relationship between the councils and the municipality.

This mixed-method research combines interviews centred on individual experiences with topic modelling and thematic analysis, providing insights into the broader trends of neighbourhood councils in Rotterdam. Together, these approaches offer a comprehensive understanding of how neighbourhood councils function in the city.

⁵² See Appendix I for the interview guides.

Chapter II: Rotterdam's Neighbourhood Council System: History and Topic Analysis

To draw meaningful conclusions about the impact of neighbourhood councils in Rotterdam, it is crucial to first develop a thorough understanding of the neighbourhood council system and its historical context.

Building on that foundation, examining the specific issues these councils focus on is essential for gaining a clearer picture of what motivates their work. This section addresses the following sub-question: *To what extent do the issues addressed by the neighbourhood councils align with the most pressing needs and concerns of Rotterdam's neighbourhoods?*

History of Local Democracy in Rotterdam

Local democracy in Rotterdam, in the form of local governing bodies, is not a recent phenomenon. Local democracy became more important after the Second World War, and this is also when the first neighbourhood councils were installed in Rotterdam.⁵³ In more recent history these councils have gone through some significant changes in Rotterdam. The first Cabinet Rutte adopted the “*Act of 7 February 2013 amending the Municipalities Act and certain other laws in connection with the abolition of the authority of municipal governments to establish sub-municipal districts.*”⁵⁴ It stipulates that, from March 2014 onward, municipalities are prohibited from establishing sub-municipalities, which until then had only existed in Rotterdam and Amsterdam. These sub-municipalities differed significantly from the current neighbourhood councils. They had a broad mandate, legal status, a clear organisational hierarchy, and a detailed division of tasks.⁵⁵ Responsibilities included participation, service provision, and implementing neighbourhood programs, with authority over infrastructure, social welfare, spatial planning, and the environment. They also had budgetary authority. In practice, this resulted in a governance structure with more subdivisions, where the sub-municipalities operated much like smaller-scale municipalities, as the name suggests. The national government saw this as undesirable.⁵⁶ In their view, the main structure of governance should consist only of the national government, provinces, and municipalities—leaving no room for sub-municipalities. It was part of a broader plan to reduce the size of the government and increase efficiency.

⁵³ Beukenholdt-ter Mors et al., *Binnengemeentelijk Gedecentraliseerd: Een Kleinere Raad?*

⁵⁴ Eerste kamer der Staten-Generaal, ‘Afschaffing bevoegdheid gemeentebesturen om deelgemeenten in te stellen’, Pub. L. No. 33.017 (2013), https://www.eerstekamer.nl/wetsvoorstel/33017_afschaffing_bevoegdheid.

⁵⁵ Derk Loorbach et al., *Een Kwestie van Kiezen. Naar een complementaire democratie voor alle Rotterdammers*, Dutch Research Institution for Transition (DRIFT), 2016. https://drift.eur.nl/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/Een-kwestie-van-kiezen-EBMR_def_digitaal.pdf.

⁵⁶ Loorbach et al., *Een Kwestie van Kiezen Naar een complementaire democratie voor alle Rotterdammers*.

When the sub-municipalities were phased out in 2014, it created a need to promote local democracy in a new way. This marked the beginning of a search for a suitable alternative. The first step was the introduction of district committees in 2014. This model divided Rotterdam into 14 districts, each with representatives elected by local residents.⁵⁷ Members had to be 16 years or older and the number of members was dependent on the amount of people per district, but always between 9-15 members. The committee was made up of a president and members, but they had the same powers. These committees had the authority to advise the Rotterdam Municipal Executive and were given a budget to support resident initiatives.

As according to Loorbach et al., when comparing sub-municipalities with district councils, it becomes apparent that district committees have fewer powers, less budget, fewer members and no independent executive capacity compared to the former sub-municipalities.⁵⁸ These limitations strongly influence how district committees relate to other parts of the city's governance structure. While the former sub municipalities had the authority to make decisions in several policy areas and could directly instruct their own civil servants, district committees mainly play an advisory role to the Municipal Executive. Also, they are dependent on securing support from the municipal area organization and administrative clusters.

Experimentation Phase

Loorbach et al. found that the transition from sub-municipalities to district committees was chaotic, with frustration and competition between various parts of the governance system.⁵⁹ The system lacked effective collaboration and complementarity, the different components often worked independently or even in opposition of each other. The transition was seen as a loss of power, and the forming of a power concentration for the municipal administrative organization.

The city government recognized that a new model to enhance local democracy had to be established. Thus, the period between 2018 and 2022 marked four years of experimentation.⁶⁰ Three forms of local governance existed at the same time and next to each other: district committees, neighbourhood councils with chosen members and neighbourhood committees with members drawn through lottery. All three governance models shared the same tasks and mandate as the previous district

⁵⁷ Gemeenteraad Rotterdam, 'Verordening op de gebiedscommissies 2014', Pub. L. No. 198206 (2013), <https://lokaleregelgeving.overheid.nl/CVDR369495>.

⁵⁸ Loorbach et al., *Een Kwestie van Kiezen. Naar een complementaire democratie voor alle Rotterdammers*.

⁵⁹ Loorbach et al.

⁶⁰ MW Van Buuren et al., *Sterker door strijd? Vier jaar democratische innovatie in de Maasstad*, Erasmus School of Social and Behavioural Sciences & Dutch Research Institute for Transition (DRIFT), 2022. <https://drift.eur.nl/nl/publicaties/sterker-door-strijd-vier-jaar-democratische-innovatie-in-de-maasstad/>.

committee: organising participation of residents, entrepreneurs and organisations, form a neighbourhood agenda, facilitate resident initiatives and work together with the municipal organisation by giving solicited and unsolicited advice. Additionally, voting rights were extended to include 16- and 17-year-olds.

Throughout the experiment, Van Buuren et al. conducted research and ultimately produced a report summarizing their findings.⁶¹ At the conclusion of the pilot phase, the city chose to adopt the neighbourhood council model, leading to the launch of the initiative ‘Wijk aan Zet’. The findings from the study by Van Buuren et al. offered critical guidance on how to shape this new approach to local governance.

Table 1. *Different forms of local governance bodies and their tasks and mandate*

Name	Period	Tasks and mandate
Sub-municipalities (Deelgemeenten)	1973 - 2014	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Legal figures • Specific task division • Responsible for participation, service provision, and the implementation of neighbourhood action programs. • Authorities in the areas of infrastructure, social welfare, spatial planning and the environment • Own budget through sub-municipal fund
District committees (Gebiedscommissies)	2014 - 2018	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Possible to be a member from 16 years old • Number of members per committee dependent on the size of the district • All members have the same powers • Budget authority is limited to resident initiatives, participation and representation • Members are part of a political party

⁶¹ Van Buuren et al.

Experiment phase (district committees, neighbourhood councils with chosen members and neighbourhood committees with members selected through lottery) (gebiedscommissies/wijkraden/wijk comités)	2018 - 2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Period to experiment with local governance to bring governance closer to residents of Rotterdam • Members of neighbourhood councils and committees do not need to be part of a political party. • 16- and 17-year-olds are allowed to vote for their local representative • All three are able to give solicited or unsolicited advice • Neighbourhood councils and committees have the same mandates as the district committees
Neighbourhood councils (wijkraden)	2022 - now	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All members are elected • Able to be a member from 16 years old • Voting rights from 16 years old • Neighbourhoods divided into 39 neighbourhood councils • Members do not need to be part of a political party • Able to give solicited and unsolicited advice • Number of members dependent on the size of the neighbourhood • Budget for resident initiatives, participation and representation

Sources: MW Van Buuren et al., 'Sterker door strijd? Vier jaar democratische innovatie in de Maasstad'; Derk Loorbach et al., 'Een Kwestie van Kiezen Naar een complementaire democratie voor alle Rotterdamers'⁶²

⁶² Van Buuren et al.; Loorbach et al., *Een Kwestie van Kiezen Naar een complementaire democratie voor alle Rotterdamers*.

Main Tasks of the Current Neighbourhood Councils

2022 marked the start of the ‘Wijk Aan Zet’ initiative. The tasks of the Neighbourhood Councils were described in the ‘Regulation on Neighbourhood Councils 2022’.⁶³ Which broadly stated that its tasks are:

- To connect neighbourhood networks, activate them for initiatives, maintain them, and, where necessary, represent them towards the municipal administration.
- To shape together with the municipal administration and neighbourhood networks the neighbourhood accord and associated neighbourhood plans
- Stimulate participation in the neighbourhood and to stimulate participation for policy and projects
- Giving solicited and unsolicited advice to the municipal administration
- To find out what people in the neighbourhood think about plans that affect the area, and to decide how the neighbourhood wants to be involved in those plans
- To assess resident initiatives in the neighbourhood

The responsibilities assigned to neighbourhood councils are broadly outlined, offering a general framework rather than a strict blueprint. This open-endedness leaves significant space for interpretation. Two core tasks consistently stand out: fostering meaningful participation among residents and serving as an advisory body to the municipality.

When the interviewees were asked about the main tasks of the neighbourhood councils, both neighbourhood council members and municipal workers gave varied responses—there was no single dominant answer. The councils play a multifaceted role in local governance. According to municipal staff, the councils primarily serve as advisory bodies, offering both solicited and unsolicited advice, particularly on participatory processes. They emphasized the importance of neighbourhood councils acting as a counterbalance to municipal power, serving as a critical mirror that encourages reflection within the institution.

From the perspective of neighbourhood council members, the role is more community-oriented and pragmatic. They focus on formal responsibilities like drafting year action plans and supporting resident initiatives. Additionally, they see value in fostering community, advocating for residents’ interests, and helping when people encounter problems by bundling concerns and bringing them to the municipality’s attention. Acting as the eyes and ears of the neighbourhood, the councils translate local signals into input for the city government. The tasks of the neighbourhood councils will be explored in more detail in the following chapters.

⁶³ Gemeenteraad Rotterdam, ‘Verordening op de Wijkraden 2022’, Pub. L. No. 402891 (2021), <https://lokaleregelgeving.overheid.nl/CVDR663980/>.

Table 2. Formal Tools of the Neighbourhood Councils

Policy instrument	Explanation	When
Neighbourhood accord	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Written in collaboration by the neighbourhood council, municipality and neighbourhood network. Four-year plan. Consists of 5 themes that the Neighbourhood council wants to focus on during their term. 	Written at the beginning of their term
Year action plan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Document consisting of a maximum of 45 action points that the neighbourhood councils wants to achieve in the upcoming year. All points are answered by the municipality with a stoplight system: green (approved), orange (maybe, if...), red (not approved). 75% of the points should be approved. The Municipal Executive can be held accountable that the action points get executed. Before admitting the year action plan, there is a lengthy negotiation process with the municipality to determine which initiatives will be implemented in the upcoming year. 	Written once a year
Solicited Council Advices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> When the Municipal Executive needs advice on something concerning the neighbourhood, they will ask the neighbourhood councils to give advice. 	When an alderman needs input from the neighbourhood
Unsolicited Council Advices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Neighbourhood councils can give unsolicited advice about anything at any time. 	At any time

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The advice is directed to the Municipal Executive, or to one of its individual members. • The Municipal Executive is obliged to give a substantive response. • Often used as a ‘last resort’ when other means have failed or as an additional signal to highlight urgent needs. • The Municipal Executive usually has about six weeks to respond although it could also take quite a bit longer. 	
Assess resident initiatives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All residents of a neighbourhood can submit an initiative for which they can get money. The neighbourhood council assesses the request. 	Whenever a neighbourhood initiative is proposed

Source: Interviews with participants

OBI Evaluation ‘Wijk aan Zet’

In March 2025, the Research and Business Intelligence (OBI) department of the municipality of Rotterdam released an evaluation of the administrative system of the ‘Wijk aan Zet’ initiative, commissioned by the Municipal Executive.⁶⁴ The research is mainly based on surveys sent to current and resigned neighbourhood councils members, municipal workers, neighbourhood alderman and city council members.⁶⁵ It provides a discussion on the functioning of the municipal organ and the various processes and people involved.

Satisfaction with neighbourhood councils’ influence on municipal policy was generally low: 88% of former and 67% of current council members expressed dissatisfaction, while other respondents were only slightly more positive. The report concluded that neighbourhood councils have limited influence, mainly restricted to budgeting for resident initiatives and advising on local matters like public space. They lack authority over major urban issues such as area development, housing, and infrastructure. The

⁶⁴ S. Brand et al., *Evaluatie Bestuurlijk Stelsel Wijk Aan Zet*. Rotterdam: Onderzoek en Business Intelligence- Gemeente Rotterdam, 2025, <https://onderzoek010.nl/documents/Politiek-en-bestuur>.

⁶⁵ Brand et al.

neighbourhood councils' limited influence is a key source of frustration. When asked, 54% of respondents believed neighbourhood councils should have more decision-making powers, with council members (76%) far more supportive than municipal workers (36%). Similarly, 52% favoured granting councils budgetary rights, again with stronger support from neighbourhood council members (69%) than municipal staff (35%).

Other key findings from the OBI research include that some neighbourhood council members feel they were not adequately prepared for their role by the municipality.⁶⁶ They also express a need for more support, such as practical tools and assistance in communicating with local residents. Municipal staff also need more time allocated for council-related work. Additionally, to stimulate more participation, neighbourhood council members should gain more visibility in the neighbourhood. As for cooperation between neighbourhood council members and municipal staff, both groups are mostly positive about their cooperation.⁶⁷ On the other hand, the cooperation between neighbourhood councils and the Municipal Executive is less positive. Part of this is because neighbourhood councils feel like their advices often go unanswered. Also, the neighbourhood council members feel like they should be involved earlier in important developments or new projects in their neighbourhood.

Topics Discussed in Neighbourhood Council Documents

Now that the roles and historical development of the neighbourhood councils have been assessed in detail, we turn to the topics these councils actually address. To do so, this research draws on documents drafted by the neighbourhood councils, available online on municipal websites. For this research, a total of 619 documents were analysed. The corpus consists of documents produced by all 39 neighbourhood councils, including neighbourhood accords, year action plans of 2024, and both solicited and unsolicited advices. Of these documents, 542 are council advices, ranging from March 3, 2022, to March 20, 2025. The advices can be found on a Rotterdam municipal website that holds all administrative information, including City Council, Municipal Executive and neighbourhood council documents.⁶⁸ The remaining 77 documents include neighbourhood accords and year action plans of 2024, which were publicly available for the majority—but not all—of the neighbourhood councils. They are published on the municipal 'mijn.rotterdam' platform, where neighbourhood councils can share their plans and activities to promote resident engagement.⁶⁹

⁶⁶ Brand et al.

⁶⁷ Brand et al.

⁶⁸ Gemeente Rotterdam. 'Wijkraadadviezen RotterdamRaad - iBabs Publieksportaal'.

⁶⁹ Gemeente Rotterdam. 'Mijn Rotterdam - Home'.

To analyse the topics discussed in documents produced by the neighbourhood councils, this research applies topic modelling, a technique that uses algorithms to uncover the main themes in large, unstructured text collections.⁷⁰ Specifically, it uses Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA), a widely used model that assumes each document reflects a mixture of topics, and each topic is characterized by a distribution of words. LDA is part of the broader field of probabilistic modelling, which treats data as the result of a generative process involving both observed elements (words) and hidden structures (topics). By modelling the joint probability of words and topics, LDA allows for the estimation of the likely topic structure of documents—this is done by calculating the posterior distribution, which indicates how likely each topic is, given the words in the text.⁷¹ Topic models do not understand the meaning of words; instead, they identify patterns of word co-occurrence across documents. This makes them a suitable technique for uncovering broader themes in documents written by neighbourhood councils, as it provides a systematic overview of recurring topics. By combining qualitative insights from interviews with the quantitative approach of topic modelling, this research gives a comprehensive understanding of neighbourhood councils in Rotterdam.

⁷⁰ David Blei, Lawrence Carin, and David Dunson, ‘Probabilistic Topic Models’, *IEEE Signal Processing Magazine* 27, no. 6 (November 2010): 55–65, <https://doi.org/10.1109/MSP.2010.938079>.

⁷¹ Blei, Carin, and Dunson.

Topic Models

Table 3. Topic Model Results for Topics 1–5 (Unigrams)

Topic 1	Topic 2	Topic 3	Topic 4	Topic 5
dorp (village)	bos (forest)	actie (action)	horeca (abbr. hotel, restaurant, cafe)	elkaar (each other)
participatie (participation)	elkaar (each other)	prognose (prognosis)	actief (active)	staat (state)
staat (state)	plek (place)	doel (goal)	lawaai (noise)	veiligheid (safety)
ligt (lies/is located)	wijkcollectie (neighbourhood collection)	maatschappelijke (social)	bas (bass)	stad (city)
doel (goal)	belangrijk (important)	veiligheid (safety)	feest (party)	straat (street)
stad (city)	ligt (lies/is located)	acties (actions)	dcmr (env. agency)	belangrijk (important)
veiligheid (safety)	zie (see)	sb (abbr. city management)	roel (name)	vaak (often)
graag (gladly)	actief (active)	directie (management)	regio (region)	graag (gladly)
veilig (safe)	staat (state)	schoon (clean)	foto (photo)	welke (which)
politie (police)	participatie (participation)	veilig (safe)	wijkraadslid (neighbourhood council member)	ligt (lies/is located)
beleid (policy)	maakt (makes)	stand (status)	piekstraat (street)	veilig (safe)
horeca (abbr. hotel, restaurant, cafe)	park (park)	extra (extra)	city (city)	plek (place)
belangrijk (important)	beeld (image)	plan (plan)	bbl (abbr.)	plan (plan)
acties (actions)	heel (very)	locaties (locations)	rosestraat (street)	participatie (participation)
relatief (relatively)	blijft (remains)	politie (police)	stadion (stadium)	heel (very)
prettig (pleasant)	graag (gladly)	twee (two)	hefpark (park)	extra (extra)
actief (active)	drie (three)	sport (sports)	johannes (name)	beeld (image)
straat (street)	toe (to)	participatie (participation)	habo (abbr.)	acties (actions)
participatiewet (participation law)	doet (does)	welke (which)	tor (name/abbr.)	belangrijke (important)
vraag (question)	doel (goal)	concept (concept)	odé (name)	tijd (time)

Source: Created by the author with RStudio.

Table 4. Topic Model Results for Topics 6–10 (Unigrams)

Topic 6	Topic 7	Topic 8	Topic 9	Topic 10
plan (plan)	advies (advice)	nee (no)	dorp (village)	bibliotheek (library)
tram (tram)	graag (gladly)	positie (position)	dorpsraad (village council)	participatie (participation)
km (kilometer)	blad (leaf/sheet)	groep (group)	stad (city)	rond (around)
ov (public transport)	reactie (reaction)	belangrijk (important)	programma (program)	belangrijk (important)
lijn (line)	griffie (municipal registry)	sprake (discussion)	strand (beach)	sprake (discussion)
tramlijn (tram line)	locatie (location)	politie (police)	beleid (policy)	rtha (abbr. Rotterdam The Hague Airport)
maritiem (maritime)	april (April)	park (park)	landtong (peninsula)	belang (importance)
tramnet (tram network)	twee (two)	ligt (lies/is located)	grp (abbr. Municipal sewer plan)	problematiek (issues)
straat (street)	welke (which)	staat (state)	m4h (district)	extra (extra)
concept (concept)	tijd (time)	vraag (question)	drie (three)	straatweg (road)
station (station)	plaats (place)	sport (sport)	grond (land)	maatschappelijke (social)
ptt (post office)	toe (to)	programma (program)	dorpsakkoord (village accord)	ligt (lies)
snelheid (speed)	belang (interest)	locatie (location)	riool (sewer)	plaswijckpark (park)
markt (market)	vraag (question)	prognose (prognosis)	welke (which)	vraag (question)
karremans (name of former alderman)	karremans (name of former alderman)	veiligheid (safety)	stand (status)	belangrijke (important)
mrdh (abbr. Metropolis Region Rotterdam The Hague)	vaak (often)	extra (extra)	belangrijk (important)	locaties (locations)
toegankelijkheid (accessibility)	één (one)	één (one)	staat (state)	advies (advice)
rijdt (drives)	postadres (mailing address)	participatie (participation)	biedt (offers)	vorm (form)
pilot (pilot)	lijkt (seems)	crooswijkseweg (street)	maatschappelijke (social)	o.a. (among others)
maas (name of a river)	helaas (unfortunately)	rood (red)	kwetsbare (vulnerable)	groei (growth)

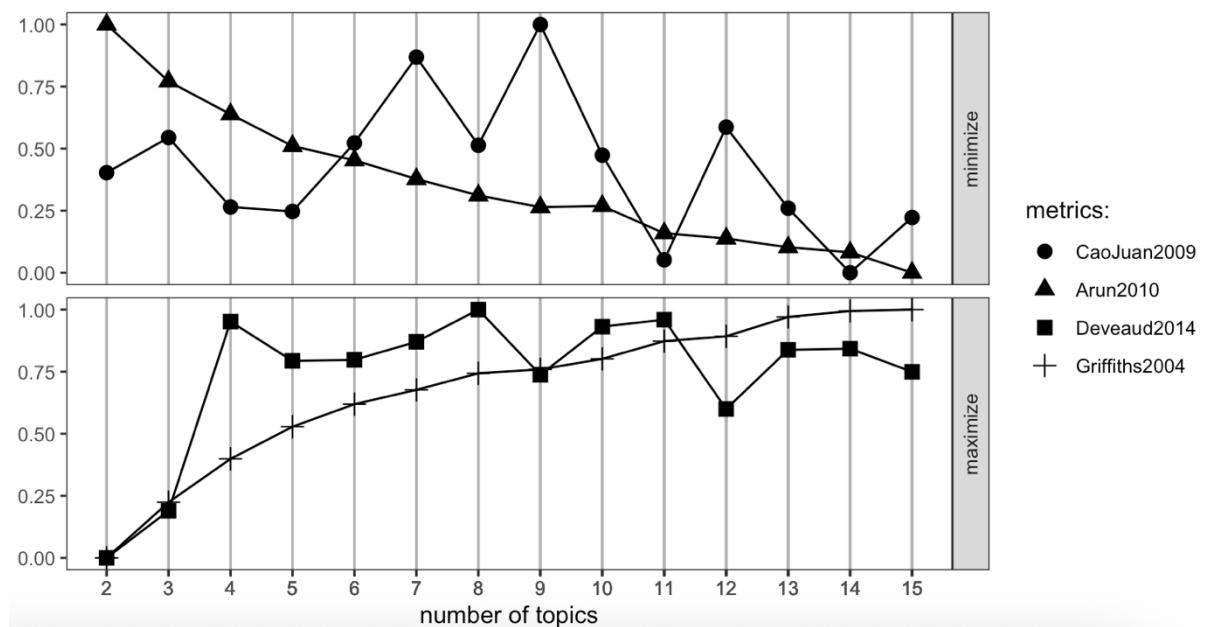
Source: Created by the author with RStudio.

Table 5. Topic Distribution (Unigrams)

Topic	Count	Percentage
Topic 1	15	1.97%
Topic 2	10	1.31%
Topic 3	48	6.30%
Topic 4	8	1.05%
Topic 5	87	11.42%
Topic 6	34	4.46%
Topic 7	346	45.43%
Topic 8	10	1.31%
Topic 9	19	2.49%
Topic 10	42	5.51%
Total	619	100%

Source: Created by the author with RStudio.

Graph 1. LDA Tuning (Unigrams)



Source: Created by the author with RStudio.

Topics Interpretation (Unigrams)

Topic 1: Small town/urban life and engagement

The use of both the words ‘village’ and ‘city’ suggests a dual identity. Although not discussed in detail in this research, some councils of the ‘Wijk Aan Zet’ initiative are village councils. They are part of the municipality of Rotterdam but assume more of a village identity. This topic does suggest the importance of this distinction and the importance of advocating for local priorities. Additionally, this topic revolves around civic participation and safety.

Topic 2: Urban spaces, public facilities and community design

This topic is about the use of public and green spaces. It also touches on urban planning concepts and how people perceive and interact with their environment.

Topic 3: Safety, policy and local government action

This topic focuses on public safety and law enforcement, including policy goals, social measures and the role of citizen participation in implementing or reacting to these policies.

Topic 4: Recreation and nuisance

This topic centres on recreation and the local disturbances these create like noise from hospitality venues, public celebrations, as well as environmental concerns.

Topic 5: Polite Pressure Language Around Safety and Urban Space

This topic captures the rhetorical style neighbourhood councils use when expressing concerns or requesting action, particularly around safety and the public space. It reflects the polite yet firm tone typical of how councils formulate their appeals. The language is demanding, but not confrontational — instead, it conveys a sense of diplomatic pressure. Terms like “vaak” (often), “belangrijk” (important), “graag” (gladly/would like to), “extra”, and “acties” (actions) suggest an emphasis on urgency and expectation, expressed in a respectful and constructive manner.

Topic 6: Public transport and infrastructure

This topic is clearly centred on transportation planning, particularly tram systems and broader mobility infrastructure in the region.

Topic 7: Formal Opinions, Advice, and Administrative Feedback

Topic 7 is a rest topic which includes broad words related to formal opinions, advice, and administrative feedback. It relates to one of the most important tasks of the neighbourhood councils which is to give advice to the municipality. It reveals something about the administration and bureaucracy the neighbourhood councils need to deal with in this process.

Topic 8: Policy, Participation and Social Context

This topic addresses social policies, positions on key issues, and public debate. It includes elements of community grouping and opposition to or support for initiatives.

Topic 9: Local Identity and Spatial Development

This topic reflects how neighbourhood councils engage with place-based planning, particularly in peripheral or village-like areas of Rotterdam (e.g., Rozenburg, Hoek van Holland, Pernis). It blends concerns about community identity with the realities of infrastructure, land use, and social policy.

Topic 10: Local Amenities and Community Involvement

This topic reflects how neighbourhood councils discuss local facilities, social challenges, and resident participation in shaping their environments. The language suggests a focus on community well-being, planning, and addressing local issues collaboratively.

Interpretation Topic Distribution (Unigrams)

The most dominant topic is topic 7 with (45.4%) distribution. Nearly half of the data is heavily focused on advice, reactions, citizen questions, and governance feedback mechanisms. These are just general topics because most advices, year action plans and neighbourhood accords touch upon these topics. Smaller topics include community life, safety, public services and transport. Whereas a topic like recreation and nuisance is very marginal and only present in 1.05% of the documents.

Interpretation of LDA Tuning (Unigrams)

LDA tuning refers to the process of optimizing the parameters of Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA). The graph shows four topic evaluation metrics—CaoJuan2009, Arun2010, Deveaud2014, and Griffiths2004—used to determine the optimal number of topics for an LDA model. While CaoJuan2009 and Arun2010 stabilize around 13 topics, Deveaud2014 peaks at 8, and Griffiths2004 rises until about 13. Given these mixed results, selecting 10 topics offers a balanced compromise.

Table 6. Topic Model Results (Bigrams)

Topic 1	Topic 2	Topic 3	Topic 4
periode_periode (<i>period_period</i>)	postbus_rotterdam (<i>P.O. box_Rotterdam</i>)	periode_periode (<i>period_period</i>)	stedelijke_opgaven (<i>urban_challenges</i>)
toelichting_jaarplanning (<i>explanation_year planning</i>)	blad_datum (<i>sheet_date</i>)	datum_pagina (<i>date_page</i>)	kleine_kernen (<i>small_communities</i>)
periode_nee (<i>period_no</i>)	retouradres_postbus (<i>return address_P.O. box</i>)	t_m (<i>till</i>)	helemaal_mee (<i>completely_agree</i>)
jaarplanning_periode (<i>year planning_period</i>)	ongevraagd_advies (<i>unsolicited_advice</i>)	rotterdams_gemiddelde (<i>Rotterdam_average</i>)	participatieruimte_wijkraden (<i>participation space_neighbourhood councils</i>)
voortgang_toelichting (<i>progress_explanation</i>)	b_w (<i>B&W – municipal executive</i>)	jaarplanning_periode (<i>year planning_period</i>)	openbare_ruimte (<i>public_space</i>)
toelichting_prognose (<i>explanation_prognosist</i>)	vriendelijke_namens (<i>kindRegards</i>)	bewoner_online (<i>resident_online</i>)	periode_periode (<i>period_period</i>)
prognose_toelichting (<i>prognosis_explanation</i>)	college_b (<i>municipal executive</i>)	gemiddelde_rotterdam (<i>average_Rotterdam</i>)	prognose_toelichting (<i>prognosis_explanation</i>)
betrokken_partijen (<i>involved_parties</i>)	w_rotterdam (<i>W_Rotterdam</i>)	stichting_wijkcollectie (<i>foundation_neighborhood collection</i>)	gemiddelde_rotterdam (<i>average_Rotterdam</i>)
planning_toelichting (<i>planning_explanation</i>)	voorzitter_wijkraadcoördinator (<i>chair_neighbourhood council coordinator</i>)	betrokken_partijen (<i>involved_parties</i>)	ten_opzichte (<i>in_relation_to</i>)
nee_periode (<i>no_period</i>)	per_verzonden (<i>per_sent</i>)	online_vragenlijst (<i>online_questionnaire</i>)	gemeente_rotterdam (<i>municipality_Rotterdam</i>)
partijen_planning (<i>parties_planning</i>)	voldoende_geïnformeerd (<i>sufficiently_informed</i>)	voortgang_toelichting (<i>progress_explanation</i>)	bewoners_ondernehmers (<i>residents_entrepreneurs</i>)
toelichting_cluster (<i>explanation_cluster</i>)	hiermee_voldoende (<i>this_way_sufficient</i>)	openbare_ruimte (<i>public_space</i>)	bewoners_zegt (<i>residents_say</i>)
rotterdam_rotterdam (<i>Rotterdam_Rotterdam</i>)	hopen_hiermee (<i>hope_with_this</i>)	prognose_toelichting (<i>prognosis_explanation</i>)	mee_oneens (<i>disagree_with</i>)

maatschappelijke_ontwikkeling (<i>social_development</i>)	gemeente_rotterdam (<i>municipality_Rotterdam</i>)	prognose_toelichting (<i>prognosis_explanation</i>)	voortgang_toelichting (<i>progress_explanation</i>)
financieel_gedekt (<i>financially_covered</i>)	geïnformeerd_vriendelijke (<i>informed_friendly</i>)	m_jaar (m_year)	toelichting_prognose (<i>explanation_prognosis</i>)
periode_financieel (<i>period_financial</i>)	hoogte_gehouden (<i>kept_informed</i>)	planning_toelichting (<i>planning_explanation</i>)	betrokken_partijen (<i>involved_parties</i>)
gedekt_toelichting (<i>covered_explanation</i>)	graag_hoogte (<i>gladly_informed</i>)	gemeente_rotterdam (<i>municipality_Rotterdam</i>)	rotterdams_gemiddelde (<i>Rotterdam_average</i>)
voortgang_prognose (<i>progress_prognosis</i>)	verdere_besluitvorming (<i>further_decision_making</i>)	toelichting_prognose (<i>explanation_prognosis</i>)	nieuwe_bewoners (<i>new_residents</i>)
periode_actie (<i>period_action</i>)	graag_onvangen (<i>gladly_received</i>)	toelichting_jaarplanning (<i>explanation_year_planning</i>)	maatschappelijke_ontwikkeling (<i>social_development</i>)
directie_veiligheid (<i>security_directorate</i>)	gehouden_verdere (<i>held_further</i>)	toelichting_cluster (<i>explanation_cluster</i>)	werk_inkomen (<i>work_income</i>)

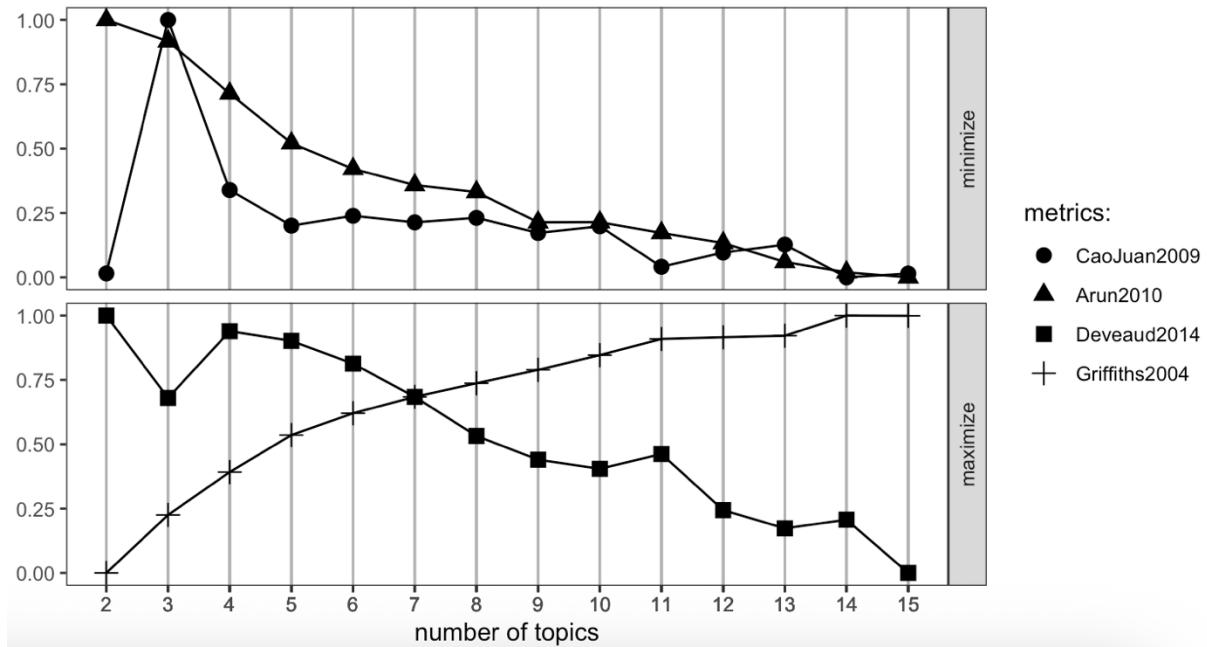
Source: Created by the author with RStudio.

Table 7. Topic Distribution (Bigrams)

Topic	Count	Percentage (%)
Topic 1	61	9.86
Topic 2	500	80.78
Topic 3	31	5.01
Topic 4	27	4.36
Total	619	100.00

Source: Created by the author with RStudio.

Figure 2. LDA Tuning (Bigrams)



Source: Created by the author with RStudio.

Interpretation Topic Model (Bigrams)

Topic 1: Planning, Timeframes and Progress Reporting

This topic revolves around scheduling, periods, timelines and progress updates. This also includes words related to budgeting and financial planning aspects.

Topic 2: Official Correspondence and Communication

This topic is about the formal communications, letters and administrative interactions between neighbourhood councils and the many parts of the municipality. Additionally, communications protocols and advice giving is included in this topic.

Topic 3: Community Engagement and Local Issues

This topic is centres on resident involvement and direct engagement with residents. It suggests that there is a collaborative framework where local government, community organizations and social initiatives work together. This points to partnerships aimed at addressing neighbourhood challenges and fostering sustainable social progress.

Topic 4: Urban Development and Social Challenges

This topic highlights the different neighbourhood types in Rotterdam, as both urban challenges as well as the small cores are mentioned. It discusses participation stimulated by neighbourhood councils as well as

the most important stakeholders in this (residents and entrepreneurs). Also, it suggests the importance of socio-economic factors by mentioning entrepreneurs and work and income which influence neighbourhood life.

Interpretation Topic Distribution (Bigrams)

Topic 2 is the most dominant topic as 80.78% of the documents include this topic. This is not surprising as it highlights the official correspondence and communication, something that plays a role in all the documents shared with municipal staff and the Municipal Executive. The other topics are less dominant and all play a role in a smaller number of documents.

Interpretation for LDA Tuning (Bigrams)

Coherence and divergence metrics indicate that four topics are optimal for the bigram model, balancing clarity and interpretability. Minimization metrics drop at four, coherence peaks at two and four, and Griffiths2004 rises steadily but favours more topics by default. Compared to the unigram model's ten topics, the bigram model captures nuance with fewer topics due to added context.

Overall Interpretation Topic Models

Overall, the topics tend to focus on local identity, public space and amenities, safety, public transport, noise and events, and infrastructure. Since neighbourhood councils are local bodies, the documents primarily address specific, small-scale issues affecting their immediate communities. Although some topics relate to broader municipal concerns—like tram networks, transport, and sewer systems—these are issues that have very specific implications for the neighbourhood structure.

Additionally, the topics reveal much about the bureaucracy and administrative system that neighbourhood councils operate within. This is reflected in the dominance of Topic 7 (unigrams) and Topic 2 (bigrams), which focus on the formal nature of feedback and the use of official correspondence and communication. The language across multiple topics points to a role that is reactive and feedback-oriented rather than proactive or initiatory. The prevalence of polite bureaucratic language (Topic 5 unigrams, Topic 2 bigrams) demonstrates that councils operate within a respectful but formal institutional space, leaving little room for radical or activist discourse. What emerges from several of the topics—particularly those emphasizing formal phrasing, structured expressions, and repeated procedural terms—is that neighbourhood councils are not merely functioning within the system but actively navigating it. This suggests that council members must develop a certain fluency in bureaucratic Dutch to participate effectively. It's not just about knowing what to say but understanding how to say it in a manner that aligns with institutional norms and expectations. The topic models reveal that language is used as a tool, a barrier, and a strategy.

Limitations of Topic Models

The outcomes in Rstudio give an interesting overview on what themes these documents represent and the themes the neighbourhood councils deal with. It does give a limited view and Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) assumes each document is a bag of words but does not incorporate word order or context. Also, there is no document context, and it is not possible to see which neighbourhoods focus on what themes, the corpus after only three years of these Neighbourhood Councils would be just too small to make this distinction. Additionally, the words are translated from their original Dutch, which might cause them to lose some context or meaning.

It is also important to keep in mind that the contents of government documents do not always reflect the policies that are ultimately implemented. While the topics discussed provide a useful overview of the issues that concern neighbourhood councils, their work in practice goes beyond what is documented. Later in this research, additional tools and methods available to neighbourhood councils, which extend beyond advices, accords, and year action plans will be discussed. This includes ongoing dialogue and negotiation with civil servants to communicate their needs effectively.

Thematic Analysis

Additionally, a thematic analysis was conducted using RStudio, based on a set list of keywords counted within the documents written by neighbourhood councils. The thematic analysis forms a good addition to the topic models, as topic modelling is a computational, unsupervised method that helps discover hidden patterns and topic across large text data without preconceived notions. A thematic analysis with a set list of keywords is a more manual and theory-driven approach with a specific focus on certain themes. All the categories are based on the research performed by Dierwechter and Coffey about Neighbourhood Councils in Tacoma, Washington.⁷² In their research, they used a set list of themes to analyse the spending of Tacoma, Washington's neighbourhood councils. These themes are recreation, crime security, environmental improvement, special needs, blight removal, education, street safety and beautification. Since Rotterdam neighbourhood councils have only limited budgetary authority, the focus was placed on exploring the themes discussed in documents written by the neighbourhood councils. For the thematic analysis, the same corpus of 619 documents (including advices, neighbourhood accords, and year action plans of 2024) was used as for the topic models. A complete list of keywords used for this thematic analysis can be found in Appendix III.

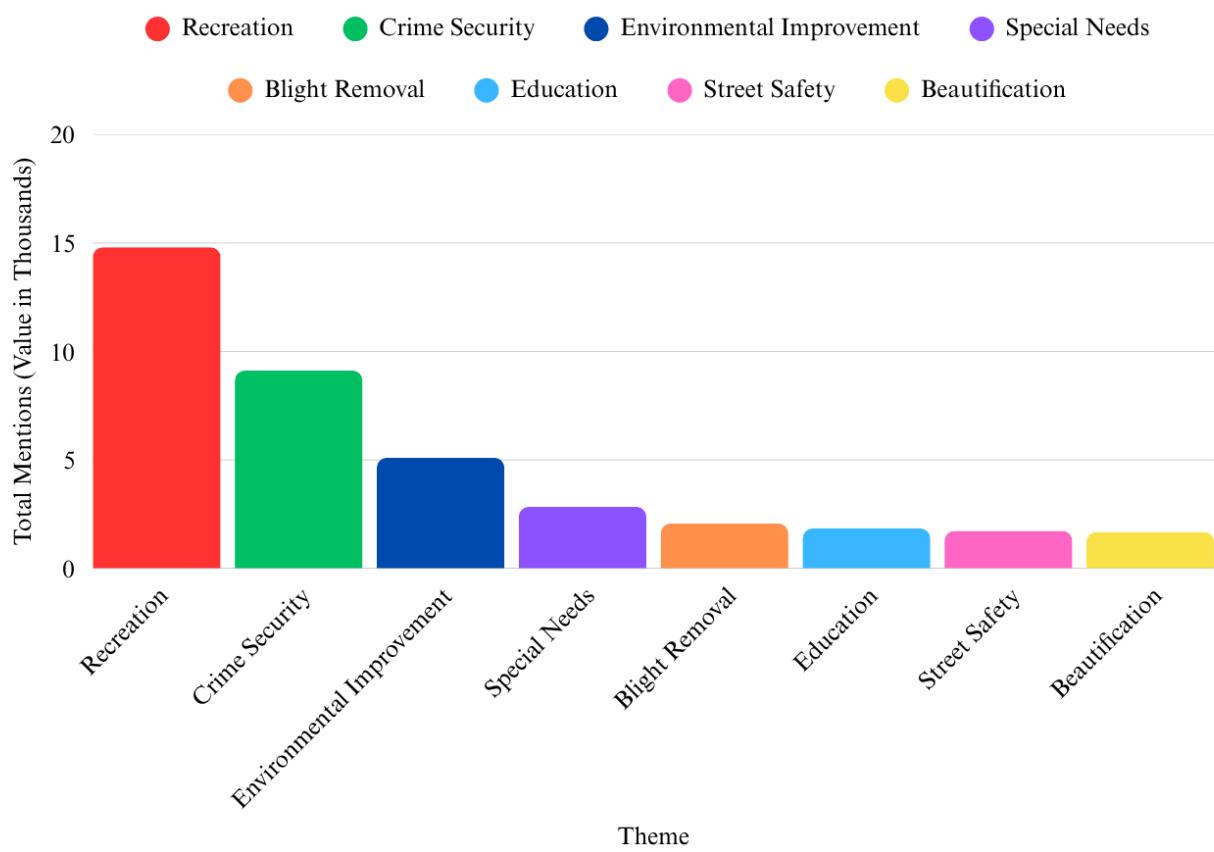
⁷² Dierwechter and Coffey, 'Assessing the Effects of Neighborhood Councils on Urban Policy and Development'.

Table 9. Theme frequency in Rotterdam neighbourhood council documents

Theme	Total Count
Recreation	14,807
Crime Security	9,116
Environmental Improvement	5,095
Special Needs	2,833
Blight Removal	2,065
Education	1,834
Street Safety	1,726
Beautification	1,667

Source: Created by the author with RStudio

Graph 3. Theme frequency in Rotterdam neighbourhood council documents



Source: Own illustration by the author, generated with RStudio and formatted using Canva.

Interpretation Thematic Analysis and Comparison to Topic Models

The most frequently mentioned theme in the thematic analysis is recreation, which encompasses activities residents engage in during their free time and the neighbourhood spaces and facilities that support these activities. This prominence highlights the central role of public amenities, parks, events, and leisure opportunities in the daily lives of community members. The next most frequent theme is crime and security, reflecting persistent concerns about safety in both public and residential spaces. Environmental improvement ranks third, pointing to a growing awareness of sustainability and the desire to enhance the quality of the local environment. This is followed by special needs, underscoring the importance of inclusivity and accessibility in urban planning. Blight removal, education, street safety, and beautification appear less frequently but still indicate areas of interest within the councils' scope.

As with the topic models, this thematic analysis confirms that neighbourhood councils primarily engage with small-scale, hyper-local issues that directly affect their communities. The prominence of themes like recreation and safety aligns with the findings from the topic models, reinforcing the idea that councils are most concerned with quality-of-life matters close to home. Interestingly, environmental improvement features more strongly in the thematic analysis than in the topic models, suggesting that environmental concerns may be broadly mentioned but less cohesively framed, and thus harder for the topic model to cluster into a single topic. Conversely, one of the most distinctive insights from the topic models—the reactive, feedback-oriented role of neighbourhood councils—is not captured in the thematic analysis. The topic models highlight the formal, bureaucratic tone of the documents, suggesting that councils often communicate in a structured, polite, and institutionally aligned manner. This aspect of language use, which reflects how councils position themselves within the governance system, does not emerge from a keyword-based thematic analysis.

In sum, the thematic analysis and topic modelling complement each other well. The thematic analysis provides a structured, theory-informed view of neighbourhood concerns, while the topic modelling offers a data-driven look at both content and tone, revealing the institutional context in which councils operate. Together, they offer a fuller understanding of the roles, priorities, and communicative strategies of Rotterdam's neighbourhood councils.

Conclusions Chapter

To conclude, this chapter discusses the development of the 'Wijk aan Zet' initiative, situating it within Rotterdam's long history of different forms of local governance aimed at strengthening local democracy. Sub-municipalities were granted significant mandates but evolved into a separate layer of government. When these were phased out, district committees took its place. They had a more advisory role, but the system lacked efficient collaboration and complementarity and led to a power concentration for the

municipality. In practice, its members were often former civil servants or individuals with deep institutional knowledge. Recognizing the need for a better and more diverse local body the municipality chose the neighbourhood councils —smaller in scale, open to people who are not part of a political party and designed to engage a more diverse group of residents. The mandate remains limited; their primary role is giving advice and activating local networks. Their tools remain embedded within the bureaucratic systems of the municipality. Despite the reforms, the OBI research shows that many neighbourhood council members are dissatisfied with the tools available to them and the limited influence they hold. An analysis of their documents confirms that neighbourhood councils primarily focus on small-scale, hyperlocal issues such as recreation, safety, and public space—issues that are visible and actionable but may not fully reflect deeper structural concerns in the neighbourhoods they represent. Furthermore, the dominant bureaucratic tone and feedback-oriented nature of the documents reveal how strongly these councils are embedded in existing institutional norms. While they are not meant to function as another formal governance layer, they are still expected to operate within rigid administrative frameworks. Their influence thus depends less on formal power and more on their capacity to navigate municipal systems and persuade officials.

To answer the question: *To what extent do the issues addressed by the neighbourhood councils align with the most pressing needs and concerns of the neighbourhoods in Rotterdam?* The topics the neighbourhood councils raise are relevant for neighbourhoods. They are hyper-local and concerned with the quality of life of their communities. Structural challenges are not easily addressed through the tools neighbourhood councils have and the documents they produce. Additionally, the language used by neighbourhood councils offers valuable insight into the formal institutional framework in which they operate. This system—shaped over years through various forms of local governance—prioritizes reactive governance, leaving limited space for radical or activist discourse.

Chapter III: Resident Participation in Practice

One of the main tasks of the neighbourhood council is to stimulate participation and to be the eyes and ears of the neighbourhood. Managing resident participation is not an easy task; it requires specific skills and the ability to reach the neighbourhood networks. In this section, the role of resident engagement and its difficulties are discussed. Specifically, it addresses the sub-question: *What role do neighbourhood councils play in encouraging participation, and how effective are their efforts in stimulating local engagement?*

The Challenges of Participation

Resident participation is crucial for building trust in local government and improving democratic processes. Šaparnienė et al. analysed the relationship between citizens' trust in local government institutions and participation in local governance.⁷³ They found citizens' trust in local government is still low. Globally, in 2019, 47% of people had trust in their government. Only 37% of the people on OECD countries believe that they have something to say in what their government does. Yet, when citizens are genuinely involved in decision-making, it can lead to better policies, stronger accountability, and greater transparency. Participation fosters dialogue, helps identify community needs, and ensures public input is reflected in political decisions.⁷⁴ It also gives civil servants a chance to demonstrate competence and build mutual trust. Overall, involving residents supports good governance, reduces conflict, and increases public support for government actions.

Resident participation was discussed in every interview, with interviewees reflecting on how neighbourhood councils approach this challenge and how successful they are in engaging the community. Paul Hulsebosch, a Neighbourhood Council Coordinator, offered interesting insights into the role of participation.⁷⁵ He stated that the effectiveness of neighbourhood councils in stimulating participation varies greatly. Some councils are very active in engaging with residents, while others do not do it much. The key question is whether this is problematic or whether something should be done about it. Hulsebosch believes that neighbourhood councils should have the freedom to decide how they approach participation, even if that means some councils do very little of it. Some neighbourhood councils operate on the assumption that their election gives them the mandate to speak on behalf of the residents without

⁷³ Diana Šaparnienė, Iveta Reinhilde, and Sandra Rinkevičienė, 'Relationship Between Citizens' Trust in Local Government and Participation in Local Governance', *Scientific Papers of the University of Pardubice. Series D. Faculty of Economics and Administration* 29, no. 2 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.46585/sp29021210>.

⁷⁴ Šaparnienė, Reinhilde, and Rinkevičienė.

⁷⁵ Paul Hulsebosch, interview by the author, Rotterdam, April 18, 2025. See Appendix II for an interview summary.

needing further consultation. In contrast, other councils engage directly with residents through public meetings, although Hulsebosch notes that attendance at such meetings is often limited, with only a small and consistent group of people attending. This raises the question of whether this constitutes sufficient participation. There are also councils that go beyond public meetings and engage with residents in other ways, such as setting up booths in public spaces. However, this typically happens only for larger issues, not on a regular basis, as neighbourhood council members often have daytime jobs, which leaves them with limited time for their council work.

Hulsebosch argues that neighbourhood councils should have the freedom to decide how to engage with residents, just as municipal and national parliamentarians have the mandate to represent their voters without being expected to engage directly with the public on every issue.⁷⁶ Hulsebosch feels it is unfair to expect neighbourhood councils to always handle resident participation, as this is not expected of other elected officials. While it is important to encourage councils to engage with residents and provide them with resources, he believes it is not something that can be demanded of them.

Similar views are shared by Ron Davids, president of a neighbourhood council, he believes that active participation of residents in identifying issues and formulating solutions is limited in their neighbourhood.⁷⁷ While there are good intentions, the interaction with residents remains minimal. Many residents only reach out when they have complaints. The neighbourhood council's efforts to engage with residents are restricted due to practical constraints, such as most council members having daytime jobs. As a result, they do not have enough time for direct engagement, like visiting markets to talk to residents.

Davids argues that the decline of neighbourhood organizations has further weakened social cohesion and the connection between the neighbourhood and the government.⁷⁸ Davids underlines the beauty of participation but states that it has been taken a bit too far. He acknowledges that it is not an easy task, especially when residents are busy and have little connection to their neighbourhood. However, there are examples where residents are actively involved in addressing specific local issues. For example, when there are concerns about mobility, parking, or an intersection in the neighbourhood, residents are invited to neighbourhood council meetings to discuss the issues. The council then works with the residents to find solutions and involves them in decision-making on these concrete matters.

Angela Stolwijk-Kramer, president of a neighbourhood council, explains that open neighbourhood council meetings are especially used to include residents.⁷⁹ These meetings are often theme-based where residents have the chance to participate and discuss together. Additionally, she recounts events organised

⁷⁶ Hulsebosch, interview.

⁷⁷ Ron Davids, interview by the author, Rotterdam, April 4, 2025. See Appendix II for an interview summary.

⁷⁸ Davids, interview.

⁷⁹ Angela Stolwijk-Kramer, interview by the author, Rotterdam, April 17, 2025. See Appendix II for an interview summary.

by her neighbourhood council that were focused on resident engagement; these included a neighbourhood cleanup together with residents and an artists' initiative to create a long marble track through the neighbourhood. However, she also adds her disappointment in the passivity she sees in many residents. Before joining the neighbourhood council, she thought there would be more initiatives from residents who want to create something good in the neighbourhood. While there is a small, active group of engaged volunteers, she observes that around 98% of residents remain passive and appear content with the way things are.

This challenge is not unique to her experience. Previous research has highlighted similar barriers, particularly among less-educated residents. Visser et al. conducted interviews with less-educated residents in Rotterdam and found that common reasons for not participating included lack of time, money, social connections, and difficulties with paperwork.⁸⁰ Beside these common reasons the study also uncovered deeper problems. Many participants felt a lack of entitlement, which seemed tied to their lower social status. They were afraid of being judged and felt they lacked the right language or knowledge to take part. Some also expressed a strong dislike of politics, criticizing it as too focused on bureaucracy, irrelevant issues, and self-promotion, and seeing politicians as distant and morally corrupt.

⁸⁰ Vivian Visser, Willem de Koster, and Jeroen van der Waal, 'Understanding Less-Educated Citizens' (Non-)Participation in Citizens' Initiatives: Feelings of Entitlement and a Taste for Politics', *Current Sociology* 71, no. 5 (1 September 2023): 924–42, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00113921211024700>.

Diversity of the Neighbourhood Councils

One of the key features that distinguishes the current neighbourhood council system is the increased diversity. According to Hulsebosch, this represents a marked improvement over previous models, where members of local governing bodies were required to be part of a political party:

What I really appreciate about the current neighbourhood councils is that they are much more diverse. The threshold to become a council member has been significantly lowered, which means that anyone and everyone can now join the council because you don't need to be politically affiliated. And that's exactly what's happening. So now, the neighbourhood councils are much more diverse and a much better reflection of the composition of the neighbourhood, because it has become much more accessible to take part in a council.⁸¹

Elin Wanring-Dedert, the transition manager for the 'Wijk aan Zet' initiative, also highlights this shift.⁸² She notes that neighbourhood councils have a unique ability to connect with residents who are often difficult for municipal workers to reach. She sees their diversity as a key strength, allowing them to engage a broader range of residents. Wanring-Dedert also points out the wide variety of neighbourhoods across Rotterdam, which differ significantly in socio-economic composition and levels of social cohesion. Some residents have deep, generational ties to their neighbourhoods, while others—such as international students or migrant workers—are more temporary. While the neighbourhood councils are quite diverse, it remains challenging to involve certain groups, like international students, in a meaningful way. This diversity in both the neighbourhoods and their populations presents ongoing challenges for engagement and is also reflected—albeit imperfectly—in the composition of the councils themselves. She emphasizes that the initiative is still evolving. One part of this is the need to spend greater attention to strengthen resident participation—especially by enhancing council members' skills in engaging local networks and residents effectively. In addition to this, digital communication and community-building strategies are also areas where training could be improved. These skills are essential for raising awareness of the council's role within neighbourhoods.

⁸¹Hulsebosch, interview. Original quote: "Wat ik heel erg fijn vind aan de huidige wijkraad is dat ze veel diverser zijn. De drempel om wijkraadslid te worden is heel erg veel verlaagd en daardoor dat Jan en Alleman nu in de wijkraad kan komen omdat je niet politiek gebonden hoeft te zijn. En dat gebeurt ook. Dus er zitten nu in de wijkraad ze zijn veel diverser en een veel betere afspiegeling van de samenstelling van de wijk, doordat het veel laagdrempeliger is geworden om in een wijkraad te kunnen zitten."

⁸² Elin Wanring-Dedert, interview by the author, Rotterdam, April 1, 2025. See Appendix II for an interview summary.

Research by De Graaf et al. further supports the observations of Hulsebosch and Wanings-Dedert, highlighting similar challenges to resident engagement.⁸³ The research looked at how to improve participation in disadvantaged neighbourhoods, where engagement is especially low—particularly among young people and minority groups. It shows that standard approaches often do not work in these contexts. Instead, participation is often driven by committed individuals who act like social entrepreneurs or “everyday makers.” These practitioners support local people by creating spaces to connect, helping them build skills, and making sure excluded groups are reached. They also act as “boundary spanners,” linking the everyday life of the neighbourhood with formal institutions. Some work within the system, while others operate outside of it, but both can challenge rules when needed to make the system more responsive. These “participation brokers” adapt policies to local needs and help residents have a voice. Their work is essential for building stronger links between communities and government, and for creating real opportunities for participation.

All interviewees agree that neighbourhood council members have the potential to take on this role—as central figures in the neighbourhood who stimulate engagement and serve as trusted connectors between the community and the municipality. Now that the councils are more diverse, they are better positioned to reach and represent a wider and more varied group of residents, further enhancing their ability to foster inclusive participation.

Neighbourhood Communication Channels

An important factor in resident engagement is the way neighbourhood councils communicate with them. The most important communication channel at the moment is the municipal website ‘mijn.rotterdam’ (My Rotterdam).⁸⁴ It functions as a place where residents of Rotterdam can share their ideas and help make decisions about plans and projects of the municipality; for instance, residents can submit their initiatives on this website. However, the platform is not well known among residents, and its lack of visibility makes it difficult for neighbourhood councils to communicate their ideas effectively. In the OBI research, it was found that 57% of respondents felt the website is not an effective platform for communicating with residents.⁸⁵ During the neighbourhood council conference on April 5th, council members discussed their concerns about the ‘Mijn.rotterdam’ platform. Most expressed a desire to abolish the platform and reallocate its budget back to the neighbourhood councils. Further outcomes of the neighbourhood council are examined in greater detail later in this study.

⁸³ Laurens de Graaf, Merlijn van Hulst, and Ank Michels, ‘Enhancing Participation in Disadvantaged Urban Neighbourhoods’, *Local Government Studies* 41, no. 1 (2 January 2015): 44–62, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03003930.2014.908771>.

⁸⁴ Gemeente Rotterdam. ‘Mijn Rotterdam - Home’.

⁸⁵ Brand et al., *Evaluatie Bestuurlijk Stelsel Wijk Aan Zet*.

The interviewees expressed similar negative sentiments on the ‘Mijn.rotterdam’ platform. Neighbourhood Council President Stolwijk-Kramer states:

We don’t really do anything with it. It’s pretty unclear how to actually post something on it [Mijn.rotterdam platform]. Or whatever. It might be possible through the neighbourhood support officer. But yeah, they’re not really very skilled with it either.
And we also feel like, well, nobody looks at it. And because no one looks at it, nothing happens.
And because nothing happens, no one looks at it. So, it’s kind of a vicious cycle.⁸⁶

Neighbourhood Council President Marco Kole also points to the importance of communication.⁸⁷ He explains that when good changes are made in the neighbourhood, whether by residents, the neighbourhood council or the municipality, this needs to be communicated with the rest of the neighbourhood so that successes are celebrated more often. Kole speaks about ‘influencer marketing’, the residents in the neighbourhood who can reach a big target audience. He explains that when they ask this community to help with communication this significantly expands their reach. He underlines the importance of these communities and how the municipality is mostly limited to their own communication structures without making use of this broader reach. The importance lies in the people who can spread the word for the neighbourhood council. Kole adds about the ‘Mijn.rotterdam’ platform:

‘Mijn.rotterdam’ is one of the platforms that is important for the neighbourhood council. But maybe not so accessible for the average neighbourhood. ‘Mijn.rotterdam’ belongs to the municipality. So, the communication also comes from a single stakeholder. Which is different from saying, “We are the neighbourhood.” Then you basically communicate on behalf of all stakeholders. There’s no community-building element in that. Which is exactly what we consider important in a platform.⁸⁸

⁸⁶ Stolwijk-Kramer, interview. Original quote: “Daar doen we eigenlijk helemaal niks mee. Het is vrij onduidelijk hoe je er nou iets op zet. Of weet ik veel. Het kan wel geloof ik via de wijkondersteuner. Maar ja, die is er ook niet zo heel erg bekwaam in. En wij hebben ook zoiets van ja, niemand kijkt erop. En omdat niemand erop kijkt, gebeurt er niks. En omdat er niks gebeurt, kijkt niemand erop. Dus dat is een beetje een fysieuse cirkel.”

⁸⁷ Marco Kole, interview by the author, Rotterdam, April 3, 2025. See Appendix II for an interview summary.

⁸⁸ Kole, interview. Original quote: “‘Mijn.rotterdam’ is een van de platformen die voor de wijkraad wel belangrijk is. Maar misschien niet zo bereikbaar voor de gemiddelde wijk. ‘Mijn.rotterdam’ is van de gemeente. Dus dat is communicatie ook vanuit één stakeholder. Wat anders is als dat je zegt van, wij zijn de wijk. Dan communiceer je in principe vanuit alle stakeholders. Daar zit geen community building element in. Wat wij juist van belang vinden in de platform.”

Kole's neighbourhood council decided to create their own website as a solution.⁸⁹ The site, named '010 HOME', allows residents to suggest ideas for neighbourhood improvements or events.⁹⁰ All residents are welcome to participate and share their suggestions. As Kole explains, the website plays an important role in community building. In addition, Kole's neighbourhood council uses its communication budget to hire a social media manager, reflecting their strong focus on communication and community building. Kole emphasizes that this will also be important for the next neighbourhood council, as they will benefit from an already established community. He points out that relying on just seven council members isn't sufficient—broader representation is a necessity for his neighbourhood council. The goal is not for the council to make decisions in isolation, but to gather more voices and input from the wider community.

Conclusions Chapter

To conclude, the value of resident participation cannot be overstated. To answer the question: *What role do neighbourhood councils play in encouraging participation, and how effective are their efforts in stimulating local engagement?* Participation plays a key role in building trust in local government, strengthening democracy, increasing transparency, and helping to solve community issues. The interviews with neighbourhood council members and municipal staff show that there are many different approaches to resident participation. While some councils are actively engaging residents through open meetings and local initiatives, others face challenges due to limited time, resources, or community interest. Participation continues to be a challenging task for both the municipality and the neighbourhood councils. Even though one of the main tasks of neighbourhood councils is to reach the neighbourhood networks and to stimulate resident engagement, they are not the answer to all participation challenges. Successfully engaging with residents requires a specific skillset. More attention should be given during the training period to how members can effectively engage different groups within the neighbourhood. Still, even well-prepared council members must deal with ongoing challenges, such as resident passivity or the difficulty of reaching specific groups like less-educated individuals, temporary residents, or those in more disadvantaged neighbourhoods. Despite these challenges, the 'Wijk aan Zet' model creates more space for diversity and offers the opportunity to engage residents who were previously not engaged. Diverse councils are better equipped to understand and connect with a broader spectrum of residents. Another recurring issue is the lack of effective communication tools. Neighbourhood council members are critical of the current 'Mijn.rotterdam' platform, which is seen as ineffective for real participation. Many councils

⁸⁹ Kole, interview.

⁹⁰ '010 HOME. 'Over 010 HOME', accessed 27 May 2025, <https://010home.nl/>.

have taken matters into their own hands, developing their own platforms or communication strategies that better match their ambitions and allow for more direct engagement with residents.

Ultimately, while neighbourhood councils have a unique and valuable role in local governance, their effectiveness in promoting participation depends on several factors: the commitment of its members, the availability of time and resources, the presence of active residents, and the development of effective communication channels. For neighbourhood councils to fulfil their role as the "eyes and ears" of the community, more support is needed—not only through training and resources but also through recognition of the complex environments in which they operate.

Chapter IV: The Neighbourhood and the City

A neighbourhood council is concerned with issues that are playing in the neighbourhood. A neighbourhood is defined by its borders, but it is also more than just a spatial concept, it defines a community of people. Yet, the challenges residents face often cross these boundaries. Some issues are felt city-wide but can still be experienced on a neighbourhood level. This raises an important question: Where does the neighbourhood end and the city begin? The sub-question discussed in this part is: *What kind of influence do neighbourhood councils have on urban policies or decision-making processes?*

Neighbourhood Interests vs. City Interests

Van Buuren et al. foreshadowed the problems that might arise by stating that the concept of a 'Neighbourhood in Action' ('Wijk aan Zet') could potentially be misleading, as the city will still want to have control over many issues.⁹¹ Van Buuren et al. stated that whether the neighbourhood truly takes charge will largely depend on situations where the interests of the city and the neighbourhood clash. They describe how in such cases, the question arises: when will these conflicts be resolved in favour of the city, and when in favour of the neighbourhood? Can all parties involved reach a mutual understanding of what falls under the neighbourhood's control versus what is determined by the city? Or will this remain a point of contention, leading to frustration and ongoing conflict? Ultimately, will the involved parties be able to find a resolution that gives proper consideration to both perspectives and interests?

The role of the neighbourhood council in decision-making regarding city wide issues and developments is also debated in the Municipal Executive. Alderman Robert Simons wrote in an article of the local newspaper (Algemeen Dagblad):

But the honest truth is that the neighbourhood councils simply do not have authority over those major urban developments. If a new city bridge is to be built, it's the municipal council that makes that decision, not the neighbourhood council. In the coming period, we want to make that even clearer and adjust those expectations.⁹²

⁹¹ Van Buuren et al., *Sterker door strijd?*

⁹² Marjolein Kooyman and Peter Groenendijk, 'Veel uitdagingen voor wijkraden: Teleurstelling en moeizame relatie met stadsbestuur Rotterdam', AD.nl, 18 March 2025, <https://www.ad.nl/rotterdam/veel-uitdagingen-voor-wijkraden-teleurstelling-en-moeizame-relatie-met-stadsbestuur-rotterdam~a01f6344/>. Original quote: "Maar het eerlijke verhaal is dat de wijkraden nu eenmaal niet gaan over die grootstedelijke ontwikkelingen. Als er een nieuwe stadsbrug komt, gaat de gemeenteraad daar over, niet de wijkraad. Dat willen we de komende periode nog duidelijker maken, die verwachtingen bijstellen."

Additionally, the OBI research found that 59% of respondents—both municipality workers and neighbourhood council members—expressed a desire for neighbourhood councils to have greater influence, particularly by having more say in urban issues.⁹³

The tension between different interests and how to operate within the city as a neighbourhood council was also an important discussion point in the interviews. In an interview with Elin Waninge-Dedert, transition manager for the ‘Wijk aan Zet’ initiative, explained that when a new coalition is formed in the city government, it results in a coalition agreement—a policy plan that the municipality is expected to follow.⁹⁴ A significant portion of civil servants’ work is focused on implementing the initiatives outlined in this agreement. Consequently, limited time and financial resources are left for addressing neighbourhood-level plans. Although many civil servants are committed to supporting the neighbourhoods, they are ultimately evaluated based on their contributions to citywide projects or those prioritized in the coalition agreement. This challenge is partly structural: the neighbourhood councils are elected simultaneously with the City Council, but by the time new neighbourhood council members are fully familiar with their roles, budget allocations tied to the coalition agreement have already been made. As a result, neighbourhoods are left with the scraps. Waninge-Dedert notes that efforts are underway to explore how this process might be improved.

Jeroen Oppelaar, Neighbourhood Council Coordinator of a city centre neighbourhood council, stresses the importance of the initiative being called ‘Neighbourhood in Action’.⁹⁵ He also saw that most civil servants have a focus on the Municipal Executive and the City Council. He often needs to explain to his colleagues that it is not the neighbourhood that needs to adapt to the municipal administration, but the other way around. Oppelaar adds that the city centre neighbourhoods are one of the hardest places to serve the neighbourhood because there are so many city interests at play in this neighbourhood. He also notes that much is improving in the relationship between the municipal administrative and the neighbourhood councils resulting in more place for the interest of the neighbourhood.

Angela Stolwijk-Kramer, president of a neighbourhood council, describes how municipal representatives are generally seen as willing and responsive when invited to explain and discuss city development plans.⁹⁶ However, she notes a recurring issue: in the context of larger, city-level plans, neighbourhood councils often feel overlooked and must actively assert their presence to be included. A concrete example is given regarding the development vision for the western edge of the Zuiderpark, where significant urban planning decisions were made and which considerably impacted the

⁹³ Brand et al., *Evaluatie Bestuurlijk Stelsel Wijk Aan Zet*.

⁹⁴ Waninge-Dedert, interview.

⁹⁵ Jeroen Oppelaar, interview by the author, Rotterdam, April 3, 2025. See Appendix II for an interview summary.

⁹⁶ Stolwijk-Kramer, interview.

neighbourhood and its residents. After proactively demanding inclusion, they were eventually involved. Stolwijk-Kramer's neighbourhood council even organized a public meeting, which drew considerable local interest—highlighting the importance of early and meaningful participation.

Ron Davids, president of a neighbourhood council, identifies a tension between the neighbourhood councils and the Municipal Executive.⁹⁷ He observes that most neighbourhood council members are not primarily interested in policy discussions but are instead motivated by a desire to contribute in a practical, hands-on manner. According to Davids, this tension becomes particularly evident when the Municipal Executive introduces plans—such as current housing developments in his neighbourhood—without involving the local level early on. He notes that the link between citywide plans and the neighbourhood context is poorly managed. Although the Municipal Executive had initially promised to provide an overview of city plans, this commitment was not fulfilled. Davids acknowledges that neighbourhood councils are typically focused on local issues, but stresses that city-level building plans can have significant consequences for neighbourhoods. In such cases, the lack of early involvement leads to frustration. He concludes that if the Municipal Executive had provided a clear overview of upcoming city developments, it would have prevented considerable confusion and dissatisfaction among neighbourhood councils.

Increase influence

This desire to be involved early on is felt by most interviewees and, according to them, also a critical way to gain more influence and be better involved into city wide developments. Marco Kole, president of a neighbourhood council, stresses the importance of being informed at an early stage.⁹⁸ When asked to organize participation, it is crucial to be made aware of what is happening and what aspects are still open to influence. He explains that his council is sometimes involved only in the later phases of a project, when there is very little left to influence — and that can be quite difficult. Kole stresses to keep in mind that there are many competing interests at play in the broader region, which often go beyond the local concerns of Rotterdam.

Susan S. Fainstein's addresses managing such competing interests, particularly through her discussion of the collaborative approach and the Just City.⁹⁹ This approach emphasizes democratic decision-making as a reaction to technocratic planning. This approach assumes that stronger participation from disadvantaged groups leads to better redistribution. However, Fainstein highlights its limitations:

⁹⁷ Davids, interview.

⁹⁸ Kole, interview.

⁹⁹ Susan S. Fainstein, 'The Just City', *International Journal of Urban Sciences* 18, no. 1 (2 January 2014): 1–18, <https://doi.org/10.1080/12265934.2013.834643>.

existing inequalities often mean that democratic outcomes still reflect the interests of the powerful. True proportional representation is rare, and even when marginalized communities are heard, their leaders may be co-opted. Since planners have limited power, they can only support the less powerful when backed by community movements or progressive politicians. Fainstein sees democracy, equity, and diversity as difficult to balance. Public opinion often clashes with the goals of equity and diversity, and advancing one value may come at the expense of another. She argues that equity—prioritizing the needs of disadvantaged groups—should take precedence in achieving the ‘Just City,’ while still recognizing the importance and occasional tension of the other two principles. In her conclusion, Fainstein notes that transformational change requires national-level action, as only the state has the necessary power. Still, local governments play a crucial role in shaping everyday life through decisions on housing, transport, and public space. The Just City theory urges a shift in urban policy from a narrow economic focus to a broader concern with justice.

Returning to Kole’s perspective, influence also involves managing expectations. Kole emphasizes the need for a clear framework and highlights that the way a question is posed is essential. In some cases, it is no longer relevant whether people want something or not, because the decision has already been made. The question should then focus on how the consequences of that decision might be mitigated. He states:

Sometimes you get involved much later in the process and there’s still a participation round. But it’s really just a small part of the entire project where you can still have some influence. And that’s difficult. But I also understand that when you’re dealing with a metropolitan region, that is much larger than the city of Rotterdam, different power dynamics are at play. But then make sure those frameworks are very clear. That way, you can decide for yourself whether it’s even worth participating. Does it make sense? If not, then my advice would always be: don’t do it. Otherwise, you’re only going to disappoint people. Because every time you ask, ‘Hey, what do you think?’ you assume you can influence things, which is logical. And then you get disappointed — you had a great idea, and you don’t see any results from it.¹⁰⁰

¹⁰⁰ Kole, interview. Original quote: “Soms kom je veel later in het traject en wordt er nog een participatieronde gehouden. Maar het gaat echt om een postzegel van het totale project, waar je nog invloed op kunt uitoefenen. En dat is lastig. Maar goed, ik begrijp ook wel dat als je gaat over een metropoolregio, dat is veel groter dan de stad Rotterdam. Dat er ook weer andere krachtvelden spelen. Maar zorg dan dat je die kaders zo goed maakt. Dan kan je zelf ook bepalen of je überhaupt moet participeren. Heeft dat zin? Maar doe het dan vooral niet, dat zou mijn advies altijd zijn. Dan kan je alleen maar mensen teleurstellen. Want iedere keer als je vraagt, van joh, hoe denk jij, dan denk je dat je invloed kan uitoefenen, wat logisch is. En dan ben je teleurgesteld, je had een heel mooi idee en je ziet er niks van terug.”

Kole concludes that smarter formulation of questions, providing sufficient time, and clearly communicating what has been done with the input are all key factors in successful influence in city development.

Joint actions of Neighbourhood Councils

In the interviews the neighbourhood council members were asked if they were ever in contact with other neighbourhood councils to take up collective actions, most of them replied in the negative.¹⁰¹ They explained that this only happens if there is a mutual interest or if it is an issue that concerns both neighbourhoods. Oppelaar, was quite confused why this particular question seems of importance.¹⁰² He observed that outsiders tend to assume that neighbourhood councils would naturally collaborate more closely. However, he emphasized that the city is divided into 39 neighbourhood councils precisely because each neighbourhood faces its own unique challenges. The core idea is that neighbourhoods are in charge of their own affairs, which requires a focus on the specific issues affecting each neighbourhood. Kole agrees that it is not about applying a ‘divide and conquer’ strategy where neighbourhood councils take up arms against the municipality; rather, it is about the exchange of inspiration.

One notable form of this exchange of inspiration is the Neighbourhood Council Conference, organised by the municipality. Since the launch of the ‘Wijk aan Zet’ initiative in 2022, the conference has been held twice. It serves as a platform for both municipality representatives and neighbourhood council members to reflect jointly on how the councils are functioning. The most recent edition took place on April 5th, 2025. Members of neighbourhood and village councils, civil servants, city council members, and aldermen were all invited to attend. For research purposes, the conference was also attended to gain insights into the functioning of neighbourhood councils and the key themes they engage with. During the conference, neighbourhood council members were divided into smaller groups to discuss key themes related to their functioning. Neighbourhood councils’ influence on city-wide issues was a prominent theme during the discussion. At the end of the day, all participants had the opportunity to vote on proposed initiatives aimed at improving how the councils operate. Some of the key outcomes included: a strong desire for budgetary rights, a proposal for establishing a process for forwarding rejected advice to the city council, the wish to abolish the website for neighbourhood councils (mijn.rotterdam) and reallocate its budget directly to the councils, and a call for improved guidance and support from the municipality, particularly during the onboarding and training period.

¹⁰¹ Kole, Davids, Stolwijk-Kramer, interviews.

¹⁰² Oppelaar, interview.

Image 1. *Impression of the Neighbourhood Council Conference Held on the 5th of April, 2025¹⁰³*



Image 2. *Impression of the Neighbourhood Council Conference Held on the 5th of April, 2025¹⁰⁴*



¹⁰³ Loskamp, Jildou, *Wijkradenconferentie (1)*, Photograph, 5 April 2025, 5 April 2025.

¹⁰⁴ Loskamp, Jildou, *Wijkradenconferentie (2)*, Photograph, 5 April 2025, 5 April 2025.

Conclusion chapter

To answer the question: *What kind of influence do neighbourhood councils have on urban policies or decision-making processes?* Neighbourhood councils were established to focus on local, neighbourhood-specific issues. However, the distinction between neighbourhood concerns and broader city issues is often blurred. While the concept of ‘Neighbourhood in Action’ promotes the importance of local governance, the municipality continues to retain authority over urban development and planning. This tension is exemplified by an alderman who openly questions the role of neighbourhood councils should have in city-wide matters, while neighbourhood councils frequently express dissatisfaction with their limited influence and input in urban policy and decision-making processes. This limitation is partly attributable to the existing bureaucratic system, wherein the coalition agreement of the Municipal Executive plays a central role. Civil servants are primarily evaluated based on how well they execute this coalition agreement, which can constrain their capacity to prioritize neighbourhood interests despite personal motivation to do so. Admittedly, this is a gradual process that takes time and involves a fundamental shift in mindset and paradigms within the municipality. Nonetheless, at present, neighbourhood councils are expected to adapt to the municipal administration rather than the reverse. Genuine bottom-up input would require significant adjustments and concessions within the system.

Regarding urban issues, neighbourhood councils and residents need to be involved early in the decision-making process. Moreover, when involvement is requested, clear frameworks should be provided. Transparency about the level of influence available is essential to prevent frustration and disillusionment. Managing expectations is part of a broader trend that is crucial for sustaining neighbourhood council members’ motivation and preventing dropout. Ultimately, neighbourhood councils retain considerable power and influence within their local areas, especially when supported with appropriate resources. This remains their primary task. This was also rightly pointed out in the interviews: the focus should not be on collaboration between councils or be overly distracted by city issues but should remain on the individual neighbourhoods—this is the very reason for the existence of the ‘Wijk aan Zet’ initiative. There is significant potential to improve working relationships between the municipality and neighbourhood councils (further explored in the next chapter), which would substantially enhance neighbourhood councils’ influence on city-wide issues. Platforms such as the neighbourhood council conference provide excellent opportunities to facilitate dialogue, exchange inspiration, and reflect on council functioning and broader challenges. They also contribute to strengthening relationships both between councils and between councils and the municipality.

Chapter V: Working relationship between the municipality and the neighbourhood councils

A strong working relationship is fundamental to the effective operation of any system, and this holds true for the ‘Wijk aan Zet’ model. At the heart of this lies the relationship between neighbourhood councils and the municipality. However, ‘the municipality’ is not a single entity—it is a complex organization made up of many individuals in varied roles. For neighbourhood councils to function effectively, they must develop a solid understanding of this institution. This section explores the sub-question: *What is the nature of the working relationship between neighbourhood council members and municipal workers/city officials, and how does this relationship affect the implementation of council initiatives and local policy decisions?*

Complexities of the Working Relationship

The ‘Wijk aan Zet’ model relies on effective collaboration between the municipality and the neighbourhood councils. Even before the implementation of the model Van Buuren et al. identified this aspect as a potential risk to its success, noting that it relies heavily on the power of dialogue and collaboration.¹⁰⁵ They found that when Rotterdam abolished district councils, it removed decentralized administrations that had real independent powers. Over time, the powers given to neighbourhood-level governments have been reduced. They state that while it is understandable and positive to rely on open discussions and collaboration in a democratic system, democracy also needs checks and balances to work effectively. These are not meant to slow things down or be used at the first sign of conflict, but to ensure that differing interests are addressed. Van Buuren et al. advise that checks and balances are especially important in a situation where a powerful city might easily overshadow smaller neighbourhoods. It is crucial, therefore, that neighbourhoods have the tools to manage these challenges. Although there is now a way for conflicts to be taken up with the city council, the success of the neighbourhood councils depends on whether people are truly willing to find common ground.¹⁰⁶ If this willingness is not there, the new governance model may fail to meet expectations.

When asked about the nature of their working relationship with the municipality many interviewees replied there is not ‘one’ municipality. The municipality is a vast and complex organisation, a system that is made up of many different people fulfilling a wide range of roles. Some operate very locally—in the heart of the neighbourhoods—where they maintain close connections to residents. Others

¹⁰⁵ Van Buuren et al., *Sterker door strijd?*

¹⁰⁶ Van Buuren et al.

function at a greater distance, crafting policies and frameworks that shape the city and guide its long-term development. In short, this grand organisation contains many facets, and to have a level of influence on these many facets can be incredibly challenging and can feel like navigating a labyrinth. In his interview, Neighbourhood Council Coordinator Paul Hulsebosch captures this challenge with a metaphor he often borrows from one of the aldermen:

Every large municipality is like a kind of lumbering ship. Just a very big, lumbering ship. And as an individual, you can hardly change its course. You simply don't have that kind of influence. But it's still important that residents have at least some ability to do so. So as a municipality, we have to organize our own countervailing power. Because it is important that there is some way for residents to have influence over the direction that ship is heading. That's what we're trying to do with neighbourhood councils—by organizing 39 councils and giving them a formal position, we hope to create a bit more countervailing power. In this way, we aim to give citizens—residents—a degree of power.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁷ Hulsebosch, interview. Original quote: “Elke grote gemeente is een soort logschip. Gewoon een heel groot logschip. En als individu kun je dat schip eigenlijk bijna niet van koers veranderen. Die invloed heb je gewoon niet. Maar het is wel belangrijk dat bewoners die mogelijkheid toch enigszins hebben. En we moeten dus als gemeente onze eigen tegenmacht organiseren. Want het is belangrijk dat die mogelijkheid er wel is dat bewoners op de een of andere manier toch dat schip invloed kunnen hebben op de koers van dat schip. En dat is wat we proberen met wijkraden, dat er door 39 wijkraden te organiseren en die ook een formele positie te geven, dat we hopelijk iets meer tegenmacht kunnen organiseren op die manier. Door burgers, bewoners op die manier toch een machtspositie te geven.”

The idea that neighbourhood councils act as a form of countervailing power to the power of the municipality is echoed by Elin Wanig-Dedert, transition manager for ‘Wijk aan Zet’. She likens neighbourhood councils to a mirror that reflects back a critical perspective to municipal staff:

A kind of critical mirror. As far as I'm concerned, the neighbourhood council is also how we organize counterpower and counterforce. And I think the municipality still doesn't show enough appreciation for that. It's like a watchdog for neighbourhood democracy. But then you shouldn't constantly act offended or pitiful when they hold up that mirror — that's exactly what they're there for. And you shouldn't get difficult about what information you share either, because if you're not transparent, you can't be held accountable.¹⁰⁸

Neighbourhood councils were established, in part, to play a critical role: to pose difficult questions and provide challenging advice. However, this critical stance is not always fully embraced by municipal staff. This points to the need for a deeper, more fundamental shift in mindset—a theme that will be explored further in the following section. At the same time, the relationship between neighbourhood councils and the municipality is grounded in dialogue and effective collaboration. Most interviewees reported maintaining generally positive relationships with municipal staff. As Marco Kole, president of a neighbourhood council, explained when asked about how he experiences the working relationship with the municipality:

That really varies from person to person. I don't see the municipality as a single entity. And that goes for every neighbourhood council member. The key is to look for ways to collaborate effectively. That also depends on your own attitude. If you adopt the right mindset and understand the framework you're working within, you can usually get quite far.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁸ Wanig-Dedert, interview. Original quote: “Een soort kritische spiegel. Wat mij betreft is de wijkraad ook hoe wij tegenmacht en tegenkracht organiseren. En daar vind ik dat de gemeente nog onvoldoende dankbaar voor zich opstelt. Want het is een soort waakhond van de wijkdemocratie. Maar dan moet je niet heel de tijd verongelijkt of zielig doen dat ze je in spiegel voorhouden, want daar hebben ze zich voor ingesteld. En dan moet je ook niet moeilijk gaan doen over welke informatie je deelt, want als je niet transparant bent dan kan je jezelf niet laten controleren.”

¹⁰⁹ Kole, interview. Original quote: “Dat is van persoon tot persoon heel erg verschillend. De gemeente is voor mij niet één entiteit. Dat geldt voor geen enkel wijkraadslid. Je moet erin vooral op zoek gaan naar hoe we goed kunnen samenwerken. Dat is ook met je eigen houding te maken. Als je die houding op die manier aanneemt. En je snapt wat de kaders zijn. Dan kom je meestal al een behoorlijk eind.”

Kole emphasizes the importance of dialogue over confrontation, as well as the ability to understand and navigate the institutional system effectively. This idea is echoed by Rosen and Painter, who offer a critical perspective on Arnstein's well-known Ladder of Participation, discussed earlier in the theoretical section.¹¹⁰ Arnstein's model presents different levels of citizen involvement, from non-participation (such as manipulation) to tokenism (like consultation), and finally to actual citizen power (such as partnership).¹¹¹ She frames participation as a power struggle between government officials ("them") and citizens or community activists ("us"), using the ladder as a provocative tool to raise awareness about the system and how to push back against it. Rosen and Painter argue that while citizen control is important, it is not always enough.¹¹² Giving citizens decision-making power without also giving them the necessary resources, knowledge, or support often leads to limited impact. Real influence requires both authority and the means to act on it. As an alternative, they propose a co-production model. In this approach, residents work as equal partners throughout the entire process—from identifying problems to creating solutions. This model aims to overcome the power imbalances that often limit participation. True community involvement means sharing resources, decision-making, and responsibility at every stage. Unlike models that stop at handing over control, co-production focuses on long-term support and building the capacity of communities to lead and sustain real change. 'Wijk aan Zet' is a good example of such a model that aims at co-production.

Mindset shift

The municipality is a big organisation and there are many different people with whom neighbourhood council members have different relationships. Waninge-Dedert underlines this by saying the neighbourhood council members are 291 individuals spread over 39 neighbourhood councils.¹¹³ Within the municipality, there also are different roles. She mentioned the OBI research and how in this research it becomes clear that neighbourhood council members are most pleased with the municipal workers who work full-time in the neighbourhood and who are present on-site, like the neighbourhood manager, neighbourhood networker and the neighbourhood council coordinator. The more distance there is between a civil servant and the neighbourhood council, the more negatively the relationship is perceived. (This is also reflected in research by OBI on the 'Wijk aan Zet' initiative: 79% of neighbourhood council

¹¹⁰ Jovanna Rosen and Gary Painter, 'From Citizen Control to Co-Production: Moving Beyond a Linear Conception of Citizen Participation', *Journal of the American Planning Association* 85, no. 3 (3 July 2019): 335–47, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01944363.2019.1618727>.

¹¹¹ Arnstein, 'A Ladder Of Citizen Participation'.

¹¹² Rosen and Painter, 'From Citizen Control to Co-Production'.

¹¹³ Waninge-Dedert, interview.

members and civil servants expressed a positive view of the relationship between council members and civil servants who work directly in the neighbourhoods. In contrast, the relationship with other, more distant civil servants is rated significantly lower.¹¹⁴⁾ Waninge-Dedert adds that it is very understandable that this relationship is valued differently, because these people remain a bit of an ‘abstract concept’. However, when you know each other, can look each other in the eyes, and have figured out each other’s ‘user manual’ a bit, then you start to appreciate each other’s viewpoints and differences more. Consequently, the relationship with the people who work within the neighbourhood is positive from both sides. However, the situation is different with municipal policy officers. Waninge-Dedert explains:

There's quite a difference between policy officers who really understand, "I'm making policy for the city, with the city." So, they check it, they're present in the neighbourhood. That attitude—“we're doing this together”—isn't exactly rare, but still not the norm. You also have quite a few policy officers who stay in the policy bubble. And if they leave the bubble, it's more often to the academic world than to the neighbourhoods themselves. And that relationship is much more strained.¹¹⁵

In that sense there is still a need for a changing norm. Something that is also noticed by Neighbourhood Council Coordinator Jeroen Oppelaar, who discusses that much of the improvement of the working relationship also lies with a changing attitude at the municipality, that the initiative is about the ‘Neighbourhood in Action’ and not the ‘Municipality in Action’.¹¹⁶ Similar sentiments are expressed by president of a neighbourhood council, Angela Stolwijk-Kramer. She acknowledged that the municipality is a large organization but emphasized that their relationship with the neighbourhood networker and - manager is strong.¹¹⁷ Whenever they invite municipal representatives to speak, someone always shows up and will give a good talk—something Stolwijk-Kramer appreciates as a sign of goodwill. At the same time, she noted that she often must remind civil servants of the neighbourhood council’s existence, suggesting that despite good intentions, the neighbourhood council can sometimes be overlooked.

¹¹⁴ Brand et al., *Evaluatie Bestuurlijk Stelsel Wijk Aan Zet*.

¹¹⁵ Waninge-Dedert, interview. Original quote: “Er is gewoon best wel verschil tussen beleidsambtenaren die heel erg zien, ik maak beleid voor de stad, met de stad. Dus ik toets het, ik ben in de wijk. We doen dit samen, is nog wel, nou ja, niet een zeldzaamheid, maar je hebt ook best wel veel beleidsambtenaren die toch wel in die beleidsbubbel blijven. Misschien als ze uit de bubbel gaan, eerder naar de wetenschappelijke wereld dan de wijken zelf. En die relatie staat meer op gespannen voet.”

¹¹⁶ Oppelaar, interview.

¹¹⁷ Stolwijk-Kramer, interview.

Understanding the system

The municipality is a large and complex system; to function effectively within it, neighbourhood council members need to be able to navigate this complexity. Angela Stolwijk-Kramer, president of a neighbourhood council, explains that the council is encouraged to include anything they wish in their year action plan.¹¹⁸ This plan contains 45 action points, and there are no formal limitations on what they can request. However, Stolwijk-Kramer shared an anecdote that highlights the gap between what's encouraged on paper and what's possible in practice. When the council requested public toilets for a local park, the response they received was that the request was too expensive. This led Stolwijk-Kramer to believe that, despite being told there are no limits, there must be some kind of budget the municipality adheres to. When she tried to engage in a discussion about the costs or understand why the toilets were considered too expensive, the only response was that there was just no money for this. She shared another example involving a request for a fence around a neighbourhood playground. The municipality replied that there were contractual issues with fencing in Rotterdam. When she then suggested a hedge instead, she was told again that it would be too expensive. Stolwijk-Kramer expressed frustration, saying that as a neighbourhood council member, she can do very little with this kind of information. To her, these seem like simple, solvable problems that are made unnecessarily complex by the municipality.

She has noticed that when their proposals align with the plans of the relevant municipal cluster, things tend to move smoothly.¹¹⁹ But when the council's ideas fall outside existing municipal priorities, progress becomes difficult. Stolwijk-Kramer refers to the 'unwritten rules and laws' that seem to govern how decisions are made. While neighbourhood councils are formally given the freedom to propose anything in the action plan, in practice, the process can quickly hit invisible boundaries—and feel like asking for 'too much'. These unwritten rules and norms are not easy to grasp, yet neighbourhood councils need to understand them in order to gain influence and achieve transformative impact at the neighbourhood level.

¹¹⁸ Stolwijk-Kramer, interview.

¹¹⁹ Stolwijk-Kramer, interview.

In addition to these unwritten rules, there are also political dynamics at play. Ron Davids, president of a neighbourhood council, explains that council members need to understand these political games to be successful:

You do need to have some knowledge of how the government works. You need to be able to do a bit of systems thinking. You have to follow politics. You need to be able to do a bit of lobbying. You also have to be able to use the instruments you have at your disposal. For example: giving advice — solicited or unsolicited — speaking at meetings, talking with party factions, with members of the executive board. So that's essentially the political-administrative game.¹²⁰

Davids observes that people who join a neighbourhood council straight from the community want to make a positive impact on their living environment but often run into difficulties quite quickly. Neighbourhood council members do not want to spend too much time on policy discussions; they want to be 'hands on'. The result is that quite a few drop out, which he thinks is a shame. He continues by saying the municipality is complex, this is also one of the critical points of citizens in general. Davids remarks that people would like to see a simpler government, but this is just not possible. Despite these tensions, the speaker notes that in their case, the relationship between the neighbourhood council, the municipal administration, and political bodies is functioning well.

Ultimately, a well-functioning relationship depends on maintaining strong connections, being able to leverage those relationships effectively, and successfully navigating the broader system. This is in line with the findings of Collins and Del Rey who did research on what constitutes a high-functioning neighbourhood council in Los Angeles.¹²¹ They found that it comes down to three key factors: their willingness and preference to negotiate, political capital and associational leverage. First, these neighbourhood councils have a preference to negotiate and use their formal position as leverage to achieve outcomes that meet local preferences. Second, political capital—the connections that neighbourhood council members have with political figures—plays a key role in shaping the influence of high-functioning councils. This is especially true for council leaders, whose strong political ties often help their councils gain more traction. City officials are more likely to engage with and respond to councils

¹²⁰ Ron Davids, interview. Original quote: "Je moet toch een beetje kennis van zaken hebben van hoe werkt de overheid. Je moet toch een beetje aan systeemdenken kunnen doen. Je moet de politiek wel volgen. Je moet een beetje kunnen lobbyen. Je moet de instrumenten die je hebt ook kunnen gebruiken, bijvoorbeeld adviseren, gevraagd ongevraagd, inspreken, praten met fracties, met collega's. Dat is dus een beetje toch het politiek bestuurlijke spel."

¹²¹ Brady Collins and Dana Kalei Del Rey, 'Participatory Urban Governance under the Microscope: A Qualitative Study of High-Functioning Neighborhood Councils in Los Angeles', *Journal of Urban Affairs* 44, no. 10 (26 November 2022): 1416–31, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07352166.2020.1820873>.

they perceive as effective and well-organized. Third, maintaining strong relationships with organizations outside the municipality, such as community groups and associations, is important. A high-functioning neighbourhood council can leverage these connections to demonstrate broad-based support for their initiatives to decision-makers.

So, to be a high-functioning neighbourhood it is important to keep up good working relationships. However, Collins and Del Rey found that high-functioning neighbourhood councils remain the exception rather than the rule in local governance.¹²² Their research highlights that participation and political influence are closely tied to socioeconomic status. The ability to engage effectively, for instance through relationships with city officials, often depends on economic stability. In contrast, working-class and renter-dominated neighbourhoods face significantly higher barriers to participation and typically exhibit weaker institutional capacity and lower levels of political capital.

Beyond the budget

A point of contestation between neighbourhood councils and the municipality is the reach of their mandate, an important factor of this is their budgetary rights. At the moment, the neighbourhood councils only have the means to decide over resident initiatives for which there is a budget. Their own budget consists of a communication budget and a participation budget, meant for marketing and organising promotion activities. Broadening the mandate of the neighbourhood councils to expand their own budget is a much debated topic of discussion with neighbourhood councils and the municipality and was a prominent topic in the recent neighbourhood council conference. In the OBI research respondents were also asked if they thought neighbourhood councils should have their own budget, of which 52% agreed that they should have.¹²³ Of the neighbourhood council members even 69% agreed that they should have their own budget.

Neighbourhood council coordinator, Paul Hulsebosch, states that budgetary rights is a topic that he discusses a lot with neighbourhood councils, especially now that they are in the evaluation phase with new elections coming up in 2026.¹²⁴ Hulsebosch doubts if the budget will add much to the neighbourhood councils and might even limit the councils' influence, especially when trying to advocate for larger or more impactful projects that would exceed their neighbourhood council budget. It could lead to the municipality deflecting responsibility by saying, "you already have your budget." Instead, the speaker

¹²² Collins and Del Rey.

¹²³ Brand et al., *Evaluatie Bestuurlijk Stelsel Wijk Aan Zet*.

¹²⁴ Hulsebosch, interview.

suggests that a strong collaborative structure — like neighbourhood accords and planning processes — may be more effective than simply allocating money.

Hulsebosch also states that the municipality is considering bringing back the year action plans from 45 action points to 5 broad action points.¹²⁵ That would in theory make it easier for neighbourhood councils to ask for ‘big’ things, like a youth centre in the neighbourhood. When Hulsebosch was asked about why the municipality did not grant neighbourhood councils a budget when they started the initiative, he replied that the municipality is a bit scared of taking that step. The municipality is cautious with giving up that kind of control. In her interview Wanng-Dedert explained that when sub-municipalities still existed, the local governing bodies had a broader mandate.¹²⁶ However, that in terms of representation it did not reflect Rotterdam’s society. The skillset that people needed to have to properly exercise those decision-making powers are very bureaucratic and administrative. In the end you end up with retired civil servants or other people who speak that language—highly educated, older and mostly men— which do not form a good representation. Wanng-Dedert adds that the idea behind having fewer formal mandates and more space for the participatory side is that simply being a resident of Rotterdam should be enough of a qualification to take on the role of neighbourhood council member. This is also why they moved away from a political party list electoral system, meaning that candidates for neighbourhood councils no longer need to be affiliated with a political party to be elected. Later in the interview, Wanng-Dedert adds that she believes the issue is not with formal authority, but with the ability to exert influence. She argues that neighbourhood councils could already have a greater impact within their existing legal powers. The real challenge, she explains, lies in aligning processes, attitudes, behaviours, and organizational culture rather than expanding formal authority. For example, she points out that neighbourhood councils currently lack adequate access to information and are often insufficiently informed about municipal plans affecting their areas, making it difficult for them to respond effectively.

Conclusions chapter

To conclude, and to answer the sub-question: *What is the nature of the working relationship between neighbourhood council members and municipal workers/city officials, and how does this relationship affect the implementation of council initiatives and local policy decisions?* The relationship between neighbourhood councils and the municipality is quite complex. The municipality is a large, layered institution made up of many different people. Likewise, neighbourhood council members come from a wide variety of backgrounds and perspectives.

¹²⁵ Hulsebosch, interview.

¹²⁶ Wanng-Dedert, interview.

For neighbourhood councils to function effectively, it is essential both to sustain constructive relationships and to possess a thorough understanding of the municipal system. At the same time, councils must fulfil a critical role: serving as a reflective mirror for civil servants and acting as the voice of the neighbourhood, advocating for practical and tangible outcomes. Van Buuren et al. accurately anticipated that, in practice, balancing these dual roles can be quite challenging. The neighbourhood council system is based on co-production, where the strength lies in collaboration, not in constant opposition. Nevertheless, preserving space for constructive opposition remains essential, enabling councils to hold the municipality accountable. For this critical function to be fully realized, municipal staff must demonstrate openness to critique and engage outside their bubble.

Given the scale and complexity of the municipal system, neighbourhood council members require a substantial level of institutional knowledge to operate effectively. However, the bureaucratic demands of this role often conflict with members' preference for immediate, practical results. This leads to council members stepping down. The 'Wijk aan Zet' model is designed to lower participation barriers; in theory every resident should be able to be part of their neighbourhood council. In reality you would need to have quite a good understanding of the municipal system to have influence and navigating this system is generally easier for people of higher socio-economic status.

The working relationship between neighbourhood councils and the municipality, and the level of influence it provides, plays a significant role in the implementation of council initiatives and local policies. Budgetary rights serve as a clear example of this dynamic. Currently, neighbourhood councils have limited control over budgets, a limitation that many members seek to address. While granting budgetary rights would demonstrate considerable trust from the municipality, it should not distract from the broader and more fundamental discussion about influence. Genuine influence depends on the alignment of organizational processes, changes in attitudes and culture, and the promotion of transparent communication between neighbourhood councils and municipal officials.

Chapter VI: Conclusion

This final chapter will bring together the findings from the previous chapters and addresses the central research question: *"To what extent do neighbourhood councils under the 'Wijk aan Zet' initiative influence urban policy and contribute to transformative changes in Rotterdam's neighbourhoods?"*

Drawing upon empirical data, theoretical insights and critical reflection, this chapter summarizes key outcomes, outlines broader implications, offers recommendations to improve the 'Wijk aan Zet' initiative and provides recommendations for future research.

Chapter I: Introduction laid the foundation for this research by presenting the theoretical framework and methodology. Employing mixed-method research, the study combined in-depth interviews with neighbourhood council members and municipal staff alongside document analysis conducted with the use of Rstudio. This method provided a balance between researching individual experiences and exploring broader trends in neighbourhood councils. The theoretical framework, based on studies from both the Netherlands and abroad, offered useful concepts for understanding the institutional, social, and political aspects of neighbourhood governance.

Chapter II: Rotterdam's Neighbourhood Council System: History and Topic Analysis discusses the history of local governing bodies in Rotterdam from submunicipalities to the current neighbourhood council model. It examines which topics are of importance to neighbourhood councils which reveals that the topics the neighbourhood councils raise are most hyperlocal and relevant for the quality of life of the community. Broader structural challenges often require broader political leverage and are not easily addressed through their current tools. Additionally, the language used by neighbourhood councils offers valuable insight into the formal institutional framework in which they operate. This system—shaped over years through various forms of local governance—prioritizes reactive governance, leaving limited space for radical or activist discourse.

Chapter III: Resident Participation in Practice explores the different aspects of resident engagement. It found that not all neighbourhood councils are as active in engaging with residents. It reveals that resident participation is difficult, even for neighbourhood council members who are seen as the centre point of their community. The level of resident engagement depends on the dedications of individual neighbourhood council members as well as the level of involvement of residents within a neighbourhood. Despite these obstacles, the 'Wijk aan Zet' model shows significant potential by successfully reaching groups that were previously disengaged. However, the current 'mijn.rotterdam', falls short in effectively facilitating resident participation. Therefore, neighbourhood councils require tools that better match their participation ambitions, alongside enhanced training to strengthen their engagement efforts.

Chapter III: The neighbourhood and the city highlights that neighbourhood councils were established to focus on local issues. Yet, the distinction between urban issues and neighbourhood issues is often blurred. While the ‘Wijk aan Zet’ initiative encourages local governance, real decision-making power on these urban issues mostly remains with the municipality. This creates tension and frustration among council members, who often feel sidelined in decisions that directly affect their communities. This is partly due to a bureaucratic system that prioritizes the municipal coalition agreement over neighbourhood input. For meaningful impact, councils and residents must be involved early in urban planning with clear expectations and transparent communication. While councils hold valuable influence at the local level, stronger collaboration, improved dialogue and better expectations management with the municipality are needed to enhance their role in city-wide matters.

Chapter V: Working relationship between the municipality and the neighbourhood councils shows that the municipality is not a single entity, but a complex system made up of many individuals with varying roles and relationships. While interactions with local civil servants are generally constructive, the chapter identified several barriers to effective collaboration. One such barrier is that neighbourhood council members need a solid understanding of the bureaucratic system, yet navigating it often conflicts with their desire for practical, tangible outcomes. Another point of contention concerns debates over mandates, such as budgetary authority. Rather than focusing solely on expanding budgets, strengthening collaboration, improving access to information, and shifting institutional attitudes may offer more meaningful progress. Achieving real influence will require not only formal roles but also trust, support, and a sustained commitment to sharing power.

To conclude and return to the central research question, the answer comes in two parts. First, neighbourhood councils have limited influence on urban policy. Their role is firmly rooted within the neighbourhood, yet defining the institutional boundaries between the neighbourhood and the city remains challenging and a source of frustration for both the municipality and council members. In this context, managing expectations about the scope and extent of neighbourhood councils’ influence is crucial. Institutional constraints affect nearly every aspect of their work. Yet, even within this framework, neighbourhood councils retain the ability to make an impact.

This leads to the second part: neighbourhood councils do contribute to transformative change in their neighbourhoods. As defined in the introduction, transformative change happens when communities mobilize around a shared vision of place, reshaping its meanings, structures, or functions in response to complex and sometimes conflicting ideas about what that place is or should become. Neighbourhood councils possess this potential and can assume such a transformative role. However, this requires trust—and sometimes a degree of radicalism and innovation—from both council members and the municipality. While their full potential has yet to be realized, this is part of an ongoing process of experimentation and learning.

Recommendations to improve ‘Wijk aan Zet’

1. Stop Looking Back- Focus on the Future

Nostalgia for the former sub-municipalities or district committees is misplaced and unnecessary.

Although ‘Wijk aan Zet’ has not yet reached its full potential, going back is not the answer. Focus on improving what’s in place now.

2. Invest in Better Training

Invest more in strengthening the skills of neighbourhood council members through targeted training programs to better equip them for their roles. Possible areas are: facilitating participation in the neighbourhood, navigating the bureaucratic system and communicating with the city government.

3. Shift the Mindset at the Municipality

The idea that “neighbourhoods are in charge” needs to be more than a slogan. Municipal staff at all levels should see council members as partners, not just participants. This shift in attitude is essential for shared ownership and trust.

4. Do Not Let Budget Debates Distract from Real Influence

Expanding budgetary authority could strengthen the mandate of neighbourhood councils.

However, the focus should not be limited to budget discussions alone. Increasing influence is also about better access to information, earlier involvement in decision-making, and changing attitudes, behaviour, and culture to truly empower the neighbourhood, rather than just granting formal powers.

5. Provide Neighbourhood Councils Better Tools for Participation

Neighbourhood councils need a participation platform that matches their ambitions, but the current ‘mijn.rotterdam’ platform doesn’t meet this need. A better solution would be to add the platform’s budget to their own communication budgets. This would give councils the flexibility to choose what works best for their neighbourhood—whether that means developing a new platform, hiring external communication support, or using another approach.

6. Give Clear Frameworks to Guide Influence

For meaningful impact in broader urban development projects, neighbourhood councils should be involved early in the planning process. Additionally, clear frameworks and transparent

communication about the scope of their influence are essential to manage expectations and prevent disappointment.

7. Encourage Experimentation and Accept Imperfection

Transformation is a long-term process. Not everything will work right away, and that is okay.

Encourage learning by doing, allow for trial and error, and create space for bold or creative approaches from both the municipality and councils.

Limitations and recommendations for future research

The most notable limitation of this research is the small sample size. Future research could benefit from interviewing a larger and more diverse group of neighbourhood council members—not only in terms of their role (this study focused solely on council presidents) but also in background and age range. It would also be valuable to include more civil servants from different levels of the municipality. Regarding the document analysis, the corpus could be expanded by incorporating additional materials, such as neighbourhood council meeting minutes.

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Appendix I: Interview guides

Interview Questions for Members of the Neighbourhood Council

(All questions have been translated from their original Dutch)

- 1) What is your role within the neighbourhood council?
- 2) In your opinion, what are the main tasks of neighbourhood councils?
- 3) What are some of the most urgent issues in your neighbourhood?
- 4) How does the neighbourhood council determine which issues have priority?
- 5) Does the neighbourhood profile play a role in this?
- 6) How do you think the priorities of your neighbourhood council differ from those of other councils?
- 7) In what ways does your council involve residents in identifying problems and formulating solutions?
- 8) How is communication with residents organized?
- 9) Do you feel your council actively involves residents in identifying and addressing issues in the neighbourhood?
- 10) Do you ever contact other Neighbourhood Councils to undertake joint actions?
- 11) How would you describe the relationship between the municipality and the Neighbourhood Councils?
- 12) What is the process of submitting advice to the municipality like?
- 13) Is there any feedback on what is done with the advice? If so, how?
- 14) Do you have examples of how advice led to changes at the neighbourhood or even city level?
- 15) In general: What changes did you and the rest of the council achieve in the neighbourhood (that you are proud of)?
- 16) Do you think the current structure of the neighbourhood councils is effective? Why or why not?
- 17) In what ways could the neighbourhood council be more involved in major urban issues?

Interview Questions for Municipal Staff

(All questions have been translated from their original Dutch)

- 1) What is your role within the municipality?
- 2) What were the original reasons for the municipality to initiate the 'Wijk aan Zet' (Neighbourhoods in Action) program?
- 3) How would you describe the relationship between the municipality and the neighbourhood councils?

- 4) How often do you have contact with a member of a Neighbourhood Council, and what is this contact about?
- 5) In your opinion, what are the main tasks of the Neighbourhood Councils?
- 6) Do you believe Neighbourhood Councils effectively stimulate participation in the neighbourhoods?
- 7) When can a Neighbourhood Council issue advice?
- 8) What happens to the advice provided by neighbourhood councils?
- 9) Is unsolicited advice evaluated differently?
- 10) Why don't neighbourhood councils have their own budget?
- 11) Does the municipality allocate varying levels of attention to neighbourhood councils based on the socioeconomic characteristics of the neighbourhood? (e.g., depending on their neighbourhood profile score or whether it's a 'weaker' or 'stronger' neighbourhood)
- 12) Do you think the current structure of the neighbourhood councils is effective? Why or why not?
- 13) In what ways could neighbourhood councils be more involved in major urban issues?

Appendix II: Summary interviews

Summary Interview 1– Elin Waninge-Dedert

Interview with Elin Waninge-Dedert. She is transition manager for the 'Wijk aan Zet' initiative and works for the municipality of Rotterdam.

The interview focuses on the "Wijk aan Zet" initiative in Rotterdam, highlighting the role of wijkraden (neighbourhood councils) in reshaping local governance. Elin Waninge-Dedert, the transition manager for Wijk aan Zet within the Municipality of Rotterdam, leads a cross-departmental team responsible for developing and recalibrating the instruments that support these councils. Introduced in 2022, Wijk aan Zet aims to give residents more influence, tailor municipal services to district needs, and make local democracy more accessible.

Initially launched with a range of instruments—such as district agreements and participation platforms—an evaluation by Concern Auditing found that continued refinement was necessary, especially due to cultural and behavioral challenges within the municipality. Historically, Rotterdam has experimented with various district-level governance structures, including wijkraden in the 1940s, deelgemeenten in the 1970s (abolished in 2012), and gebiedscommissies. After testing multiple models between 2018 and 2022, the city opted for elected wijkraden, now active in nearly 40 districts.

These modern wijkraden are non-mandated, volunteer-based bodies whose core roles are advising the municipality, forming agreements, and monitoring implementation. Their direct financial influence is limited, but their localized knowledge makes them valuable advisors. This limited mandate is intended to reduce tension with central authorities, while still allowing wijkraden to act as grassroots watchdogs. The composition of wijkraden has become more diverse thanks to elections on a personal basis rather than political lists, attracting younger members and people from varied backgrounds.

The relationship between wijkraden and the municipality varies. District-level municipal staff tend to engage more constructively, while some central policy officers remain distant. Key challenges include misaligned timing between wijkraden's planning and the municipal budget cycle, limited resources for local initiatives, and a risk-averse culture that hinders policy flexibility. Although wijkraden often provide valuable unasked advice, the municipality's responsiveness varies, and efforts are ongoing to improve transparency and receptiveness.

Waning-Dedert emphasizes the importance of appreciating wijkraden's insights, especially regarding participation processes. She sees them as effective in engaging hard-to-reach groups, thanks to their diverse makeup and grassroots connections. However, training is still needed in areas such as lobbying, community organizing, and digital communication. While there's no intention to grant wijkraden formal decision-making power, their integration into municipal processes and strategic urban planning remains a work in progress, with efforts focused on increasing their influence through better information and procedural alignment.

Summary Interview 2– Marco Kole & Jeroen Oppelaar

An interview with Marco Kole and Jeroen Oppelaar. Kole is president of the Neighbourhood Council 'Cool, Scheepvaartkwartier & Stadsdriehoek', a neighbourhood in the city centre of Rotterdam. Oppelaar is the Neighbourhood Council Coordinator for this council and works for the municipality of Rotterdam.

The interview features Marco, a district council member and current chairman, and Jeroen, an advisor on governance at the municipality who also serves as the district council coordinator. Marco leads meetings, oversees task completion, manages the agenda, keeps track of time, and ensures fair speaking opportunities. Jeroen focuses on municipal governance, advising on the relationship between the municipal executive, council, and mayor, especially regarding the district council system he helped develop. As coordinator, he supports the council's functioning, aligns agendas with Marco, processes decisions, ensures document availability, and manages contact with municipal colleagues on the council's behalf.

According to Marco, the district council has several formal responsibilities: collaborating on an annual action plan with the municipal district team, giving both requested and unsolicited advice, and providing input on resident initiatives assessed by district networkers. An important informal role is community building—connecting entrepreneurs, residents, visitors, and partners to facilitate communication, especially around advisory processes.

In Centrum, urgent issues include safety (including inclusivity and accessibility), construction-related disruptions, cleanliness, and the need for greening and water storage to reduce heat. Priorities were initially identified in brainstorming sessions with council members and residents, resulting in themes like Green, Sustainability, Accessibility, Health, Sociability (balancing peace and disruption), and Inclusivity. Actions under these themes were selected by vote. While the district profile supports some of these decisions, many issues arise from local, street-level input. Living in the district also helps council members identify what matters most.

Centrum differs from other districts due to its high number of visitors, vertical high-rises (which may limit social cohesion), and large international population. Although other districts may share similar themes, how issues appear varies—for instance, visible homelessness in Centrum versus hidden poverty elsewhere.

To engage residents, the council participates in street interactions, attends events, keeps channels open, and allows public input during formal meetings. They work closely with district networkers, who monitor local conditions, observe social dynamics, and contribute to the action plan. These networkers also liaise with managers responsible for safety and cleanliness and are considered essential to the council's work. Cooperation with other district councils is limited and generally arises only when there's shared geography or overlapping issues, like public squares or tram routes. Broader collaboration is rare due to time constraints and the individualized focus of each district. Some value could come from sharing experiences and solutions across councils, though the municipality remains the main partner.

Occasionally, information flows between districts via networkers who operate across areas.

The relationship with the municipality depends on the people involved, as it's not viewed as a unified entity. Successful collaboration requires understanding the system and the right contacts. There's an ongoing need for the municipal structure to better adapt to the district councils, especially regarding practical logistics like meeting times. Officials tend to focus more on the municipal council and executive, making it difficult for grassroots input from district councils to gain traction, though communication is improving.

When giving advice, the council responds to formal municipal requests or submits advice proactively based on notable events or widespread concerns among residents and entrepreneurs. Even seemingly small issues may be addressed if their impact is significant. Before submitting unsolicited advice, the council checks for broader support and requires a majority decision. The municipality is required to respond, usually within six weeks, though the feedback is often vague, making it hard to relay outcomes to the community. Advice hasn't led to transformative changes, and issues persist such as limited time to draft responses, difficulty accessing municipal data, unclear advice framing, and poor feedback.

Resident initiatives offer another way for locals to suggest improvements. These are formally reviewed by district networkers, with the council providing input or adjustments before implementation. Council members also try to meet initiators and help realize promising projects. These initiatives are generally seen as successful.

Key successes of the council include implementing resident initiatives and completing action plan projects, like greening efforts or shared mobility hubs in cooperation with the municipality. Many small wins go unrecognized, including those achieved by the municipality.

Communication and community building are critical, as seven council members cannot fully represent the entire district. The council emphasizes using diverse channels and tapping into resident and partner

networks to share updates and celebrate progress. Municipal communication tends to stay internal and fails to reach broader audiences. Platforms like Mijn Rotterdam aren't widely used or accessible to the average resident or entrepreneur. The council wants to build a central, easy-to-use district platform, and currently finds Instagram particularly effective.

Marco sees the current structure as effective for the action plan and communication (depending on networker quality), but not for giving advice. He believes formal power or budgets matter less than how seriously the council's input is taken and acted upon. He suggests merging separate district-level budgets into one integrated district fund. The council uses its means to hold meetings and events across the district to reach different communities.

For involvement in broader urban issues, early inclusion is essential. Meaningful participation requires at least two months' lead time. Often, the council is consulted too late, limiting their input to minor details. They recommend smarter consultation—focusing on minimizing negative impacts of decisions rather than asking broad, late-stage questions. Improved structure and participation tools would also help council members, many of whom lack extensive governance experience. Managing residents' expectations about the actual influence they can have is also important.

Summary Interview 3– Ron Davids

An interview with Ron Davids, he is president of the Neighbourhood Council from Het Lage Land, Prinsenland en 's Gravenland, a neighbourhood in the east of Rotterdam.

The interviewee, Ron, is the chairman (voorzitter) of the neighbourhood council. His formal tasks include convening and organizing meetings in collaboration with the neighbourhood council coordinator, who functions like a clerk. A key part of his role is maintaining strong communication between the neighbourhood, the neighbourhood council, and the municipality—particularly the Municipal Executive and the City Council. He also represents the neighbourhood externally and ensures the council operates smoothly and fulfils its responsibilities. Ron sees his role as combining participation with strong advocacy for the interests of residents and the neighbourhood.

According to regulations and ongoing discussions—supported by the OBI study—the neighbourhood council is primarily seen as a participation body. Unlike in the past, it has no formal mandate or budget. Ron finds this limiting and emphasizes that the council's main tasks are currently participation and representing residents' interests.

Historically, Rotterdam had legally regulated sub-municipalities (deelgemeenten), with elected members, a full board, and a civil service. These entities operated with considerable autonomy and resources,

resembling mini-municipalities. This model was phased out due to political decisions. The city has long had neighbourhood-level structures, dating back to post-WWII efforts by Mayor Oud, who brought together representatives from various community groups to manage urban growth and diversity. This evolved through different forms until the current neighbourhood council model was introduced, influenced in part by the CDA party's belief in the historical rights of neighbourhoods.

Ron views the current model positively. Its smaller size allows members to be closer to the community, more practical in operations, and less political than the previous area committees. Those committees involved factions and spokespersons, and their broader scale made them less nimble and more policy-heavy. The new model allows for more direct involvement and relevance to local residents.

The council begins its work through participation—gathering input from residents across key themes in public spaces. This input is translated into actions that form the Year Action Plan (JAP). The JAP is discussed with relevant municipal departments (such as Social Development, City Management, Safety, and Urban Development), leading to agreement and eventual approval by the Municipal Executive and the City Council for execution.

A significant problem is the failure to implement approved actions. Even when there is agreement and budget, execution often stalls, creating frustration. Issues such as installing parking solutions or resolving traffic problems are approved but not carried out, and the reasons remain unclear—likely due to internal municipal bottlenecks.

Ron identifies two key areas for improvement. First, there's a lack of transparency about how major urban plans affect specific neighbourhoods. The promised overview linking citywide projects to neighbourhoods never materialized, leaving councils unaware of developments in their own areas. Second, neighbourhood councils lack the authority to ensure implementation. In theory, neighbourhood managers should have this role under the 'Wijk Aan Zet' model, but this has not happened. Ron argues that with only a few members, the council isn't suited to execute policy directly—this should lie with a professional daily board or the neighbourhood manager. These changes are also recommended in the OBI report and by the council itself.

Many council members join with enthusiasm but quickly discover the complexity of the system. Participating effectively requires an understanding of governance, politics, lobbying, and formal procedures—something Ron calls being a “civil servant light.” Many struggle with this, and time constraints (due to jobs) hinder training and lead to dropouts.

Ron describes the relationship with civil servants as generally constructive, though municipal staff often prioritize directives from aldermen, who may not always be clear. Staffing shortages, budget constraints, bureaucracy, and the focus on major projects hinder execution.

The council can submit advice—either when requested or unsolicited. Unsolicited advice is typically a last resort, used when cluster-level solutions fall short. Formal advice is rare; instead, Ron's council often

uses written questions directed to the neighbourhood manager to resolve issues informally and more efficiently.

In Ron's neighbourhood, the most pressing concerns are mobility (traffic, parking, and tensions between car use and public transport promotion) and maintaining social amenities (as shops close and facilities like schools, healthcare, libraries, and playgrounds must keep pace with growth). Waste and green space are relevant but less urgent. Priorities are set by working pairs (duos) within the council, organized around themes aligned with municipal departments, helping structure their efforts and match city processes.

The neighbourhood profile (*wijkprofiel*), which contains socio-economic data, hasn't played a major role. Council members feel they know the area and prefer focusing on practical concerns. However, the profile can flag emerging trends, such as neighbourhood decline, which is becoming a concern. Compared to other neighbourhoods, Ron's area has low unemployment and high education/income levels. Their focus is on maintaining and gradually improving conditions rather than solving deep-rooted problems.

Engaging all residents is challenging in this relatively individualistic neighbourhood. While ongoing contact is limited, residents with complaints do reach out, and the council responds actively, often visiting locations and involving civil servants to find solutions. Participation remains difficult, especially since most council members have daytime jobs, and the disappearance of resident organizations has weakened local cohesion.

Collaboration with other neighbourhood councils is rare, except for specific joint projects like the Oostflank development. While chairpersons meet regularly, broader cooperation is uncommon.

Ron believes neighbourhood councils can play a role in large-scale projects—Oostflank is an example where they were involved early. In smaller projects, especially private developments, participation is harder due to the influence of developers and their own engagement processes. Contact with housing corporations is also difficult.

Practical successes include initiating neighbourhood developments like Oostflank and preventing the demolition of a key building in the neighbourhood.

Ron concludes that the current structure is reasonably effective. He sees the council as a vital “watchful eye” on behalf of the neighbourhood. While progress isn't always fast, he remains optimistic about long-term impact—especially if the municipality follows up on the OBI report's recommendations: clarify urban development impacts and empower neighbourhood managers to execute decisions. He also urges more realistic goal-setting by the government and stresses that residents share responsibility for driving local improvements. Tools like written questions are seen as more effective than formal letters in many cases.

Summary Interview 4– Angela Stolwijk-Kramer

An interview with Angela Stolwijk-Kramer, she is president of the Neighbourhood Council of Charlois-Wielewaal, a neighbourhood in the south of Rotterdam.

The interview is with Angela, the chairperson of the neighbourhood council for Oud Charlois and Wielenwal. Angela describes the council as very egalitarian—the chairperson mainly chairs meetings but otherwise has a similar role to other members. While tasks were more clearly divided at the start, they've become more fluid, with members focusing on topics they are passionate about, such as poverty, traffic, or noise. Everyone can contribute to any issue, and the council is described as a "very friendly club."

The council's main role is to support residents who want to improve the neighbourhood, have ideas, or need help navigating the municipality. This includes facilitating resident initiatives, for which the council has a budget, and bundling issues raised by groups—like noise or parking complaints—to bring them to the municipality's attention. Angela sees the council as the "eyes and ears of the neighbourhood," gathering signals and translating them into action.

Some example projects:

- Improving a skate park: While mostly handled by the neighbourhood manager and networkers, the council helped organize an input session with skaters and supported greening the area and adding amenities.
- Cleaning up Karel de Stoute Park: Responding to complaints about drug use and litter, the council and municipality staff cleaned the park, pruned bushes, and removed syringes. A "branch rail" was created from the trimmings.
- Organizing a marble run through the neighbourhood: This creative project encouraged resident participation and helped surface community issues.

When setting priorities, the council looks at what they consider most important, where resident signals are strongest, and whether the issue is actionable. Some concerns, like supermarket availability, are beyond their influence and receive low priority. Themes for monthly public meetings are often based on current signals or anticipated issues, such as municipal development plans or traffic changes.

Resident engagement happens through:

- Public council meetings that encourage open interaction—members sit among residents to create a more equal atmosphere.
- Stalls at local markets or events to ask residents directly about their concerns.
- Activities like flower bulb giveaways in exchange for sharing ideas or complaints.
- Topic-specific consultations, like noise pollution meetings involving residents, the port authority, and companies.

Communication with residents is diverse. The council avoids using the official *Mijn Rotterdam* site due to low usability and traffic. Instead, they post on *Alles in Charlois*, which they help fund, and maintain an

active social media presence with design support. Members also use local WhatsApp groups to share meeting updates and flyers.

Collaboration with other neighbourhood councils is limited but occurs for cross-border issues like recycling facilities or major roads. Occasionally, councils co-sign unsolicited advice, though Angela doubts this increases its impact, noting such advice is usually processed slowly.

The council's relationship with the municipality is generally good, especially with the neighbourhood manager and networker. Officials usually attend meetings when invited. However, the council often needs to push for involvement in urban planning. Ideally, they'd be consulted early in the process, but often hear about developments through other channels and must request information sessions themselves.

For the annual action plan, the council gathers resident input to propose a set of action points. While there's no strict financial limit, feasibility depends on cost and whether the request aligns with municipal priorities. Items are color-coded during reviews—green for executable, orange for conditional, and red for unfeasible. Most proposals are approved, though often in a diluted form. Simpler items have a higher success rate than larger investments. The process is slow: it starts in autumn, with execution clarity coming only mid-year—by which point planning for the next year has already begun.

Submitting advice to the municipality happens infrequently. Requested advice is rare and often hampered by a lack of data or short deadlines. Unsolicited advice is used as a form of escalation when informal routes fail. A notable success involved solving a parking issue through a trial, which the municipality quickly adopted—though communication around the change was lacking. Feedback on advice is often delayed, sometimes arriving months later, suggesting it isn't always prioritized.

Angela finds it hard to pinpoint clear achievements, noting her initial expectations of influence were higher than the reality. While small wins are possible, tackling structural problems like poverty is beyond the council's scope. She's frustrated by the passivity of many residents but sees value in enabling collective action and helping residents understand how to influence change.

She believes the *Wijk aan Zet* model is still in development. For improvement, she calls for more recognition and early involvement from municipal departments. She also sees potential in councils learning from one another—sharing best practices and the energy different initiatives require. While there are quarterly meetings for chairpersons in Rotterdam South, broader collaboration is still evolving.

Angela thinks the structure needs several years to mature. The council's role remains somewhat unclear, and residents sometimes expect them to solve issues outside their remit, like waste container placement.

Angela suggests neighbourhood councils could contribute more to major urban developments by:

- Being involved early in vague planning stages.
- Being asked concrete, localized questions tied to broader themes, such as safety.
- Helping prioritize project implementation (e.g., which streets should become 30 km/h zones).
- Having a say in budget allocation within the neighbourhood.

Angela personally enjoys the role and is considering running again. Two older members plan to step down, but most others intend to continue. The role has helped her connect more deeply with the neighbourhood. She also mentions the future "neighbourhood hub," which is delayed due to building issues. The council hopes it will become an accessible space for residents to ask questions—something currently lacking. The recently renovated library is highlighted as a bright spot.

Summary Interview 5– Paul Hulsebosch

An interview with Paul Hulsebosch, he Neighbourhood Council Coordinator of the Neighbourhood Council of Blijdorp Bergpolder Liskwartier and of Mathenesse. These are both neighbourhoods located in the North/West of Rotterdam.

The interview features Paul, a neighbourhood council coordinator (*wijkraadcoördinator*) in Rotterdam. His job involves supporting neighbourhood councils in everything they do. He specifically supports the neighbourhood councils of Mathenesse and Blijdorp, Bergpolder Liskwartier. His main task is to ensure they "get the most out of themselves" ("uit de verf komen").

Paul describes his role as primarily being an intermediary. He ensures that all necessary information from the municipality reaches the district council and, conversely, that everything the neighbourhood council wants to communicate to the municipality reaches the right place. This could be a local official, an alderman, or even the municipal council. He also sees his main task as providing advisory support to the neighbourhood councils. This means advising them on how to approach issues they identify in their neighbourhood, such as writing a letter to an official, speaking at a municipal council meeting, or even organizing a protest action if necessary. His most frequent daily task is exchanging information. He helps neighbourhood councils stay informed about upcoming changes in their neighbourhood (like street renovations) and how residents can participate in decision-making. His work can cover a wide range of issues, from practical problems like sewage replacement to positive initiatives like organizing a neighbourhood party to increase togetherness.

The initiative to establish neighbourhood councils ("Wijk aan Zet") was launched by the municipality. A key reason, according to a quote Paul often uses from a former alderman, is that a large municipality is like a big, slow ship ("logschip"). As an individual resident, it's very difficult to change the course of this ship, but it's important that residents still have some influence. The municipality needed to organize its own "counter-power" ("tegenmacht") to ensure residents could influence its direction. Organizing district councils and giving them a formal position was intended to achieve this.

The relationship between the municipality and district councils is described as difficult but simultaneously quite constructive. There are possibilities for influence, and if the provided channels aren't

sufficient, there are other ways to proceed, potentially involving the district council coordinator. This might include pursuing the political route by going to the municipal council or a political party. Paul finds his job particularly rewarding because he feels he has the unique position within the municipality to potentially go against the policy of his own employer if it's in the interest of the neighbourhood council he supports. He finds it great that the municipality facilitates this possibility and provides the necessary resources. However, he emphasizes that this doesn't mean everything a district council wants will be successful.

Neighbourhood councils have daily contact with their coordinators, often discussing practical matters related to their regular meetings. They typically hold one public meeting per month, open to all residents, and one closed meeting to prepare.

Paul views the main task of neighbourhood councils primarily as an advisory body to the municipality. While they don't have the power to directly implement major projects (like building a youth centre), they can advise the municipality on issues they observe and suggest potential solutions. This advisory role extends to various topics.

Neighbourhood councils have several formal "means" or powers:

- The most significant current power is related to the "bewonersinitiatief" (resident initiative) system. Residents can apply for funding (typically small to moderate amounts) for ideas for their district, and the district council acts as the jury, deciding whether funding should be allocated.
- Another important tool is the "Wijkakkoord" (Neighbourhood Accord), a multi-year plan developed jointly by the district council and municipality, broken down into annual action plans. The district council negotiates these plans with the municipality, which then commits to realizing an agreed portion of them. These action plans originate from local discussions and can be escalated to higher municipal levels for approval.
- A third political tool is the "ongevraagd advies" (unsolicited advice). According to regulations, neighbourhood councils can submit unsolicited advice to the aldermen on any topic. The alderman is required to respond substantively within a fixed timeframe. These exchanges are also shared with the municipal council. This is considered the councils' most direct political instrument.

When advising neighbourhood councils, Paul suggests considering whether an issue needs formal political action or can be addressed in collaboration with municipal departments. For example, poverty reduction as a national issue isn't effectively tackled through local advice about benefits, but organizing a local job fair is a concrete step. Where the municipality has gone against neighbourhood preferences despite resident input, political tools become necessary.

Large-scale urban projects are often viewed by neighbourhood councils as difficult to influence. While they can't stop such projects, they can influence how they affect their own district—such as the design or location of amenities. This requires strategic focus. District councils are often involved during planning but sometimes feel consultation comes too late. Their advice is considered but is only one of many factors in decision-making.

Paul feels the current powers of the district councils are “not bad at all.” He is cautious about proposals to give them their own project budgets, fearing it could weaken their negotiation leverage. If councils were expected to use their own budgets for every local improvement, it might undermine efforts to secure larger-scale investments from the municipality. Instead, he prefers structured agreements like the Wijkakkoorden and action plans that ensure municipal commitment to certain actions.

Neighbourhood councils have specific budgets for communication and participation. The communication budget allows them to manage their own outreach, while the participation budget enables them to organize meetings and community events. However, they don't have their own funds for implementing projects like park renovations.

Resident participation varies significantly across district councils. Some are very active, organizing events and going into the neighbourhood to engage residents. Others are more passive, relying on their election mandate. Paul feels there's an unfair expectation from the municipality that district councils handle resident participation—something not typically asked of municipal councillors. Moreover, consultation timelines often don't align with district councils' meeting schedules.

The municipality uses district profiles—data about neighbourhood conditions—to inform policy. These are also shared with district councils, but are less often actively used by them, as they feel they already know the issues. Still, the profiles could be used strategically to advocate for attention to specific problems.

Paul believes "Wijk aan Zet" can be effective if viewed as an advisory system. If expectations were for more direct power or budgets, disappointment is likely. The municipality could have better managed expectations when the system launched.

A notable improvement over past systems is that political affiliation is no longer required for council membership, which has improved diversity and representation. The barrier to joining is now lower. Paul's personal advocacy is for selecting members by lottery to fill vacant spots. He considers this more democratic and representative. He cites the example of a cleaner in Mathenesse selected this way, who reflects the local population well. While some fear unqualified members, Paul believes this method enriches councils with real-life perspectives. Politically affiliated members might have more connections but can also be constrained by party loyalty.

District council members receive a modest financial compensation for their work.

Paul envisions a future model combining elected members with lottery-selected members. The elected core would prepare issues, while the randomly selected group participates in decision-making, provided they receive appropriate support and training.

Appendix III: Thematic analysis keywords

The following list is the list of keywords used to create the thematic analysis in Rstudio. All keywords are translated from their original Dutch.

Themes	Words
Recreation	recreation, sports, playground, park, nature, relaxation, leisure, camping, recreational, walking, cycling, culture, hobby, youth activities, event, music, theatre, museum, library, movement, volunteer work, activities, outing, nature reserve, summer activities, workshop, clubs, associations, game, creative
Street safety	street safety, pedestrians, traffic accidents, traffic safety, traffic lights, crossings, sidewalk, street lighting, traffic congestion, speeding, traffic hump, traffic signs, street design, bicycle safety, school zone, bike lane, pavement, traffic rules, traffic lights, busy roads, crossing, zebra crossing, driving lane, safe crossing, stopping distance, accident prevention, driving behaviour, traffic jams, parking nuisance, traffic control
Special Needs	special needs, disabilities, accessibility, wheelchair, care needs, integration, inclusion, limitation, social safety net, care facilities, support, informal care, aids, autism-friendly, deaf, blind, care structure, self-sufficiency, mobility, adjustment, barrier-free, family guidance, ADL (Activities of Daily Living), guide dog, medical care, rehabilitation, housing support, special education, individual care, care adjustment
Beautification	beautification, urban renewal, green space, planting, landscape architecture, aesthetics, architecture, cityscape, facade renovation, redesign, squares, gardening, public art, street furniture, flower boxes, mural, plant pot, green roof, urban beauty, ornamental paving, street image, public space, renovation, decoration, street art, living environment, climate-adaptive design, light art, promenade, resting places
Environmental Improvement	environmental protection, sustainability, climate change, CO2 reduction, green energy, reuse, recycling, sustainable development, air pollution, energy efficiency, water quality, biodiversity, nature conservation, environmental impact, waste separation, circular economy, composting, solar panels, wind energy, insulation, energy consumption, natural resources, climate adaptation,

	green roof, environmental education, rainwater harvesting, ecological, energy policy, heat pump, environmental regulations, greening, air quality, green
Blight Removal	decay, dilapidation, renovation, urban renewal, vacancy, redevelopment, demolition, revitalization, neglect, breakdown, repurposing, restoration, squatted houses, housing quality, makeover, disadvantaged neighbourhood, social recovery, building maintenance, living environment, aging, poverty, structural reinforcement, area approach, housing improvement, maintenance, neighbourhood makeover, street maintenance, neighbourhood renewal, physical backlog, demolish
Education	education, school, training, student, educational facilities, primary school, secondary school, college, university, study, educational policy, educational innovation, pedagogy, educational disadvantage, compulsory education, school performance, teaching materials, teacher shortage, after-school care, language development, digital literacy, equal opportunities, parental involvement, learning environment, class size, mentoring program, teaching methods, school building, schoolyard, safe learning environment
Crime and Security	crime, safety, police, burglary, theft, violence, nuisance, neighbourhood watch, security camera, crime, justice, rule of law, crime prevention, public order, security, criminal law, vandalism, robbery, youth crime, street violence, drug problems, feeling of safety, fines, prevention, control, police presence, neighbourhood officer, criminal offenses, tough approach, immediate action