

JOURNAL

PROJECT

WESH – We.Service.Heerlen

📍 Heerlen, The Netherlands

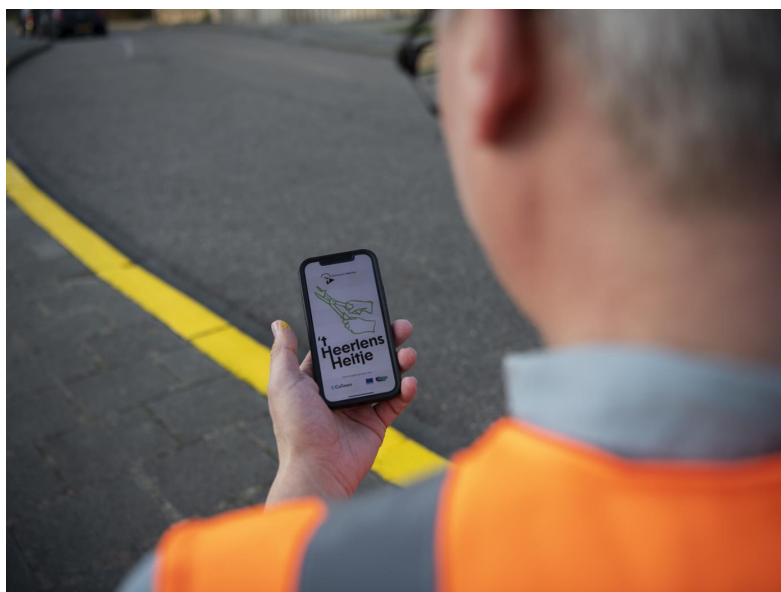
TOPIC

Digital transition

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We.Service.Heerlen (WESH): Journal 3

See on UIA website



WESH Journal no. 3 describes the progress of the We.Service.Heerlen project as of October 2022. That means WESH is in the final stage of the project period, ending in December this year.

1. Executive summary

Project update

By October 2021 a municipal-wide rollout was achieved with the Heitjes and chores across Heerlen. From June 2022 on new chores were added to various available paint jobs on the platform, such as cleaning public playground equipment, walking with elderly disabled citizens and performing a night watch in neighbourhoods. Because of its long preparation time and COVID-19 restrictions that vehemently limited engagement of both citizens and entrepreneurs during the lockdowns, the WESH platform still had catching up to do on its prospected potential in 2022. As of August 2022 around 185 tasks were completed and about 20 shops and bars joined the platform. In the summer of 2022 the city council agreed to maintain Heerlens Heitje at least during 2023 and to explore other functionalities on the platform. WESH technical supplier CoTown is currently investigating a decentralisation of the platform, whereas other public organisations — such as housing and caretaking organisations — can add their own tasks on the platform and perform transactions.

Challenges

The UIA initiative identifies seven operational challenges for implementing a collaborative innovation project. Each of these are translated to the current state of the project at the writing of Journal no. 3 in October 2022, with their corresponding risk level:

- **Leadership** (*risk: low*): the previous leaders of Heerlen arranged a tax exemption for the project, set to 1,500 Heitjes per year. In May 2022 a new Alderman was installed, that still had to gain experience and knowhow of the project.
- **Procurement** (*risk: medium*): the procurement has shifted from software towards various means of communication

(both online and offline) for attracting users and content on the platform. The fact that the software code is not open source, seems like a hurdle for scaling up the initiative to other municipalities and contexts.

- **Participative approach** (*risk: medium*): since the platform relies on users and content, the participative approach of WESH is seen as a critical factor from the start. With 185 tasks completed and 1,150 hours of work done, the platform is still catching up on the anticipated numbers, mainly because of the COVID-19 restrictions in early 2022.
- **Cross-department working** (*risk: low*): although perceived as a Spatial project within the municipal organisation, the target users of WESH are in the Social policy sphere. For the continuation, the interaction between the Spatial and Social domains should be intensified.
- **Measuring and monitoring** (*risk: low*): Statistics Netherlands conducted an oversampling research in 2021 and 2022 on the effects of the project on the social cohesion in the neighbourhoods of Heerlen. User surveying showed that the number and diversity of the available chores were deemed too low.
- **Communication to beneficiaries** (*risk: low*): by September 2022 the number of followers on Heerlens Heitje social media accounts had doubled since last year: Facebook (906 followers; +482), Instagram (771 followers; +523) and LinkedIn (265 followers; +173). After initial regional focus, the project caught more attention of national media in 2022.
- **Scaling up** (*risk: medium*): in 2022 it became increasingly clear that Heerlens Heitje is a context specific solution and other municipalities have varied needs and preferences for a platform to delegate municipal tasks or a local digital currency.

Emerging lessons

Cities in Europe can learn valuable lessons from WESH. Firstly, from the methods used to stimulate civic engagement and apply governmental city management tasks to do so. Secondly, from the process of aligning partners, working cross-departmental, as well as engaging both citizens and entrepreneurs to participate. Thirdly, from co-developing and orchestrating a tailor-made city platform, which has the possibility to incorporate new activities. Addressing issues of public concern by participation, civic-engagement and voluntary work tend to create more trust among citizens and stimulates (local) political interest. Digital tools allow us to have citizens interact with public authorities, reflect on decision-making and even use their collective wisdom and strength to execute public tasks more effectively. Experiments like WESH help public institutions to create a more responsive, transparent and participatory decision-making process.

Heitjes spent in the city centre of Heerlen



Source: Municipality of Heerlen

2. Project update

2.1 From setting up to city-wide implementation

In 2019 a consortium of ecosystem partners from the Dutch city of Heerlen, led by the municipality, developed an integrated urban experimentation project monikered as We.Service.Heerlen (WESH). This digital transition project was granted funding as part of the European Commission's Urban Innovative Actions (UIA) initiative. WESH features an innovative civic engagement platform, which uses blockchain technology to delegate accessible and relatively easy public space maintenance tasks to Heerlen's citizens. Think of painting a park bench, weeding a garden or cleaning up lampposts. By simply downloading a smartphone app and registering, citizens of Heerlen are able to apply for these chores assigned by the municipality. They can pick up a toolbox with instructions at their local community building and get started. When a task is completed and approved by the city's public space maintenance department, the citizen will be rewarded with local digital coins, named 'Heerlen Heitjes'. These Heitjes, whereas 1 Heitje equals 1 euro, can be spent at local shops, bars and cultural facilities in the city. The goals of the project are therefore firstly to increase civic engagement, secondly to improve the quality of the public space and thirdly to stimulate the local economy of retail and hospitality.

In 2020 the consortium partners prepared the project meticulously. The visions and expectations of the partners involved were aligned, all of the facilities for executing the project were organised, the platform software was tested and the content and users were engaged and involved in the testphase. In March 2021 WESH was officially launched for the public. For publicity reasons the app and the digital coins were named 'Heerlens Heitje', with Heitje deriving from the Dutch saying for bob-a-job: 'Heitje voor karweitje'. Neighbourhood association GMS (Grasbroek-Musschemig-Schandelen), one of the consortium partners, arranged and engaged the first group of citizens to volunteer and kickstart the platform. In the summer of 2021 the WESH platform was subsequently introduced in the neighbouring Heerlen North district of PMS (Meezenbroek-Schaesbergerveld-Palemig). By October 2021 a municipal-wide rollout was achieved with the Heitjes and available chores. This eased the access to the platform for citizens of Heerlen's Central and Southern neighbourhoods, as well as the incorporated former villages of Hoensbroek (19,000 inhabitants) and Heerlerbaan (10,000 inhabitants).

2.2 Additional chores and extension

During the implementation of WESH in 2021, most of the tasks that were available on Heerlens Heitje app were a variety of painting jobs. These included the sanding and painting of park benches and public trash bins, as well as renewing the no-parking markings on curbs and designated concrete roadside posts (so-called Limbricht poles). This led to some discussions with citizens (for example during the Focus Groups) on the limited accessibility of the platform for citizens who are unable or unwilling (as in not skilled enough) to perform painting jobs. Late 2021 and early 2022 the municipal WESH team held multiple talks with their counterparts of the Social Department on socially relevant tasks to be added to the platform. From June 2022 new chores were added, such as easy cleaning, caretaking and surveillance tasks. These were respectively cleaning up public playground equipment, by removing graffiti, markings and stickers; walking with elderly disabled citizens through the park and thereby providing them company; as well as keeping an eye on the neighbourhood as a night watch.

2.3 Scenarios for continuation

Because of its relatively long preparation time and Covid-19 restrictions that vehemently limited engagement of both citizens and entrepreneurs during the lockdowns, the WESH platform still had catching up to do on its prospected potential in 2022. That meant that as of August 2022 less than 200 tasks were completed and just about 20 shops and bars joined the platform. During 2022 centre management organisation Heerlen Mijn Stad endured difficulties to convince new entrepreneurs to join in. Given the fact that the UIA project period initially would end on 31 August 2022 and that it was unsure if and how the local digital currency would continue. After discussing the underspending of WESH with the UIA secretariat, also due to Covid-19, it was agreed by the project partners to extend the project period until the end of 2022. At the meantime the team of the municipality involved in WESH was looking within their organisation for endurance of the local cryptocurrency beyond the UIA project period. They developed three future scenarios for the future of Heerlens Heitje, in short either quit, continue in the current framework or broaden the scope to other functionalities.

In the summer of 2022 the municipality agreed to maintain Heerlens Heitje at least during 2023 and to explore other functionalities on the platform. Budget is reserved for this continuation beyond the WESH project period. The municipality of Heerlen is looking to connect other ongoing social projects that engage people and reward

them for desired activities or behaviour. It is currently introducing the VitKnip ('vitality purse') for its employees, where they can cash in vouchers at local shops for their wellbeing. For certain income households the municipality is introducing the EnergieKnip ('energy purse'), a blockchain project where citizens can cash in credits at hardware stores for sustainable home improvement. Another example is Buurtdeals ('neighbourhood deals'), where citizens can help to create new public facilities for their community, by deciding and supporting to develop an empty plot into an outdoor gym, a vegetable garden or a public barbeque. Or Buurthelden ('neighbourhood heroes'), where kids can earn credits for toys by collecting litter in their neighbourhood. WESH technical supplier CoTown is currently investigating a decentralisation of the platform where other public organisations could put their own tasks on the platform. Housing corporations for example can have their tenants perform simple maintenance work in the public areas or caretaking organisations can have citizens do some of the cleaning.

Campaign to engage citizens to join the WESH platform

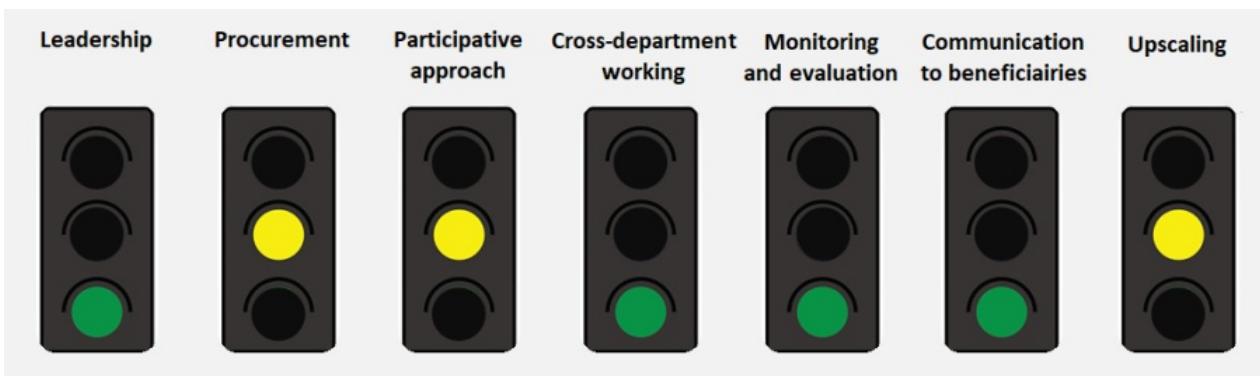


Source: Municipality of Heerlen

3. Challenges and emerging lessons

3.1 Challenges overview

For the implementation of WESH, the UIA initiative identifies seven operational challenges, that are seen as the most relevant and cross-cutting for implementing a collaborative innovation project within the urban sphere: (1) leadership, (2) procurement, (3) participative approach, (4) cross-department working, (5) measuring and monitoring, (6) communication to beneficiaries and (7) scaling up. Each of these seven UIA challenges are translated to the current state of the WESH project, at the time Journal no. 3 is written (October 2022). That means nearing the closure of the project period at the end of 2022. The state of the challenges are depicted as risks, coded accordingly as traffic lights: green is low, yellow is medium and red is high. The challenges will be addressed one by one in the detailed analysis below. For each challenge, a critical analysis anchored to the project activities development is presented as well as the emerging lessons learned from that specific challenge.



3.2 Detailed analysis

Challenge

Observation

Leadership Challenge level



During the preparation of WESH in 2020, the former Mayor and Alderman held multiple discussions with the national tax authority on taxing the performed tasks as well as on the expenditure of the digital coins in the local economy. With their leadership they arranged a tax exemption, under the condition that the maximum was set at 1,500 Heitjes per year and the amount should be registered by citizens in their annual tax return. After the municipal elections in March 2022 a new executive board was formed in April and installed in May 2022. Mr Gelderblom, the new Alderman for Housing, Planning, Circularity and Public Services, debuted at City Management in general. Since he started during the last phase of the WESH project period, the new Alderman still has to gain experience and knowhow of the project. The focus of the project itself was on the scenarios of continuation after the project period, for which the WESH team needed to establish better connections to the Social Department and their respective council members. The core goal of the project is to stimulate civic engagement, but WESH was designated a project in the spatial sphere. The reason for which is that the municipal tasks that were delegated to citizens were, at least initial, public space maintenance. In terms of leadership WESH was therefore included in the managerial portfolio of the Alderman for Planning and Public Services.

Procurement Challenge level



During the preparation phase of WESH, the procurements for the project included the platform software of the technical supplier (CoTown) in terms of a subscription based on the number of users. The number of users were described as both citizens as well as entrepreneurs who interacted on the platform. During the implementation phase of the project, the focus thence went to outreach to these two target groups: attracting more users (citizens) and stimulating their engagement, as well as engaging more entrepreneurs in order to create more platform content. As a result, the procurement shifted towards various means of communication (both online and offline). In order to secure the continuation of the project in case the technical supplier should go bankrupt during its course, the municipality of Heerlen has co-ownership of the source code of the platform software. The fact that the software code is not open source, seems like a hurdle for scaling up the initiative to other municipalities and contexts. To avoid vendor lock-ins for public organisations, the European Commission's vision is creating open software standards. These were stated in the European Digital Strategy and detailed in the European Free/Open Source Software Licence. In 2022 WESH project partner VNG (Netherlands Association of Municipalities) discussed this issue multiple times with the municipality and CoTown. The startup agreed to make certain parts of the software open source, so it could be easier adopted by other public entities.

Participative approach

Challenge level



The success of any digital platform depends on the number of active users and the provided appealing content, so the participative approach of WESH is seen as a critical factor from the start. The incentive for citizens to perform tasks on the platform lie in the number of places where the Heitjes can eventually be spent. During the kick-off of WESH in March 2021 a partial lockdown due to COVID-19 was still in place, whereas opening hours of shops were still limited. During the Winter of 2021-2022 a second hard lockdown was set in the Netherlands, which allowed only take away for all non-essential retail and all hospitality services as well as a night curfew from 8 PM on. It was strongly advised to stay at home and only go out when needed. These restrictions made it more difficult for both the entrepreneurs to join in as well as citizens to perform the tasks. According to the municipality by August 2022 185 tasks in total were completed and approved, which accounted for 1,150 hours of work. By that time 20 local entrepreneurs had joined the platform. Both were lower than anticipated at first, but the numbers were still growing since the COVID-restrictions were loosened. The citizens who joined in stated that their main reasons to participate were (1) to improve their neighbourhood, (2) be more meaningful and (3) get rewarded financially. Their limited time, unattractive type of chores and unavailable chores nearby were the main reasons to not participate. These were countered by including quicker and other type of chores as well as the citywide availability. For entrepreneurs to join in a look out beyond the project period of at least one year was established.

Cross-department
working

Challenge level



In its goals WESH touches upon the spatial (improving the public space), the social (stimulating civic engagement) and the economic (boosting the local economy) policy fields. The main focus of the project - from the city management perspective - is spatial: developing a digital platform to divert public maintenance tasks from the urban authority to the citizens. The municipal organisation of Heerlen is divided into six different spheres: Spatial, Social, Economic, Civic, Resources and Administrative. The municipal employees involved in WESH are Project Managers, a Communications Advisor and a Financial Officers of its Spatial Department. So the scouting of the initial tasks was done by spatial Maintenance Workers, who are also part of this department. Since liveability and wellbeing both are dependent on the physical city environment as well as on social factors, the city's Spatial Department and the Social Department work closely together in developing and executing neighbourhood policy. This integrated process to improve deprived city districts, is called a 'district-oriented approach'. In 2022 we have seen that most citizens that are targeted by the WESH project are intrinsically motivated citizens and in a lesser extent the extrinsically motivated. The latter are targeted mainly by the city's social policy, such as low income or unemployed households and citizens of which their health and wellbeing is relatively low. Although the age of the participants range from 22 to 69, the project has seen less young people willing to participate than elder. For the future continuation of WESH beyond the project period in 2023, the interaction between the Spatial and Social domains of the Municipality of Heerlen on this matter should be intensified. Another option is to develop a more decentralised version of the platform where other public or semi-public parties can add chores and deliver transactions themselves. This diverts the governance orchestration from within the municipal organisation to other actors in the city.

Measuring and monitoring

Challenge level



After one and a half year of implementation we have seen lower numbers of users and entrepreneurs than anticipated. There were approximately 1,220 downloads of the Heerlens Heitje app (+670 since last year), 185 tasks completed (+135), and 20 local shops and hospitality involved (+5). As stated above, the COVID-19 restrictions limited participation during the first months in action and during the Winter of 2021-2022. During 2022 the WESH team has been intensifying communication (see below) and lowering the threshold for participation. Along the direct outputs of WESH, the impact of the project is measured and monitored by project partner Statistics Netherlands (CBS). They have been conducting social cohesion research in the 50 largest urban areas in the Netherlands for years, which have shown that Heerlen scored the nation's lowest in the governmental trust and number of volunteers. During WESH Statistics Netherlands conducted an oversampling research in 2021 and 2022 on the effects of the project on the social cohesion in the neighbourhoods of Heerlen. In the Heerlens Heitje app features a periodic survey possibility for its users. In 2022 reflecting questions were added to the app on the type of tasks, the positive aspects and the downsides. The users deemed the number and diversity of the available chores too low. In general, the measuring and monitoring of WESH is conceived as a low risk, since various mechanisms are in place to supervise the results and impact.

Communication to beneficiaries

Challenge level



Communication about WESH to its beneficiaries has a primary local focus, since it has a merely regional ecosystem partnership (asides Netherlands Association of Municipalities) and only local residents and entrepreneurs of Heerlen can join the platform. Apart from communication about We.Service.Heerlen or WESH on the UIA website, the project is communicated publicly as "Heerlens Heitje". Leading up to the implementation the main channel of communication has been the webpage www.heerlen.nl/heitje, provided and maintained by the Municipality of Heerlen. By September 2022 the number of followers on the dedicated social media accounts of Heerlens Heitje had at least doubled since last year: Facebook (906 followers; +482), Instagram (771 followers; +523) and LinkedIn (265 followers; +173). During 2021 the initial outreach of the communication had a regional focus, targeting audiences in the province of Limburg. In 2022 the project caught more national media attention, this resulted in a dedicated article in VNG Magazine and an online Dutch [article in iBestuur about cryptocurrency initiatives in the Netherlands](#). WESH has shown interest from a number of European cities, when the story was shared during talks and (online) conferences. In September 2022 the international association IEEE Smart Cities awarded Heerlens Heitje as the best EU solution of their global Smart Cities Awards for a Smart Cities Award.

Scaling up

Challenge level



Part of the WESH project is setting up the Public Services Lab, in order to support innovation processes of municipalities and scale the co-created digital public services. Therefore the Municipality of Heerlen, the Brightlands Smart Services Campus and the Dutch Association of Municipalities (VNG) have joined forces to help municipalities in the province of Limburg in their digital transformation. In the first half a business plan, acquisition plan, proposition and marketing material were developed for the Public Services Lab. During the second half of 2021 and the first half of 2022, multiple orienting talks were held with numerous municipalities. In combined session, possible new innovation projects were explored, such as a data-driven tourism dashboard, tools for insight in the housing market and sustainability. With the municipal secretaries of the Parkstad region, which Heerlen is part of, an integrated proposal was developed for taking a joint approach in stimulating and developing digital public services. The methods, conditions and cross-sectoral approach of the WESH project were applied in order to see if this could help the public authorities to co-create and adopt new digital services. In 2022 it became increasingly clear that Heerlens Heitje is a context specific solution and other municipalities have varied needs and preferences for a platform to delegate municipal tasks or a local digital currency. A main factor was the missing urgency in the specific subject and thus lack of allocated budget. This made scaling WESH or the Heerlens Heitje solution to other municipalities and different contexts much more difficult than anticipated earlier on.

Citizens of Heerlen performing chores at a playground



Source: Municipality of Heerlen

Digital transition

See on UIA website

