



# Case Study Briefing

The Green Sticht (inclusive neighbourhood), the Netherlands



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## 1. Overview

**The Green Sticht has been set up to reintegrate homeless people into society by giving them a home in a unique mixed housing project.**

The Green Sticht combines a variety of residential and working functions for a mixed group of people with and without a socially vulnerable position. The working functions include a thrift store, a furniture workshop (for recycling of furniture) and a restaurant which employs people with intellectual disabilities. In order to create a sense of community and to support social cohesion, active participation and mutual support are promoted. The social innovative element of this project is the provision of a safe haven and social support to homeless people by offering a favourable environment for their process of reintegration into society, and an informal support structure for socially vulnerable people living in the mixed neighbourhood.

## 2. Key policy implications

**Homeless people are able to recover and re-integrate by offering them the basic conditions (housing, work and social support), in combination with a limited degree of social support.**

- The project had a positive impact on the re-integration of the homeless and on the support of the socially vulnerable in the neighbourhood.
- The project only needs initial financial support to start. In the next phase the rental revenues cover the key coordination activities. Third parties manage the thrift shop, the furniture workshop and the restaurant, while the housing corporation owns and rents the social housing properties. Thus, with minimal efforts, a mixed, supportive community has been realised that offer optimal conditions for reintegration of (former) homeless and other socially vulnerable people.

Although the initiative has never been replicated, recently three projects have started in Utrecht inspired by the Green Sticht. These projects show that it is possible to make various combinations of the main elements and mechanisms that have made the Green Sticht initiative successful.

## 3. Context

The target groups of the Green Sticht are people who are excluded or at risk of exclusion because of social and individual problems: (1) people with a psychiatric disorder and/or light mental impairment who are in a vulnerable (domestic) situation as a result of social and/or psychological circumstances, and who are unable to live independently, and (2) the (former) homeless with prospects of recovery and who are in need of a shelter to stabilize. Homeless people commonly are struggling with multiple problems, including psychiatric, addiction and debt problems.

Main organisations involved in the initiative are: Foundation the Green Sticht, Woonvereniging the Green Sticht (residents' association, both of the tenants and the house owners), the Emmaus Foundation, the Tussenvoorziening, NoiZ and Foundation Reinaerde (all of them care organisations).

The project is located in Utrecht, the fourth largest city in the Netherlands, at the centre of the country. The Green Sticht is a socially mixed neighbourhood in Leidsche Rijn, the Utrecht new town extension under construction since 1997. It has its roots in the emancipatory movement of homeless people. In 1994, homeless people intended to set up a self-managed shelter in Utrecht, but were unable to find a suitable location. This stimulated the establishment of the grass-root foundation 'Night Shelter in Self-Management' (NoiZ) in 1995. Since the second half of the 1990s, awareness increased among the local government about a chronic lack of shelters in the city, while it was also confronted with a growing resentment among local residents against shelters in their neighbourhood. The project reflects a shift in programmes and policies to support the homeless.

The Green Sticht a combination of three distinct key assumptions:

1. It is possible to overcome neighbourhood resistance against the establishment of a homeless shelter by reversing the order: first a shelter, than inviting the neighbours;
2. Homeless people are able to recover and re-integrate by offering them the basic conditions (housing, work and social support), in combination with a limited degree of professional support;
3. It is possible to create and maintain a mixed, solidary neighbourhood, were people care for and support each other.

They represent three key elements of processes of re-integration or recovery of homeless people: shelter and housing, work or meaningful daily activities, and acceptance and social support by neighbours. The project planned an integrated approach to the problem of recovery of homeless people, with advantages of mutual coordination and the possibility of a tailor-made approach.

The Green Sticht is a typical networked non-profit organisation, with an important role for the residents' association. People with debts (the homeless often have debts) live alongside owners of rather expensive houses. To prevent the formation of small islands, all sorts of activities are organised by the residents' association. The Green Sticht should not turn into an anonymous neighbourhood was one of the departing points. This applies also to the residents of the guest accommodation, homeless people who can stay no more than a year. They are intentionally involved in all activities, for example by having them look after the catering at major neighbourhood festivities.

## 4. Sources of evidence

It is not easy to carry out an evaluation of a civil society project that has its roots in a conference in 1997 and started in 2003. Project plans and documentation only provide fragmented information. Due to the absence of a needs assessment, we had to reconstruct our own one, based on available sources and interviews with key players. To elaborate the original assumptions how the project or program should work, we have used the perspectives of the initiators as expressed in interviews. Fortunately project plans have been evaluated and adapted twice (2009 and 2014). This documentation was available. We also did some interviews with current residents and other stakeholders. We did not have relevant quantitative data to evaluate the process and the outcomes of the project. As alternatives we used information from self-evaluations by the Green Sticht, interviews, annual reports of the Foundation the Green Sticht and the association of residents and, articles in the Green Sticht newsletter ('Overburen'). Final conclusions have been presented to and discussed with a focus group of five stakeholders.

## 5. Main findings

In the opinion of directly involved residents, workers and staff members the project has achieved its stated goals (to establish a neighbourhood consisting of one or more residential and work communities with shelter functions for the homeless, and other people with a socially vulnerable position). One important contributing factor is that the Green Sticht was not set up in a previously existing neighbourhood, but was built as part of an overall new construction project with the aim of achieving a combination of and interaction between more and less self-reliant inhabitants, from the very start.

The high expectations concerning community building and neighbourly support to socially vulnerable residents had to be tempered to more realistic ones. In the process, the project objectives and interventions were revised if needed because of changing circumstances and new insights. It stimulated further democratisation, greater involvement of all concerned, including temporary workers and professionals, and improved coordination at all levels. Experience also showed that more support is needed to initiate some of the joint activities of the residents (by a social broker) or to solve some difficult decisions by the residents' association (not only on the right balance between self-reliant and vulnerable residents, but also to ensure that truly engaged people are selected).

The Green Sticht offered and still offers a temporary accommodation to homeless people who are motivated (to continue) to work. The security of a shelter for a fixed period of time as such helps them to stabilise. Gradually the maximum period of stay has been adjusted from some months to six months, with an extension of one year, adapting the original plans to the reality. Between 2010 and 2015, around 27 homeless arrived at the guest accommodation per year. The successful referral to the next step in the residential career ranged from 50 to 81 percent between 2010 and 2015. Interviewed stakeholders indicate that the guest accommodation provides a good accommodation to the homeless, and that relatively many are referred to the next phase, of sheltered housing or independent housing.

The Green Sticht is certainly a neighbourhood where homeless people are accepted, in contrast to other neighbourhoods where they are ignored. Without sufficient informal social support, several homeless people don't succeed to live independently and relapse, as repeatedly underlined in interviews and the focus group discussion. Although the plans to create employment opportunities for homeless people have been less successful, the neighbourhood offers plenty of – mostly unpaid - work opportunities, for instance in the Emmaus thrift store, and in assisting with festivities or cleaning of the area.

The realisation of the neighbourhood has been a success because it met an unfulfilled need at that time. The fact that the project still exists makes it clear that it still meets a need, especially by offering a tolerant and supportive neighbourhood for the socially vulnerable.

## 6. Impact & Implications

The project has achieved its stated goals according to involved residents and staff members. Some expectations had to be moderated and some elements had to be adapted to new insights, experiences and developments over the years. Major changes include a better (more stringent) balloting of potential residents, homeless have to look for work mainly outside the neighbourhood, achieving mutual social support and reciprocity demand constant efforts and joint activities require more support (from a social broker and partner organisations).

The initiative has never been replicated, which is understandable: because of the size and complexity of the project and because the opportunity to start a homeless shelter and then invite the neighbours can only be found in a newly built neighbourhood. Recently, two projects started in Utrecht inspired by the Green Sticht initiative. These projects show that it is possible to make various combinations of the main elements and mechanisms that has made the Green Sticht initiative successful and sustainable, such as a combination of regular and former homeless residents, adequate selection of both types of residents, a commitment of the regular residents to actively promote an open and supportive living climate, a central role for the residents' association, and support by a coordinator and case managers that support the socially vulnerable residents to live independently. A third project is currently being realized in Utrecht, of mixed housing of young refugees with a residence status and native young people, based on the same principles of balloting and social support.

In various other Dutch cities, more mixed housing projects emerge, but often without former homeless people, and focusing on categories with temporary housing needs. These initiatives contain many comparable elements and mechanisms as the Green Sticht initiative. The rise of mixed housing projects is encouraged by the current social and care policy context. In the retreating welfare state, the socially vulnerable must in the first instance rely on their social network and their neighbours for social support. All the other mixed housing projects have less ambitious goals. And usually, the project is managed by one main organisation. This contrasts with the Green Sticht project. The ambitious social objective it pursues can only be effectively promoted by a networked non-profit.

The economic evaluation of the project is rudimentary, because of the lack of financial and other data on the guest accommodation part of the project. Most interesting are the social returns of the activities of the foundation and the residents' association, in advancing and realising social cohesion, mutual involvement and support, and the integration of socially vulnerable citizens in the district. The social returns on investments are huge in this respect, while the costs are marginal.

Another strong point of the project is that it only needs initial financial support to start the project. After its start, the rental revenues of the real estate suffice for the key coordination activities. Thus, with minimal efforts, a mixed, supportive community has been realised that offer optimal conditions for reintegration of (former) homeless and other socially vulnerable people.

## 7. Further information

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For further information on InnoSI: Innovation in Social Investment: approaches to social investment from the scientific perspective, visit our website at <http://innosi.eu/>

To view the Community Reporting video with a personal experience of the case study please follow the link below:

<https://communityreporter.net/story/working-t-groene-stricht>

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