

Case study

How Puurs-Sint-Amands succeeds in involving residents in policymaking



Involving residents works: lessons from Puurs-Sint-Amands

In recent years, the municipality of Puurs-Sint-Amands has made major strides in involving residents in policymaking. Residents appreciate this approach. In the 2020 Municipal Monitor, 46% said they were satisfied with their involvement in changes to their neighbourhood. By 2023, this had risen to 58%. Puurs-Sint-Amands thus improved by 12 percentage points while also bucking the general trend of declining satisfaction in Flanders.

How did Puurs-Sint-Amands go about it? We spoke to Hilde Van der Poorten and Tim Van Gool about their approach, insights and plans. Hilde is the alderwoman for participation; Tim is responsible for participation and policy for specific population groups.

Participation in policymaking: a journey of discovery

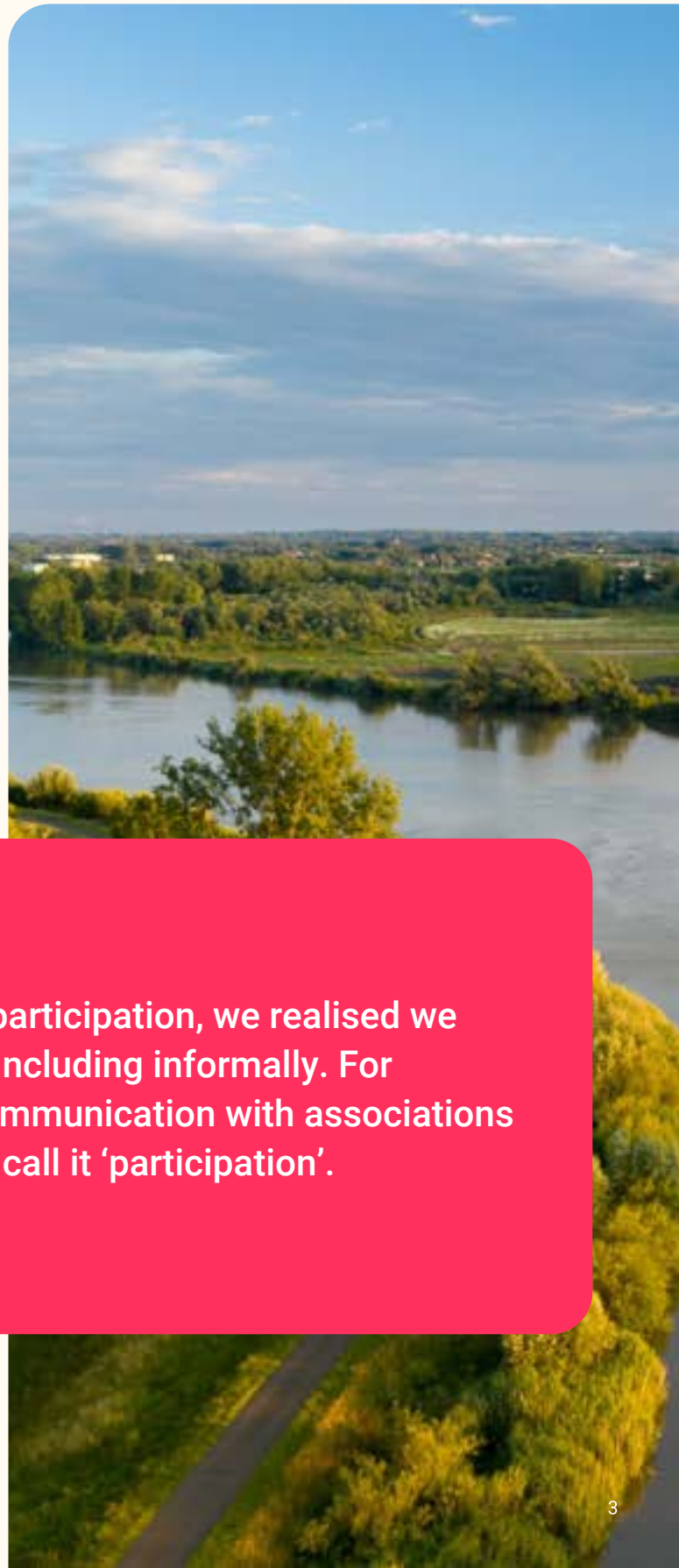
The merger of Puurs and Sint-Amands six years ago created an opportunity to give concrete shape to participation in policymaking. It was also a process of exploration. Although the Local Government Decree made consultation and participation mandatory, it was not initially clear how to put this into practice.

Hilde and Tim explain that they discovered the municipality was already doing a great deal to involve residents, without always calling it participation. By defining it broadly, they realised how much was already happening informally, for example through their extensive and rich contacts with local associations, as Hilde explains:



When we took a broader view of participation, we realised we were already doing many things, including informally. For instance, we already had open communication with associations and residents, but did not always call it 'participation'.

Hilde Van der Poorten



The many existing contacts with local associations are an unexpected strength of the municipality's participation policy. They make it easier to build support quickly and effectively. Tim, who is responsible for policy for specific population groups as well as participation, says:

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Our contacts with associations keep us in constant touch with what is happening in our municipality. This is a tremendous help in building support for policy.

Tim Van Gool



A horizontal structure as the key to success

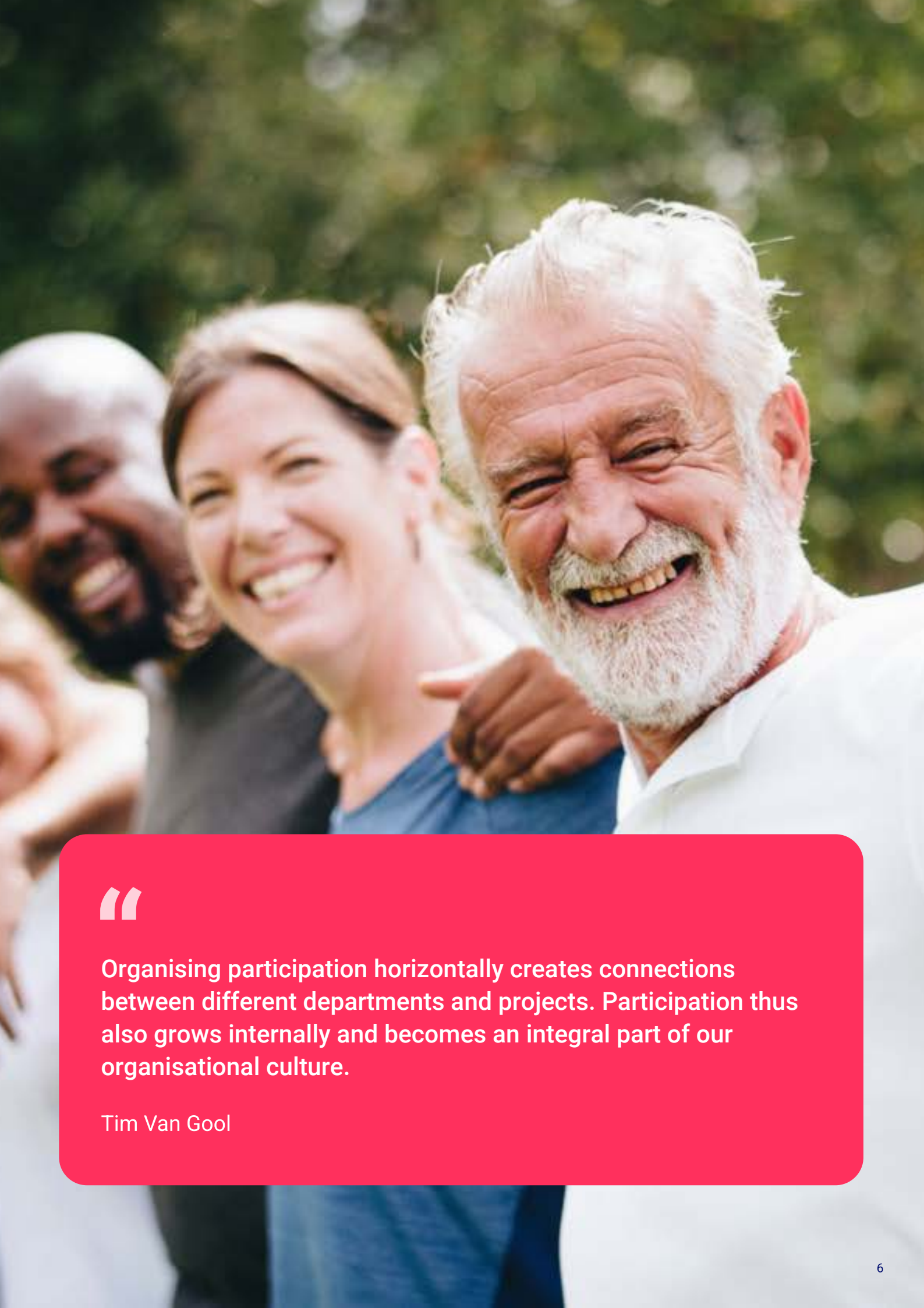
This realisation showed them that participation was already deeply woven into their daily work and provided a solid basis for further professionalisation. They reviewed the organisational chart and deliberately chose a horizontal approach. A central participation officer forms the core participation team together with the alderwoman for participation, the communications manager and the spatial planning manager. This made it easier to embed support for participation throughout the organisation and connect knowledge and insights across departments.

Tim and Hilde agree that these short, informal lines of communication are an advantage of their municipality. With 27,000 residents, Puurs-Sint-Amands is not small by Flemish standards. Yet its scale remains manageable enough to allow participation to develop more organically.

Satisfaction with consultation on changes

Puurs-Sint-Amands scores above the average.





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Organising participation horizontally creates connections between different departments and projects. Participation thus also grows internally and becomes an integral part of our organisational culture.

Tim Van Gool



Honest communication and clear expectation management

When presenting participation projects, Puurs-Sint-Amands chooses clear communication and expectation management. Residents are told in advance what is still open for decision and what has already been decided. Afterwards, they consistently receive feedback on how their input is used.

For Tim, this is not necessarily about politicians giving up power or residents gaining it, but about working together to achieve the best possible policy. Hilde also clearly stresses the role of the municipal leadership.

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At the same time, it is important to make clear that the municipal leadership ultimately has the mandate to decide. After participation and discussion, a decision must be made at some point. You can keep participating and debating, but eventually you have to make choices, otherwise you lose time and stand still. Every administration also wants to have achieved something after six years.

Tim Van Gool

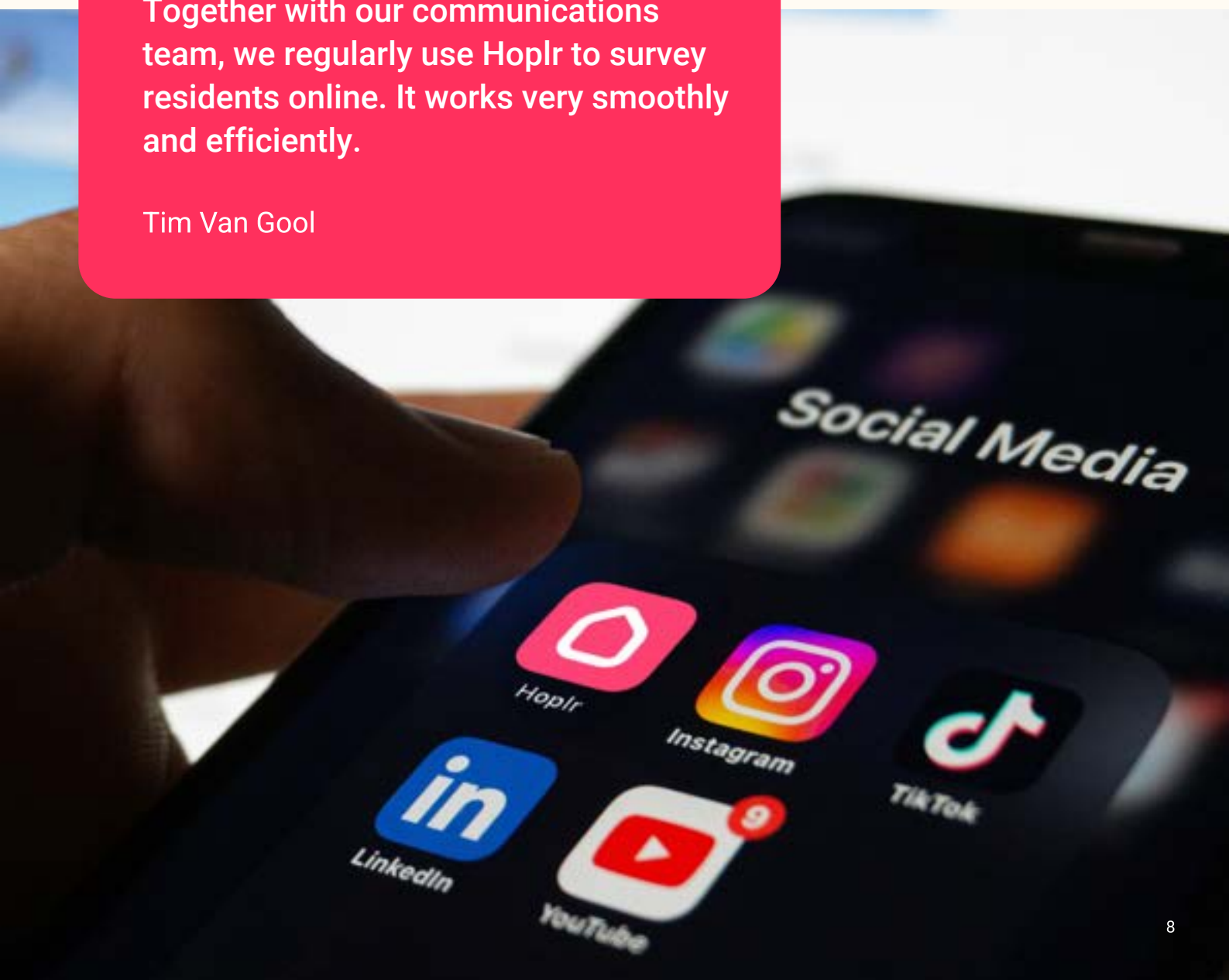
Digital support through Hoplr

In its search for a digital participation platform, Puurs-Sint-Amands found Hoplr. It chose Hoplr because it can be deployed quickly and flexibly for digital participation projects. Tim explains that Hoplr now makes it easy for them to set up surveys themselves.



Together with our communications team, we regularly use Hoplr to survey residents online. It works very smoothly and efficiently.

Tim Van Gool



Its strength lies in combining dedicated participation tools with an extensive network of neighbourhood communities. This involves residents efficiently and accessibly while keeping the municipality in touch with different neighbourhoods and population groups. Tim highlights another benefit: it is easy to reach residents who do not attend in-person participation events but are interested in contributing ideas:

“We use Hoplr to extend participation beyond those who always attend in-person consultations and sometimes take a rather negative view. By using an online platform with a

more positive approach, we can reach more residents who want to contribute ideas but do not attend traditional meetings. The more positive voices you involve, the better you can put the extent of negative feedback into perspective.”

They also observe that Hoplr provides a safe, constructive environment, making participation processes more positive and productive than on traditional social media such as Facebook.



Benefits of Hoplr

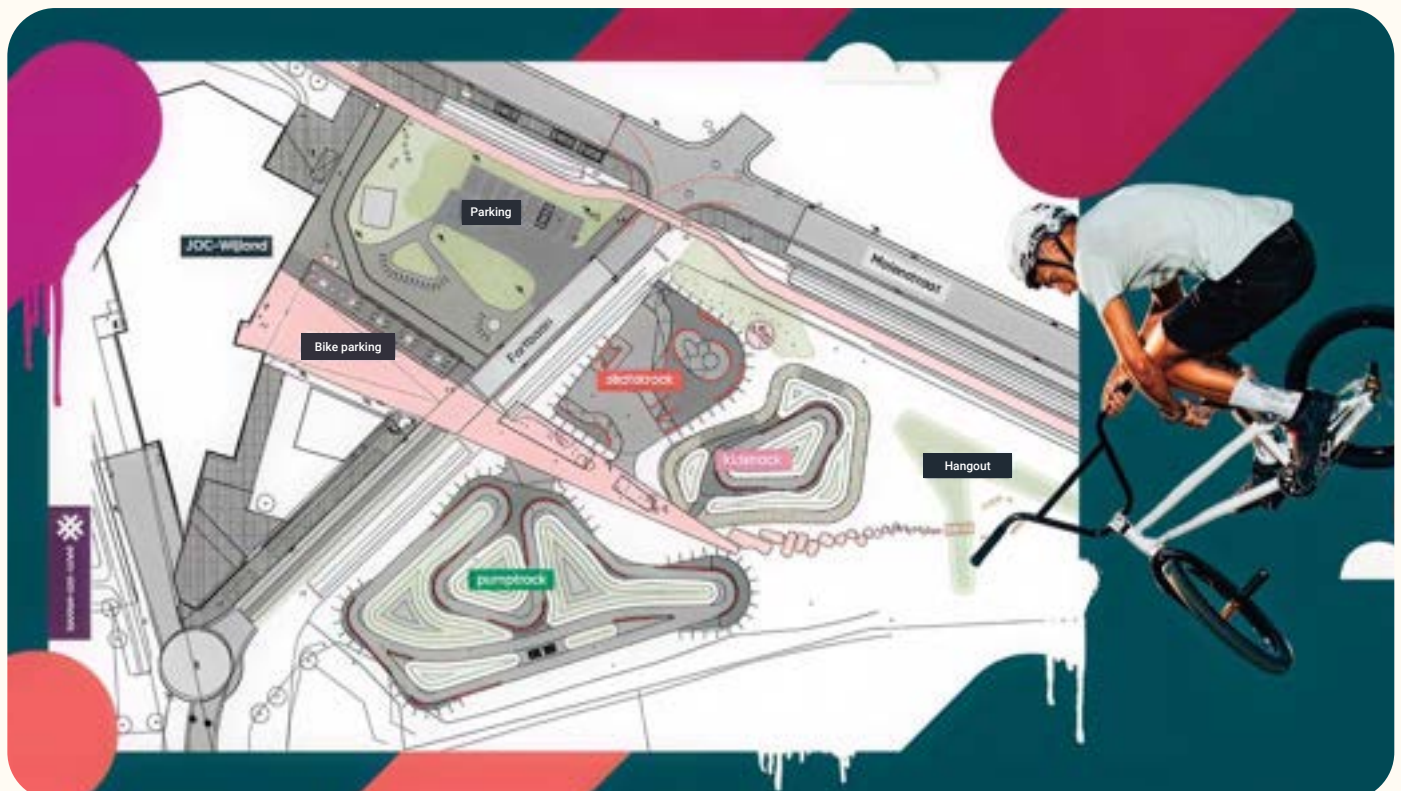
-  A safe, privacy-friendly environment without commercial advertising.
-  Targeted communication with residents, independent of algorithms.
-  Active participation: consultations, local initiatives and decision tools.
-  A locally supported solution where neighbours empower each other and local authorities can better respond to what matters in the community.

A practical example: the skatepark

A successful example is the development of the new skatepark and pump track into a broader youth space in the municipality. Tim explains: “This project started as a simple skatepark. We began with straightforward surveys using Hoplr’s survey tool, which we shared with young people. We wanted to find out what equipment they would like in the skatepark. Several of these young people then joined a working group with designers, contributing their expertise as skaters to develop the plans further.

There was also strong interest in a pump track. So the skatepark idea grew into a real space for young people.”

Hilde adds: “Politically, the initial focus was solely on the skatepark. But when it turns out there is demand for a pump track and space to build one, you take that on board.”



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Participation in the future: more focused and concrete through local communities

Puurs-Sint-Amands' next participation process focuses explicitly on developing and refining its multi-year plan. From a similar process six years ago, they know they must start with sufficiently concrete topics to obtain useful results. Tim and Hilde explain: "We have taken that lesson into our new process. We will now work much more deliberately and specifically, with a clear focus on the communities within our municipality. Much of our multi-year plan is already settled, partly because residents clearly chose a particular policy vision in the elections. Our goal is therefore to make clearer what is still open to participation. Where is there still room to contribute ideas or share in decisions? Communicating that clearly to residents will be our biggest challenge."

Clear communication is central: residents must know exactly which choices have been made and where there is still room to participate.



Puurs-Sint-Amands also sees a bigger future role for Hoplr. It intends to use the digital platform more widely and intensively, not only for specific participation projects, but also with associations and local activities within its communities. As Tim puts it: “During the next council term, we want to extend Hoplr to our associations, local communities and activities. We also want to connect offline contacts, for example through community service centres and home nursing, with Hoplr's digital possibilities. This will strengthen

dialogue and interaction in our neighbourhoods and make staying involved in local policymaking more accessible and appealing to all residents.”

For Puurs-Sint-Amands, Hoplr is therefore both a tool for participation in policymaking and a central communication platform. Residents can find relevant information in one place, such as announcements about roadworks, events and neighbourhood initiatives. Participation is thus not limited to a single project; it becomes a lasting dialogue embedded in residents' everyday lives.



Lessons and tips for other municipalities

Drawing on their experience, Tim and Hilde offer the following valuable recommendations to other local authorities embarking on participation. These lessons from Puurs-Sint-Amands show that every municipality can successfully involve residents in policymaking with a thoughtful approach, clear communication and a good mix of formal and informal methods.

Invest in a clear internal structure, giving someone a mandate across departments to broaden participation.

“It is simply about having people with that horizontal perspective and a mandate from the municipal leadership to work across departments. It is not about power, but about clear agreements and a shared mandate.”

Communicate clearly and transparently about what is open for discussion and what is not, and provide clear feedback.

“Together with the municipal leadership, make clear what is on the table. What can be discussed, and what cannot? You need clear agreements. Politicians sometimes struggle to give up power, but clarity builds trust and prevents misunderstandings.”

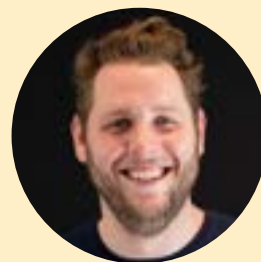
Value and draw on the strength of informal networks such as associations and volunteers.

“Our informal contacts help build support quickly. Our associations and volunteers already give us a strong foundation that we can easily build on.”



Want to discover how Hoplr can support your municipality?

Book a meeting and explore
the possibilities.



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