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Strengthening Community with Appreciative Inquiry: Stories From a Learning Network

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Strengthening Voluntary Engagement With the Community: Supporting a Municipality in Addressing Volunteer Shortages Using Appreciative Inquiry

Local governments in the Netherlands are facing multiple societal challenges such as social inclusion, equal opportunities, and (mental) health care, and rely on volunteer organisations as crucial and indispensable partners at a time when there is a nationwide trend of fewer people committing to volunteering on a long-term basis, particularly amongst younger generations. How can people be inspired to engage as volunteers?

How do we inspire people to engage as volunteers for your initiative? And how do we remain attractive to those who are already volunteering for your organisation, so that you can continue to rely on their commitment in the future?

These questions are currently relevant in many places across the Netherlands. Not only for volunteer organisations themselves, who want to contribute to strengthening their local communities, but also for municipal organisations. Local governments are facing multiple societal challenges such as social inclusion, equal opportunities, and (mental) health care, and rely on volunteer organisations as crucial and indispensable partners in finding new and timely answers. Simply put, the problems are too big for the formal network of professional organisations to tackle, the informal networks and communities are needed as well.

At the same time, there is a nationwide trend of fewer people committing to volunteering on a long-term basis, particularly amongst younger generations. While many are willing to contribute, they tend to prefer project-based or more occasional forms of engagement. Just think about your own sports club or

Pressure on volunteer organisations is increasing while the societal importance of their work continues to grow.

community centre: how difficult has it become to find a new chairperson, or to consistently fill canteen shifts? Overall, pressure on volunteer organisations is increasing while the societal importance of their work continues to grow.

A municipality in North Holland consisting of several smaller village communities wanted to explore how it could support volunteer organisations in recruiting, retaining, and developing volunteers so that they could continue to fulfil their vital role within the local ecosystem. The project leader wondered whether their research into these questions could be designed in a way that would immediately benefit the volunteer organisations themselves. After all, participation in any study requires time and effort. How could their engagement be worthwhile for them?

She also wanted to avoid ending up with a report that would leave the responsibility solely with the municipal organisation. And they knew up front that they wouldn't be able to develop new projects themselves – their intention was primarily to support and strengthen existing initiatives. Therefore, she was looking for an approach that would allow volunteer organisations to learn from one another and develop ideas they could put into practice straight away.

An approach grounded in the principles of Appreciative Inquiry

Together with the project leader, we designed an approach grounded in the principles of Appreciative Inquiry. We believed this relational way of working would suit the context very well: since the aim was to support volunteer organisations in expanding, retaining, and developing their volunteer base, it made sense to engage in inquiry with them.

The alternating rhythm of reflection and action felt like a good fit.

By actively exploring together, participants would gain first-hand insights themselves, not just the project leader in her role as researcher. The alternating rhythm of reflection and action also felt like a good fit. This way of working would enable volunteer organisations to experiment immediately with insights emerging from the inquiry without having to wait for a final report.

We organised two meetings with representatives of local volunteer organisations and municipal civil servants at a local cultural centre. The first gathering, opened by one of the aldermen, focused on exchanging and learning from positive examples: where does attracting and engaging volunteers work well? What would it look like if we did this more frequently? This encompassed the Discover and Dream steps of the 5D cycle.

People were hesitant at first because of the wide array of organisation types, from sport clubs to welfare initiatives to nature groups ... Many had not

What can we do to move one step closer to the envisioned future?

Many organisations genuinely struggle with a lack of volunteers which causes stress and increases the burden.

People were genuinely curious to hear more.

met before. However, the evening turned out to be unexpectedly vibrant and energising. This became even more apparent during the second meeting, which attracted an even larger group of participants. Fortunately, the local stamp collectors' association was willing to postpone their meeting so we could use the main hall. This time, the emphasis was on small steps and experiments: what can we do to move one step closer to the envisioned future? This completed the Design and Deliver stages of the Appreciative Inquiry 5D cycle.

Working principles

What principles underpinned our process design? Below, we highlight three that proved particularly effective.

Looking for where it already works

When addressing volunteer shortages, there is a strong temptation to focus on dilemmas and problems. This is understandable, as many organisations genuinely struggle with a lack of volunteers which causes stress and increases the burden. When an organisation increasingly has to rely on a small group of people to do all the work, it can start to feel more like a job to them – which is not why these people became volunteers in the first place. But they feel the pressure to show up. Some even postpone stepping down due to age because they can't find successors, which makes it hard for them to let go. They know some things will simply stop if they do.

So, it was a big shift in focus when, during the first meeting, we invited them to shine the spotlight on instances and places where recruiting or retaining volunteers does work. It was a bit of a surprising question, but soon different stories emerged. For example, a youth organisation with a vibrant network shared their experience; a cultural venue described how they had developed into a thriving place for activities and encounters over the last ten years; and several volunteer board members explained how they had their organisations running smoothly.

The fact that people didn't know other organisations' stories (because they were active in different fields) made sharing their experiences feel natural. People were genuinely curious to hear more and it was easy for them to ask questions and listen because they really hadn't known much about the organisation. To their own surprise, everyone was ultimately able to name something that had worked in the past. in their experience. Drawing on these stories, participants jointly identified the mechanisms behind success: what made it work here? And why did it generate so much energy?

Bringing these diverse groups together turned out to be a powerful element of the process.

What action or initiative that you want to take would help you attract new volunteers or retain existing ones?

Strength lies in the network

Bringing everyone together in a physical meeting was not easy. Many volunteers worked in a day job and the municipality covers a large geographical area with many dispersed villages. Moreover, not all volunteers immediately saw the value of exchanging experiences with initiatives from very different domains. Yet, bringing these diverse groups together turned out to be a powerful element of the process. Participants questioned one another about positive examples and, through their fresh perspectives, uncovered new insights into each other's stories.

Volunteers bring their own creativity and commitment; by connecting this energy, a strong network emerged. The project leader and alderman were quick to recognise the added value of these meetings. For them it was a shift in thinking about how the municipal organisation could support volunteer organisations: perhaps these people didn't need expert advice, but someone who enabled them to come together, share knowledge, and learn from one another. There is strength in the collective.

Starting from small, concrete questions

At the second meeting, people were invited to work towards a very practical question: what action or initiative that you want to take would help you attract new volunteers or retain existing ones? With whom might you collaborate? And what support would you need – from the municipal organisation, for example?

The facilitators and the local government representatives wanted to encourage the volunteers to keep things small and manageable, while also giving them a sense that they were contributing to something larger. We therefore worked with the metaphor of a fleet made up of many different boats.

To create focus, we identified four themes that had emerged as being important during the preliminary research and the first meeting:

- Creating meaningful places;
- Being visible and attractive to younger generations;
- Making governing roles (like being on a board) attractive (again);
- Contributing to inclusive participation for everyone (including people with language barriers or distance from the labour market).

These themes provided a concrete starting point and enabled those who had not attended the first meeting to join in and contribute ideas for actions. We were curious to see whether the energy from the first meeting would re-emerge. Some time had passed, and the group was bigger now, partly because the volunteers had brought new people with them, and partly because others had heard positive stories about the first meeting.

Buzzing energy that emerged during the sharing of positive stories and the collective dreaming resurfaced during the second gathering.

We were happy to see that much of the buzzing energy that emerged during the sharing of positive stories and the collective dreaming resurfaced during the second gathering. People had that memory in their minds, were looking forward to seeing each other (again), and were ready to step in and bring things forward. Also, the image of the fleet of different boats proved to be inviting. And the framework of four themes helped translate the general energy and goodwill into concrete next steps.

Outcomes

The process generated both individual and collective outcomes. Participants expanded their personal networks, and those who wished to do so developed their own action ideas with support from others. This also shows the collective gain: many small movements together create a larger impact.

In addition, several concrete initiatives emerged through which the municipal organisation will be able to support volunteer organisations in future:

- Redesigning a digital platform for matching supply and demand in volunteer activities (with a stronger focus on activities rather than long-term roles);
- Supporting the ongoing development of meaningful meeting places in different village communities;
- Establishing a learning network for boards of volunteer organisations, together with the local government representatives.

Together with the project leader, we continued to build on the outcomes of the process. We facilitated several learning meetings between volunteer board members and municipal civil servants. In one of the villages, residents established a village council to strengthen their connection with the municipality and, at an administrative level, the municipal executive embedded the movement within its governance structures.

The municipal executive embedded the movement within its governance structures.

In the coming year, the municipal organisation will allocate structural resources to continue the learning network for board members. They are exploring the possibility of appointing a permanent volunteer coordinator.

In a sense, we built a community of volunteers and civil servants within a community of citizens, supported by the generative questions that Appreciative Inquiry has to offer.

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The Power of an Appreciative Perspective

How Appreciative Inquiry Brought Movement to a Hospital's Medical Specialist Training Programmes

The authors work at Erasmus MC (University Medical Center Rotterdam), one of the largest academic hospitals in the Netherlands, where they advise on future-proof training for young doctors (residents) to become medical specialists. They participated in the Appreciative Inquiry Learning Network conducted by Kessels & Smit in 2024–2025.

Berry Nijveld and Frederica Jousma work at Erasmus MC (University Medical Center Rotterdam), one of the largest academic hospitals in the Netherlands, where they advise on future-proof training for young doctors (residents) to become medical specialists. They do this through the OASE academy, which contributes to improving the quality and innovation of the approximately 35 training programmes. They play an important role as connectors in the Central Training Committee (COC), a community of medical specialists who are involved on a daily basis in training the medical specialists of tomorrow. Together, they participated in the Appreciative Inquiry Learning Network conducted by Kessels & Smit in 2024–2025.

Erasmus MC, a leading academic hospital in the Netherlands, invests in the education of its residents through the OASE academy. We design and facilitate about 35 of the training programmes. Working in the context of medical specialists (in training) requires patience and good timing, but it is very rewarding and offers an incredible wealth of opportunities: all those involved are highly ambitious, professional and intelligent.

In recent years, there has been a growing awareness within our OASE academy that the challenges in healthcare, which are reflected in the training programmes, require more than new policies, updated curricula,