

Citizen audit mobilizes citizen's insights

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In the municipality of Oude IJsselstreek (comprising of 15 villages and nearly 40.000 residents in total, located in the eastern Netherlands, Europe), six expert citizens witnessed and assessed the functioning of the municipality intensively during a half year period. They offered their engaged outside perspective, completely voluntarily, with funded external guidance but without personal remuneration. This 'citizen audit' led to recommendations that have been received by the Municipality.

In the Netherlands, professional auditing forms a well-known practice held between the municipalities of major cities and other large-scale service organizations such as educational institutions, health care centers, and housing associations. Within these sectors, it is seen as an authoritative peer review of one another's organizations to see what is going well and what could be improved. Oude IJsselstreek wanted to apply this method differently in the form of an audit by a small expert group of citizen volunteers that lent its input and insight to its own municipality via a one-time only process. This fits in with the trend towards network governance carried through by Oude IJsselstreek. What could be better and more logical than having residents with a certain strategic aptitude assess this change? Residents, seen less often by the City Council as a result of their specific qualities and daily occupations, but who identify with their municipality nonetheless.

Following an open call based on specified requirements and following recommendations it was not difficult to form a citizen audit committee, which was subsequently appointed by the City Council. This formula is worth gold, in a figurative but also in a literal sense. Ask a consultancy firm for this type of review and one will spend tens of thousands of dollars more than the amount needed to fund an independent supervisor of a committee of volunteers. Independence is another great advantage of the voluntary nature of a citizen audit. The recommendations of a citizen committee are value-free and sincere: committee members hold no interest in proposing things prettier or less pretty than they are.

Wide range

The City Council of Oude IJsselstreek gave the following question to the citizen audit committee: "What are the effects of our organizational development and what are the additional expected results?" After some desk-research, the committee chose three areas to assess the organizational development on: education, entrepreneurship and 'village cores'. These issues are not politicized in Oude IJsselstreek, which is helpful towards a rational assessment. The audit involved a wide range of issues, including political and administrative leadership, organizational skills, result orientation, policy performance / effectiveness, quality assurance and communication with stakeholders. The terminology used here already indicates that the citizen audit comprised of a rigorous assessment. The committee approached and spoke with (sometimes in pairs) some thirty individuals inside and outside the town hall. The findings of the committee are based on direct observations and paraphrased statements and have been included in a written report.

Contradiction and consultation

The essential conclusion of the citizen audit committee's report is that the goal of network governance is widely endorsed, but needs further practical application, with more clearly recognizable features. The committee makes specific recommendations in the fields of knowledge, process and program management, IT, communication, the liaising role of politicians between the municipality and community, and the balance between the local Mayor-Secretary-Clerk triangle and the municipal organization. In general, the citizen audit committee of Oude IJsselstreek notices the importance of counter-force for the initiated organizational change. To succeed, it advocates balance between work styles that focus on envisioning and acting, with clear checkpoints on the road towards change.

Citizen audit step by step

The citizen audit in Oude IJsselstreek was an experiment made possible within the project 'In Action With Citizens' of the Dutch Association of Municipalities. In broad terms: a citizen audit proceeds as follows, in a period of half a year.

Assignment: the city council determines the question expressed by or about the municipality, to whom the citizen audit committee will report and whom acts as the recruitment/selection committee.

Capture approach: from the question, an independent facilitator sharpens the local process and own municipal profile for the citizen audit-committee.

Recruitment and appointment: the selection committee recruits members for the citizen audit committee, and through nominations by the Mayor and Aldermen, the city council appoints the citizen audit committee.

Self-assessment (optional): the municipality can choose to conduct a self-assessment, that the citizen audit committee incorporates in its audit. In this case the city council determines the format for such a self-evaluation based on a proposal submitted by the Mayor and Aldermen.

Actual audit: the citizen audit committee determines its assessment framework, selects and examines documents and consults individuals within and outside the municipal organization. The committee selects and approaches these individuals by itself.

Reporting: the citizen audit committee determines the format for its report, produces a first draft, checks whether the tone of voice used in the draft report is well understood, and subsequently produces a final report with recommendations.

Agenda setting: the citizen audit committee produces its report in such a way that this will impact on the functioning of the municipality, and the committee can evaluate this after some time.

The guideline and documents on citizen auditing in Oude IJsselstreek are available (in Dutch) on the Internet through <http://raad.oude-ijsselstreek.nl/themas/Burgervisitatie> .

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Citizen audit: quality journey for the municipality

The citizen's audit-committee of Oude IJsselstreek consisted of former business directors Jos Bergevoet, Bartjan Kaptein and Ben Terwiel, Emeritus Professor Ko Achterberg and organizational consultants Elise Ruesink and Geert Teunissen. The committee worked completely independently with an external supervisor made available by the municipality: Hein Albeda. Cartoon: Len Munnik.