

This Is How Social Housing Organization Woonzorg Nederland Is Working on its Sustainability Goals and Ambitions

Woonzorg Nederland is a social housing organization with a unique target group: the elderly. More than 300 enthusiastic colleagues are working on good housing for more than 43,000 households throughout the Netherlands (see box). The key values of the housing corporation are: committed, solution-oriented and responsible. Woonzorg Nederland also invests in sustainability. Strategy & Innovation advisor Lucien Palmboom talks about the sustainability goals and ambitions, and how they are being realized within real estate projects. He also tells about the difficulties of uniting the various ambitions and goals of the organization. On the sunny side, this friction leads to: inventiveness, collaboration and networking beyond the normal pathways.

Woonzorg Nederland is one of a kind in the Netherlands in terms of target group. What does this mean for the organization and real estate portfolio?

That's right, we mainly house older people in the Netherlands. Nationally, we are putting on the agenda what is needed for senior housing and nursing care real estate in perspective of aging. We share our local and regional experience at a national level. Obviously, the elderly require more care on average. This means that we work together with several healthcare parties. The accommodation must have other requirements in order to meet the wishes of our tenants. Think of: spacious elevators, sufficient room for wheelchairs and walkers to manoeuvre smoothly, and communal areas where electric wheelchairs can be stored and charged. We also rent out intramural care buildings to care organizations. In that case, there is often no direct relationship between the clients – who are renting – and our organization. A healthcare organization is then our tenant. At a national level, we are a large organization but due to our spread, we have relatively little real estate locally. And therefore, we often have a different position and status than a regular social housing organization, which operates mainly locally or regionally. The wishes and care needs of our target group, our relationships with many municipalities and care providers, and the spread of real estate require: flexibility, capacity and organizational performance. At the very same time, all those different facets are also what makes this job and organization so attractive.

Woonzorg Nederland houses seniors in about 30,600 independent homes and leases 12,500 nursing care places to care organizations in intramural care buildings. They are active in 179 Dutch municipalities. Woonzorg Nederland has performance agreements with 138 municipalities. Most of the residents are 65+. The average age is just over 75 years (source: 2018 annual report).



What are the main reasons for the organization to work on sustainability?

On the one hand, it is very simple: legislation forces us to do so. It is necessary to reduce our ecologic footprint and become carbon neutral. And it is good that the government is taking up its role in this. The climate is changing and action is necessary. But Woonzorg Nederland also has an intrinsic and an economic motivation to make homes more sustainable. We want to make our real estate future-proof. A well-insulated house offers more comfort in winter and summer. Plus, a sustainable home also means lower heating costs for our tenants. And there is also a personal ambition and drive to contribute. Having said that, many of my colleagues are having this ambition and urge to work on these goals.

This creates an extra dimension. My colleagues and I are working more inventively on projects and with great pleasure in making our real estate more sustainable. Being inventive is necessary, because making our real estate more sustainable is also a financial challenge. We want to achieve the sustainability goals within the existing financial budgets. At the same time, we realize that reuse of materials and raw materials also adds extra value to real estate. So we monitor developments in this area, including how the residual value can be included in the financial picture.

What sustainable measures has Woonzorg Nederland taken so far?

The entire real estate portfolio must be CO₂ neutral by 2050. This is in accordance with the agreements from the Dutch National Energy Agreement and the [Paris Climate Agreement](#). Woonzorg Nederland has also appointed a Sustainability Programme Manager, and we work together with consultancies to make our portfolio sustainable.

Our main goal is, however, to take senior housing to a higher level. The interventions that contribute to this have priority. That is why we recently mapped out which measures and interventions are needed to make our entire real estate portfolio CO₂ neutral by 2050. And in order to have our real estate portfolio completely CO₂ neutral, Woonzorg Nederland has set up three programmes. The first programme is the energy-neutral programme, in which we bring homes to – at least – label B and install solar panels. Naturally, we also look at other interventions and measures. For example, homes are no longer being connected to the natural gas network in renovation and new construction projects, where possible, but to an alternative technique to heat the homes and buildings. In all our homes we install electric hobs if they change tenant(s). This will soon make us natural-gas-free-ready. The second programme is aimed at making our own business operations more sustainable. We then look at making our offices and other facility resources more sustainable. The third programme is the circularity programme. We are collaborating with social housing organization [Eigen Haard](#) from Amsterdam in a pilot project. To share knowledge about circularity internally, we have set up a *Circularity Working Group*. We started this process on the basis of "learning by doing". For example, with the project leaders of the relevant projects, we look which circular measures work best, and how we are going to roll out the further approach. We act this because we are still in the initial phase of circularity. At the same time, we are also looking further ahead and are drawing up a strategy to be 100% circular by 2050.

The collaboration with the Amsterdam based housing organization Eigen Haard consists of research into the optimal package of materials for insulating homes, which we will apply in a pilot project. The entire package contains various circular materials. This means that we are looking at how we can keep the new insulation materials to be added in the cycle during future renovation or demolition, and by ensuring that we can then reuse these materials again. Reusing materials mean that they can last many more extra years or even decades. So, by thinking carefully about it now, we are laying the foundation for future reuse. And we are looking for human healthy and biobased materials as well. We will most likely be conducting our pilot in a residential complex in Amsterdam. If the results are positive, the approach will be continued.



A lot of information about circularity can be found on the internet. Or join a knowledge platform, such as: the European Federation for Living (EFL). EFL is a partner in the CHARM project, which is funded by Interreg NWE. CHARM co-finances a number of circular renovation and new construction projects in England, France, Belgium and the Netherlands. The knowledge about optimizing and innovative (re)use of materials and natural resources is collected and bundled by TU Delft and made available free of charge to social housing organizations in Europe. The project will run until the end of 2022.

How did Woonzorg Nederland start on circularity?

The municipality of Amsterdam is the initiator of [The Circular City](#). This initiative consists of supporting and stimulating circular projects of social housing organizations. In addition to housing corporations, other companies and governments are connected, making it a large network in the field of sustainability and circularity. We are affiliated with The Circular City to expand our own network and gather knowledge. There, we came into contact with Eigen Haard and decided to work together on our circularity ambitions.

We want to apply the extra knowledge, that we gain through this network and this collaboration, in the renovation of our real estate projects. And we don't want to reinvent the wheel. In addition, Woonzorg Nederland has an ambition to grow on national scale, so we will also build new homes. That is why we like to work closely with municipalities and other partners to achieve benefits. As said, our primary tasks always come first, so we invest very responsibly and only when it benefits our real estate and our services to our tenants.

Woonzorg Nederland has a special target group with a current average age of 75 years. This target group has different requirements than the target groups of a regular social housing organization. Does this influence the prioritization within the organization with regard to sustainability?

No it doesn't, because as an organization you want to rent out good and comfortable homes. Now and in the future. But no doubt about it: we are always looking for interventions and measures that fully benefit our residents. So, if we can contribute to 'quality of life' of our tenants through biobased materials, or if we can improve the condition of our healthcare real estate by using modular and circular construction, then those interventions will have priority. In this stage, we still have to find out the best strategy. It is therefore important to gain experience.

It is also important to us to be more efficient with natural resources and the reuse of materials. We will all benefit from this in the long term. But as an organization, we have to deal with financial opportunities and restraints. As a result, we know that we cannot fulfil all of our ambitions and goals at the same time. That is the reality of today. But that does not alter the fact that in thirty years, by 2050, our real estate portfolio must be completely carbon neutral. And we realize that we cannot do this alone. We achieve this together with municipalities, consultancies, energy companies, contractors and of course our tenants!

The Netherlands are aging. In 2035 already, 1 in 4 inhabitants in the Netherlands will be older than 65 years. This means that the target group of seniors is growing. Woonzorg Nederland is therefore looking for new forms of housing that meet the diverse housing wishes and needs of seniors. They do this in collaboration with knowledge institutes. Last year, a multi-year study was started into the added value of communal living in an aging society. This study is executed in cooperation with Eindhoven University of Technology and Arnhem Nijmegen University of Applied Sciences.

