



Stories of Our Neighbourhoods

Exploring the experiences of people living in
socially diverse residential and working
neighbourhoods

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Overview

't Groene Sticht is a mixed residential and working project in a new housing district in Utrecht. The residents of 't Groene Sticht are vulnerable citizens such as (former) homeless people, people suffering from mental disorder or disabled people, but also students, senior citizens and young families. The purposeful residential mixing of people from socially diverse backgrounds contributes to the project's aim of creating a socially integrated neighbourhood, supporting individuals to reintegrate into social life step by step. Set up in 2003, the programme is now a part of the Social Support Act (WMO), introduced in 2007. Together with the law, long-term care (WLZ) and the Health Insurance Act (Zvw), the Social Support Act forms the basis of the system of care and welfare in the Netherlands. The neighbourhood of Majella Wonen has similar aims and objectives and was inspired by the success of 't Groene Sticht.

To gather user voice on this topic we worked with a small group of individuals from Utrecht who live and/or work in these types of neighbourhoods, focusing on 't Groene Sticht and Majella Wonen areas. The stories provide an understanding of the people's life experience in these areas. In the stories, people share the events happening in their lives (i.e. recovery), the activities and work they are involved in (i.e. gardening) and issues that they or their communities are facing (i.e. homelessness) and their feelings with regard to their experience (i.e. empowerment).

Roles within the community

[Dirk's](#) story highlights how the 't Groene Sticht neighbourhood provides employment opportunities for residents. In this story Dirk mentions that he got involved in 't Groene Sticht as resident of the sheltered accommodation and he describes his two actual roles with the community, firstly as an administrator of a sheltered accommodation and secondly as President of the residents association. Within his role with the residents' association he is seeking to achieve better integration between the people who live in the neighbourhood permanently and those who live there on a short-term basis. The duality of the Dirk's role – both as resident and as a worker in the area – is in-keeping with the neighbourhood's aim of using the capacity of residents to work together to overcome social issues within the area and to encourage the participation and development of vulnerable people.

Many of people who shared their stories of living in these socially diverse neighbourhoods chose to speak a lot about their role within the area, suggesting that this is an important part of how they see their identity in the place in which they live. [Arina](#) describes in her story how she has a

job within the Majella Wonen project and that she is “*proud*” of this achievement. As explored later, this is one of the steps in Arina’s journey that the Majella Wonen project has contributed to in order to support her on her life course. A [resident](#) of the ‘t Groene Sticht details how she work as a Postwoman and at a food store whilst living in the neighbourhood. She describes how this enabled her to meet people from the area and learn more about her fellow residents. In a story from another User Voice set, [Markuu](#) (Kainuu, Finland) describes a similar scenario. In his story he says that he lives alone but his role as a voluntary IT teacher for older people in his community has given him “*an opportunity to meet other people easily*”.

The importance of social responsibility

In neighbourhoods like ‘t Groene Sticht and Majella Wonen there are both people who are vulnerable and need support, and people who occupy a support-giving position. Whilst people in these neighbourhoods demand something from the area (i.e. housing, work, social support etc.), they also want to give something back. [Suzy](#) is a young woman who lives in Majella Wonen and in her story she describes how she used to live in temporary ‘anti-squat’ housing which meant that she had to move frequently. She says how she is “*looking forward*” to supporting the former homeless people who are now moving into the area to “*reintegrate into normal life*”. This gives her “*a lot of energy*” and is a key part in enabling her to feel that she belongs in society.

[Maria](#), who lives in ‘t Groene Sticht, is also equally keen to ‘give’ to her community. She lives in a flat and uses her balcony to grow vegetables. Her next step is to begin to share her knowledge with children and adults in her neighbourhood. Similarly, [Carlijn](#) describes how she is now using her experience of mental health illness to help set up a business that informs people about mental health issues. She also describes how the outdoor spaces in ‘t Groene Sticht provide places at which people can come together for parties and sports. The sentiment of these stories is also expressed in a ‘t Groene Sticht [resident’s](#) story. She says that she feels responsible for the collective of people in her neighbourhood, who she has met whilst in communal areas and through work. As the stories suggest, these neighbourhoods are cultivating spaces in which the residents actively participate in their community. This is something that other people in the ‘User Voice’ stories collated would also like the opportunity to do. For example, [Mohamed](#) (Ingolstadt, Germany) describes how having settled in, in Ingolstadt that he now wants to give back to German society.

Changing relationships

Within this collection of stories, a trend is that people's lives undergo significant changes when their key relationships with other people change. In his story, [Isaak](#) talks about how he found himself living alone after his children had grown-up. He found that he had time and space to himself, and he got to like it. This situation changed when his son became a father and moved back home after the breakdown of a relationship. This changed Isaak's "*perspective of being free*" as he was now had more of a role as a father and grandfather. In her story, the 't Groene Sticht [resident](#) indicates that her break-up with a partner who she still lives with, is a factor in her forthcoming move to Amsterdam. What is suggested from these stories is that with life transitions and events, people's connections towards both their homes and neighbourhoods change.



[Click here](#) to view the extracts from these stories and [click here](#) to view the feature story.

InnoSI Themes

The ways in which these residential and working neighbourhoods make interventions in the people's lives explored in these stories seem to have had a significant impact on their **life-course perspective**. For example, [Arina](#) describes how the Majella Wonen project has supported her development in many ways. Firstly, she has found employment within the project and is enrolling in a forthcoming education programme. Secondly, her new home in Majella Wonen is not shared accommodation and therefore she will be able to have children stay over with her.

From Arina's story we can gather that she has had a "*difficult path*" to get to where she is now and the interventions that can be attributed to the Majella Wonen project have provided support along this journey. With this support in place and positive prospects, the cycle of intergenerational transfer of poverty could be broken. Congruently, [Suzy's](#) experience of temporary housing was alleviated by the Majella Wonen project. She is now keen to use her skills to help support new people moving into the area who have experienced housing issues and to support them to integrate with the community there.

Summary of Insights

-  **Meeting People:** It is important that neighbourhoods provide spaces and opportunities where residents can meet one another, share social time and get to know each other better. This helps to create a stronger sense of community, and enhances social connections.
-  **Social Responsibility:** Fostering a notion of 'social responsibility' within neighbourhoods strengthens people's ties to the area and creates communities that are willing to 'give' as well as 'receive'. This could lead to people becoming less reliant on service provision and more on the resources within their own communities.