

NEWS

PROJECT

WESH – We.Service.Heerlen

📍 Heerlen, The Netherlands

TOPIC

Digital transition

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WESH: Highlights & Achievements

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For the capitalisation of WESH we are looking back on the project in three key ways; firstly on the highlights and achievements of the project.

The city of Heerlen in the Netherlands, along with a consortium of local ecosystem partners, developed and implemented an integrated innovation project named We.Service.Heerlen (WESH). The project centres around a digital platform and a local digital coin, which are used to create more civic engagement, improve the city’s public space and boost the local economy. As part of the European Commission’s Urban Innovative Actions (UIA) initiative, this digital transition project was a ground-breaking urban experiment. After the EU project-period finished at the end of 2022, the initiative has continued within the city. For the capitalisation of WESH for other European cities, we are now looking back on the project in three key ways; firstly on its highlights & achievements, secondly on the pitfalls & prospects and thirdly on the lessons & learnings. In this article we are focusing on the most remarkable accomplishments of the projects so far. These include arranging a breakthrough tax exemption for the experiment, shifting wages to voluntary work to increase engagement, creating more variety of the listed tasks and receiving international recognition.

How the experiment works

The WESH-project, led by the municipality of Heerlen, features an innovative civic engagement platform. The software platform is a novelty and therefore an achievement in itself. It uses blockchain technology to delegate accessible and relatively easy city maintenance tasks from Heerlen’s municipality to its citizens. For example letting residents paint park benches, cleaning up playground equipment or weeding public gardens. By downloading the smartphone app called Heerlens Heitje, citizens of Heerlen can register and apply for assigned chores throughout the city. They then go to a local community centre, pick up a toolbox and guidance for the specific chore, and are ready to get started. When the task is completed and approved by the city’s public space maintenance department, the citizen are rewarded with local digital coins named ‘Heerlens Heitjes’. These Heitjes, where 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 primarily to increase civic engagement, secondly to improve the quality of the public space and thirdly to stimulate the local economy of retail and hospitality.

Receiving a tax exemption

During the preparation phase of WESH, the team found out that the Dutch tax authority does not favour other digital currencies over the Euro for wage and domestic expenses by residents. This lies in the fact that both of these are obliged to levying taxes. Normally each hour of paid work is taxed, as well as each bought product or service. For WESH this seemed impossible or at least undesirable, since digital credits are delivered for the completed tasks. In order to make WESH work, Heerlen's Mayor and Alderman held multiple discussions with the Dutch tax authority on the taxing of performed tasks as well as on the expenditure of the digital coins in the local economy. After lengthy discussions and lobbying on excluding taxing the performance of the tasks and corresponding expenditure of earnings, the project received an exemption for wage tax as well as VAT. This tax exemption was officially arranged for the experiment, 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. This was a breakthrough moment for the project, since it allowed Heerlen's citizens to participate easily.

Tax authority of the Netherlands



Source: Rijksoverheid

Shifting wage to voluntary work

In order to make the tasks on the platform attractive and potential participants willing to perform them, the wage was initially set at 15 Euros per hour. So painting a park bench would require approximately 4 hours of work, resulting in 60 Heitjes for completing the task. After the first months in action however, the WESH-team heard that there was reluctance of some citizens to register for the Heerlens Heitje app. They feared their allowances would be cut when registering the earnings in their annual tax return. This happened in the midst of a national tax authority scandal, where ethnic profiling led to wrongful accusations and forced repayments. As a result of some of Heerlen's residents' hesitation to register, the WESH team lowered the wage for the tasks from 15 to 5 Euro an hour. This is the maximum wage for voluntary work in the Netherlands, which is excluded from taxing at all. This wage shift gave participants maximum freedom in joining the platform. The municipality however still held on to the maximum cap of 1,500 Heitjes per participant per year, in order to give as many residents as possible the chance to participate.

Variety of initial tasks on the WESH platform

Heerlens Heitje

Type of chores in the public space



Tidying up
a trash bin

15 heitjes



Painting
a park bench

30 heitjes



Refreshing
curb markings

15 heitjes



Neighbourhood
night watch

20 heitjes



Cleaning playground
equipment

12 heitjes

From June 2022 on: additional chores in the social sphere

1 HEITJE = 1 EURO

Source: Municipality of Heerlen

More variety of tasks

During the early implementation of WESH, most of the tasks that were available on Heerlens Heitje app were a variety of painting jobs. These included sanding and painting of park benches and public trash bins, as well as renewing of the yellow no-parking markings on curbs and designated concrete roadside posts (so-called Limbricht poles). This lack of variety in tasks available, led to discussions of the WESH project team with citizens, for example during Focus Group sessions. There they concluded that the WESH platform had limited accessibility for citizens who are unable or not skilled enough to perform paint jobs. Later on, the municipal team of WESH held multiple talks with their counterparts of the Social Department on which socially relevant tasks could be added to the platform. These led to adding new chores, such as easy cleaning, caretaking and surveillance. These tasks were respectively, cleaning up public playground equipment, by removing graffiti, markings and stickers; walking with elderly disabled citizens through the park and thereby accompanying them; as well as keeping an eye on the neighbourhood as a night watch. For the follow-up phase, the municipality of Heerlen is looking to connect other ongoing community projects that engage people and reward them for certain desired activities or behaviour. Examples are Buurthelden (literally 'neighbourhood heroes'), where kids can earn credits for toys by collecting litter in their neighbourhood or Buurtdeals (literally 'neighbourhood deals') where citizens 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.

Receiving international recognition

During the project period WESH encountered much interest from other European cities, from Sweden to Spain and from Ireland to Czechia. A prominent international highlight of WESH was the IEEE Smart Cities conference, held late September 2022 in Cyprus. IEEE is the [Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers](#) which is the largest tech association in the world. IEEE features over 20 global technology communities, encompassed 400,000 members and spans across 160 countries. For the first time the international [IEEE Smart Cities Awards](#) were organised, where WESH was awarded as the best EU-solution in the global contest. Members of the WESH Project Team as well as the UIA Expert were invited to the ceremony and attended the high-level academic conference. WESH's civic participation platform Heerlens Heitje was awarded as a finalist among solutions from India, Morocco, Kazakhstan, Indonesia and the USA. The global jury praised the integrated, participative approach of WESH. They framed it as genuine governance innovation which pioneers in crowdsourcing on a blockchain platform. WESH was regarded as highly promising for future cities' management. Receiving this recognition from a highly regarded international association was certainly a highlight of the project. The communication team of the project partnership used this accolade extensively in their communication on the project's milestones and achievements. Afterwards IEEE Smart Cities invited WESH to [host a dedicated webinar](#) to explain the project live to a global audience.

International recognition for WESH by IEEE Smart Cities



Source: UIA

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