

Beyond municipal social services: the effectiveness of BuurtWerkKamers in promoting social cohesion

A comparative analysis of non-municipal social services in Utrecht

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Utrecht, 13 November 2024

Acknowledgement

November 2024 shows the end of a long journey, and I am writing this text as the last thing for my research as a way of saying thank you. The past few months have been very intense and I have learnt an awful lot. It was a tough time, but I am grateful for the final outcome and the people I got to know in the process. Therefore, I would also like to reflect on the people who have helped me over the past few months.

First, I am very grateful to my supervisor Dr Abigail Friendly, her help and understanding of my situation helped me a lot. Also, her knowledge and professionalism were always there for me and taught me a lot in shaping this research. Besides the help from the University, I also had the opportunity to be part of Jonge Honden. This consultancy firm acted as a research internship site. Here, I would particularly like to thank Isaac Puijk and Pepijn Hubers for their guidance within my research. Jonge Honden offered me a place where I could work and already get a glimpse of the work field.

I would also like to thank the people in and behind the BuurtWerkKamers who gave me the opportunity for my empirical research. This organisation has shown me what great things can exist in a neighbourhood, helping people who need it is a necessity taken seriously here.

I would also like to thank my family and friends who have always come to my aid outside the research. Thank you.

Sam de Wilde de Ligny, 13 nov. 24

Abstract

This research investigates the role of community centres and BWKs (BuurtWerkKamer) in fostering social cohesion within Utrecht's neighborhoods. By examining the theoretical framework, interview data, and the specific context of Utrecht, the study provides valuable insights into the potential of non-municipal social services in promoting community engagement and well-being.

The theoretical framework presented in the study explores the key concepts of inclusivity, personalized support, and community building as essential factors in fostering social cohesion. These concepts are supported by the empirical findings from interviews with residents, coordinators, and volunteers involved in BWKs.

The study delves into the context of Utrecht, examining the city's social landscape, challenges, and opportunities. It highlights the diversity of Utrecht's population and the need for targeted interventions to address specific needs within different neighborhoods. The empirical findings demonstrate the effectiveness of BWKs in creating inclusive and welcoming environments, providing personalized support to residents, and fostering social connections. BWKs have been successful in reaching marginalized populations, addressing specific needs, and empowering residents to become active participants in their communities.

By comparing BWKs to traditional municipal social services, the research highlights the unique advantages of non-municipal models, such as greater flexibility, responsiveness, and community ownership. However, it is important to acknowledge that BWKs are not without their challenges, including limitations in funding, staffing, and outreach.

The study offers recommendations for enhancing the effectiveness of BWKs and promoting social cohesion within Utrecht's neighborhoods. These recommendations include increasing funding and support for BWKs, promoting collaboration with other organizations, raising awareness of their services, and evaluating and adapting programs to meet evolving needs.

Overall, this research provides compelling evidence for the effectiveness of BWKs in fostering social cohesion and creating more vibrant and inclusive communities. By understanding the unique advantages and challenges of these non-municipal social services, policymakers and urban planners can inform the development of effective community-based initiatives to address the complex challenges facing contemporary cities.

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Glossary

This research uses many Dutch terms that do not have a direct English translation. This glossary will translate the Dutch terms as best as possible and explain the term used in this research. It may occur that a Dutch term is abbreviated and used instead of the literal translation.

<i>Dutch term:</i>	<i>Literal translation:</i>	<i>English translation:</i>	<i>Term used:</i>
BuurtWerkKamer	Neighbourhood work room	Community room	BWK
Buurthuis	Neighbourhood house	Community centre	Community centre

Introduction

The fabric of a city is woven from the strength of its communities. Vibrant social cohesion within neighbourhoods fosters a sense of belonging, improves resident well-being, and contributes to a thriving city. Existing research, highlights the positive correlation between social cohesion and various aspects of urban life, including health, safety, and economic prosperity (Hart, 2002; Vlaanderen, 2009; Bos & Horjus, 2018; CBS, 2010). This research empirically delves deeper into this correlation by specifically examining the role of community centres in the city of Utrecht. These facilities are strategically placed in areas identified as having low social cohesion. The research investigates how Utrecht leverages a specific type of community centre, the BuurtWerkKamers (BWK) to address social cohesion deficits and foster stronger connections within communities. While both BWKs and municipal community centres play important roles in fostering social cohesion, they differ in terms of their governance, funding, and level of flexibility. BWKs, as non-municipal organizations, often have a more grassroots approach and can be more responsive to the specific needs of their local communities.

While the theoretical benefits of social cohesion are well documented, such as health, safety, and economic prosperity (Hart, 2002), the practical implementation of strategies to achieve it requires further exploration. Social cohesion is a multifaceted phenomenon influenced by a wide range of factors, including cultural, economic, and historical contexts (Kearns & Forrest, 2000; Friedkin, 2004). Furthermore, accurately measuring social cohesion can be difficult, as it involves intangible concepts such as trust, belonging, and shared values (Kearns & Forrest, 2000). The absence of standardized metrics can hinder the ability to track progress and evaluate the effectiveness of interventions aimed at fostering social cohesion. This research builds upon existing knowledge by examining a specific urban intervention – neighbourhood rooms – within the real-world context of Utrecht's unique governance structure. Utrecht's eight districts each have a degree of autonomy, creating a complex interplay between social services, project managers, and residents. By analysing Utrecht's approach, this study seeks to contribute to the broader theoretical understanding of how urban planning and social initiatives can be effectively combined to cultivate stronger social bonds within neighbourhoods, even in multifaceted governance structures.

Practical Relevance and Problem Definition

This research delves into the critical role of community centre and BWKs in fostering social cohesion within the context of Utrecht, the Netherlands. BWKs are unique, non-municipal community organizations that offer a range of services and activities aimed at strengthening social bonds and improving quality of life. By analysing these unique social facilities, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the factors that influence social cohesion in urban settings. While theoretical frameworks have extensively explored the concept of social cohesion, like de Hart (2002), Friedkin

(2004) and, Putman (2007), empirical studies that examine the effectiveness of specific interventions, such as BWKs, are still relatively limited. This research aims to bridge this gap by providing empirical evidence on the role of BWKs in promoting social cohesion and community well-being.

Utrecht's approach to fostering social cohesion through community centre and BWKs presents a unique model that distinguishes itself from traditional municipal social services. By focusing on non-municipal social welfare initiatives, the research offers a fresh perspective on how to address the challenges of social isolation and community building in urban environments. This research is particularly relevant in the context of rapid urbanization and the increasing complexity of social challenges. As cities grow and diversify, there is a pressing need for innovative approaches to foster social cohesion and create inclusive communities. Utrecht's experience with community centre and BWKs provides valuable insights into how these initiatives can be effectively implemented and tailored to specific local contexts.

BWKs are non-municipal social facilities, which means they are not directly operated or funded by the government. This distinguishes them from traditional community centres, which are typically established and managed by municipal authorities. Their non-municipal status allows them to be more responsive to local needs and foster a stronger sense of community ownership (BuurtWerkKamer Coöperatie, 2024). By comparing the BWK's approach to traditional municipal social services, the research highlights the potential advantages and limitations of non-municipal models. Besides this comparative analysis, a deeper understanding of how the BWK operate offers valuable lessons for policymakers and urban planners seeking to implement similar initiatives in their own communities. Moreover, the research contributes to a deeper understanding of the factors that influence the effectiveness of community-based interventions. By examining the experiences of residents, staff, and volunteers, the study provides insights into the role of leadership, community engagement, and resource allocation in fostering social cohesion. These findings can inform the development of more effective and sustainable community-based initiatives in the future.

Problem Statement and Research Objectives

The municipality of Utrecht, like many urban centres, faces significant challenges in fostering social cohesion among its diverse population (Visser, 2010). Despite efforts to promote community engagement and inclusivity, there are persistent disparities in social well-being, trust, and hopefulness, particularly among vulnerable groups. As highlighted in Chapter 3, social cohesion scores vary significantly across different neighborhoods, indicating a need for targeted interventions to address specific needs. The research presented in this thesis aims to address the following specific objective:

To investigate the role of non-municipal social services, such as BWKs, in fostering social cohesion within Utrecht's neighborhoods, and to assess their effectiveness in addressing the challenges faced by residents.

By focusing on non-municipal social services, this research seeks to contribute to a broader understanding of the potential of community-based initiatives in promoting social cohesion. While traditional municipal social services play an important role, non-municipal organizations often possess unique advantages in terms of flexibility, responsiveness, and community ownership. This research is particularly relevant in the context of Utrecht's diverse and rapidly evolving urban landscape. By examining the experiences of residents, staff, and volunteers involved in BWKs, we can gain valuable insights into the factors that contribute to the success of these initiatives and identify areas for improvement. Ultimately, this research aims to inform policymakers and urban planners about the potential of non-municipal social services in promoting social cohesion and creating more vibrant and inclusive communities.

Research Questions

To realise the objective described above, certain knowledge needs to be generated. Therefore, a central research question has been formulated which is the focus of this study:

How do non-municipal social services, such as BWKs, contribute to fostering social cohesion within Utrecht's neighborhoods, and what lessons can be learned from these independent community centres?

This central research question seeks to understand the role of BWKs in promoting social cohesion and to compare their effectiveness to traditional municipal social services. By examining the similarities and differences between these two approaches, the research aims to identify the unique advantages and limitations of non-municipal social services and their potential contribution to creating more vibrant and inclusive communities. For a deeper substantiation of the research question, several sub-questions have also been answered:

- How do BWKs differ from traditional municipal community centres in terms of their governance, funding, and service delivery models?
- What are the primary factors that contribute to the effectiveness of BWKs in fostering social cohesion?
- How do residents perceive the impact of BWKs on their sense of belonging, well-being, and social connections?
- What are the challenges and opportunities faced by BWKs in promoting social cohesion, and how can these be addressed through policy and practice?

The central research question and sub-questions are interconnected and aim to provide a comprehensive understanding of the role of BWKs in fostering social cohesion. By addressing these research questions, the study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the role of non-municipal social services in fostering social cohesion and to inform the development of more effective community-based interventions.

Readers guid

This thesis research is divided into 5 chapters followed by a conclusion and discussion. In the first chapter, there is a literature review, here it describes the benefits of strong social cohesion and shows that there is indeed a need to promote social cohesion. This chapter also describes the impact of different urban planning interventions on social cohesion to show the influence of the urban planner is very important. Chapter 2, the theory framework, describes how the literature thinks about how social cohesion is constructed and how it can indeed be measured. This is done using several dimensions. This is followed by Chapter 3, the context, which highlights the social cohesion of Utrecht and which social facilities are used in the city of Utrecht. It also highlights the concept of BWKs and compares it to municipal social services. Chapter 4 shows the method how the empirical research was conducted. Research sites, the interviewee and operationalisation is explained here. Chapter 5 presents the results of the empirical research. Here it becomes clear what the users and people behind the BWK think of the system used, it also looks at what municipal workers think social cohesion in Utrecht and the use of non-municipal services.

Conclusion and Discussion summarizes the key findings of the research and discusses the implications for policymakers, urban planners, and community leaders. This chapter highlights the strengths and limitations of community centre and BWKs, identifies areas for improvement, and offers recommendations for future research and practice. The appendix includes supplementary materials, such as field research supplies and interview transcripts. These materials provide additional context and support for the findings presented in the main body of the research.

Chapter 1 – Literature overview

1.1 The benefits of strong social cohesion

Strong social cohesion can significantly improve individual well-being, community safety, economic prosperity, civic engagement, and environmental sustainability. Studies have shown that cohesive neighborhoods often have lower crime rates, better health outcomes, and stronger economic resilience. Additionally, residents in cohesive communities are more likely to participate in civic activities and adopt sustainable practices. While the specific benefits may vary, fostering social cohesion is a worthwhile endeavour that can create a more positive, resilient, and sustainable environment for all.

Health

Studies support a positive link between social cohesion and overall health. Research by Huygen and de Meere (2008) suggests that social engagement in neighborhoods, like having accessible meeting places, can positively impact the health of older adults. They found that individuals over 65 who are more socially engaged tend to require fewer doctor visits and less assistance with housekeeping tasks. Similarly, Wilkinson (2003) argues that strong social relationships, which social cohesion fosters, can help protect overall health, particularly by combating loneliness. As De Vos (2018) defines it, loneliness is " [...] *the absence of relationships in which support was exchanged, which give the feeling that there are others you can count on, but also the feeling that you are someone others can count on*". De Vos further suggests that strong ties within local communities can play a significant role in reducing loneliness. Further evidence comes from research by Cacioppo et al. (2011) conducted in the United States. Their findings indicate that reduced loneliness is associated with a range of health benefits, including lower risks of cardiovascular problems, Alzheimer's disease, dementia, depression, and hypertension. Additionally, reduced loneliness may lead to improved sleep quality and a stronger immune system

Perceiving one's environment as both safe and positive can foster trust in others, reducing social stress and anxiety (Vos, 2018). This, in turn, has been linked to a longer lifespan. Similarly, Vlaanderen (2009) suggests that a desirable living environment contributes to resident happiness. People feel comfortable living amongst those who share similar lifestyles, norms, and values. Vlaanderen argues that this happiness is likely fuelled by experiencing social cohesion. He defines a "living domain" as a residential area where residents share similarities, have a recognizable identity, and sometimes even shared facilities and collective management. This sense of community fosters happiness and social cohesion (Vlaanderen, 2009, p. 14). Furthermore, research shows a positive correlation between happiness and health. When people feel good or happy, they tend to live longer and experience more healthy years (Jansen, Schuit, & van der Lucht, 2002).

Liveability

de Hart (2002) proposes three key aspects contributing to liveability: physical quality, social cohesion, and safety. Physical quality refers to the living environment itself, including the quality and quantity of facilities, and the housing stock available. Social cohesion encompasses neighborhood involvement, integration, informal care, and interaction among residents. Safety encompasses concerns like crime, perceived insecurity, and traffic nuisance.

De Hart emphasizes the crucial role of social cohesion in enhancing liveability. He argues that strong social connections within a neighborhood contribute significantly to a positive living experience (Hart, 2002). Supporting this notion, Huygen and de Meere (2008) found that residents report higher satisfaction with their environment when they experience social cohesion. They further suggest that social cohesion fosters resident participation in collaborative policy initiatives and contributes to self-reliance within communities through informal social control (Huygen & de Meere, 2008).

Protection against deprivation

Studies suggest that fostering a sense of attachment to their neighborhood in young people can reduce the risk of behavioural problems (Huygen & de Meere, 2008). Additionally, social cohesion can help address issues of deprivation among young people related to education, employment, and access to housing (Huygen & de Meere, 2008). Notably, the benefits of social cohesion extend beyond young people. Research suggests that men, in particular, can experience improved employment outcomes when they have a strong network of friends, acquaintances, and colleagues within their local community (Huygen & de Meere, 2008).

Municipal savings and increased welfare

Trust within communities fuels economic success. Sharing ideas, collaborating, and supporting each other thrives where trust exists, leading to a more productive and growing economy (Healy & Cote, 2001). Research suggests potential municipal saving while implementing interventions to promote social cohesion. The study of Bos and Horjus (2018) give examples of potential savings in four different areas:

1. Reduced treatment costs
2. Lower absenteeism costs
3. Improved employee performance
4. Decreased employee turnover

The research by Maas et al. (2009) identified 24 diseases with a lower prevalence in areas with more green space and more social connections. Based on these findings, the research estimated a potential reduction of 169 patients per 1,000 inhabitants, with a strong decrease in depression cases.

Data from the CBS¹ (2010) shows a significant negative correlation between social cohesion and social spending across 115 municipalities. In this study it means higher social cohesion is linked to lower costs. CBS further states a comparison of the six most and least socially cohesive municipalities that revealed a stark difference in social spending per person. The least cohesive municipalities spent an average of €1840 per person, while the most cohesive spent only €763 - a 41% reduction (CBS, 2010). It's important to note that this might not be a cause-and-effect relationship. Based on the national data, a 0.1 point increase in social cohesion could translate to cost savings of €153 per inhabitant per year (CBS, 2010; Bos & Horjus, 2018). Investing in social cohesion and green spaces has the potential to generate significant cost savings for municipalities and residents (Bos & Horjus, 2018). While the exact figures might vary, even a fraction of the estimated savings could be substantial.

Social exclusion, peer pressure and strong group boundaries

While social cohesion often brings positive benefits, potential drawbacks also exist. Several scholars highlight the importance of balance. De Kam and Needham (2003) argues that while strong cohesion within smaller groups can be beneficial, it becomes problematic when it leads to the exclusion of others in the neighborhood. Similarly, de Hart (2002) suggests that "denser networks," while fostering internal social cohesion, can lead to "closedness" by making residents less open to interacting with people outside their circles. Furthermore, strong group solidarity can have downsides. De Hart (2002) argues that it can lead to intense peer pressure and social control, restricting individual freedom and choice. This effect can be observed in extreme cases like cults or criminal organizations, where high internal cohesion fosters distrust and isolation from outsiders.

Scholars distinguish between "bonding" and "bridging" social capital: bonds represent connections within a group, while bridges connect different groups (Kam & Needham, 2003; Wetenschappelijke Raad voor het Regeringsbeleid, 2018). While fostering "bonding" social capital can strengthen a group, it can come at the expense of "bridging" social capital, which can be crucial for broader social development (Kesselring, 2013). Additionally, dense networks can create situations where residents feel obligated to tolerate nuisance or even crime committed by others within their group (Stokkom & Toenders, 2010).

It's important to note that these negative aspects are typically associated with extreme cases of strong social cohesion, and their prevalence in real-world scenarios may be limited. Nonetheless, these potential drawbacks emphasize the importance of aiming for a balanced approach, fostering cohesion while maintaining openness and inclusivity.

¹ Dutch Central Office of State Statistics (*Centraal Bureau van de Statistiek*)

1.2 Concept definition

Social cohesion, a concept first explored by Durkheim in his 1893 work "The Division of Labor and Society" emphasizes the importance of social solidarity in a well-functioning society. Durkheim argued that individuals draw strength from a sense of shared community (Brock, Kwakernaak, de Meere, & Boutellier, 2009; Durkheim, 1893). Building on this idea, later scholars, such as de Hart and Huygen and de Meere have moved beyond viewing society as simply a collection of individuals, recognizing that broader societal factors play a crucial role in individual and collective well-being.

However, the situation was further complicated by the perception that extreme redistributive measures, often proposed as solutions, were undesirable by a significant portion of the population (Brock, Kwakernaak, de Meere, & Boutellier, 2009). This multifaceted situation, where traditional solutions seemed inadequate and alternative approaches were met with resistance, created a fertile ground for the concept of social cohesion to gain traction. As the concept permeated political, sociological, and urban research, scholars from these various perspectives attempted to define and capture its essence. This pursuit yielded a diverse range of interpretations, reflecting the multifaceted nature of social cohesion itself. The concept of social cohesion has been explored by various scholars and policymakers, resulting in a range of definitions and perspectives. The following table presents a selection of these definitions, highlighting the breadth and complexity of this crucial concept:

Table 1, A selection of definitions of the concept of social cohesion

Definitions of social cohesion	
Durkheim (1893)	The glue that holds society together
Maloutas & Pantelidou Malouta (2004)	The degree of social control, social networks, trust in other residents and a certain willingness to search together for solutions to collective problems
Huygen & de Meere (2008)	The internal bonding power of a social system
Sociaal cultureel planbureau² (2023)	the extent to which (groups of) people feel connected to each other and to all kinds of institutions, and to the behaviour that gives expression to this
WRR³ (2018)	What holds a community together and the ability of citizens to live and work together.

² The Dutch socio-cultural planning office (*Sociaal cultureel planbureau*)

³ The Dutch Scientific Council for Government Policy (*Wetenschappelijke Raad voor het Regeringsbeleid*)

Defining and measuring social cohesion is challenging for scientists due to its multifaceted nature. Despite being a complex concept with various layers, its measurement often focuses on a single factor, neglecting the broader picture. Botterman, Hooghe, and Reeskens (2011) emphasize the need to consider the various dimensions of social cohesion, which are further interconnected, adding another layer of complexity. This interconnection is evident in Dekker's (2007) research, which demonstrates how social connections influence civic engagement. The study suggests that strong social ties and a shared sense of community norms encourage citizens to participate in local democracy and volunteer organizations. Therefore, instead of viewing social cohesion as a single dimension, it's crucial to recognize it as a domain of interconnected elements occupying distinct theoretical positions (2004). These interlinked dimensions, metaphorically described as "sticking together" (Novy, Swiatek, & Mouleart, 2012; Chan, To, & Chan, 2006), form a unified and meaningful whole.

Despite its global reach, the concept of social cohesion was not merely an abstract notion in the Netherlands. Its significance was formally recognized in Dutch legislation starting from 1998, appearing in documents like coalition agreements, speeches from the throne, and numerous national, municipal, and provincial reports (Verplanke, Engbersen, Duyvendak, Tonkers, & van Vliet, 2002). However, Dutch sociologist Schuyt (1997) aptly described social cohesion as "*one of the most abstract and difficult concepts in sociology*" highlighting the inherent complexities involved. Reflecting this complexity, this research will adopt a specific definition. Huygen and de Meere (2008) defined social cohesion as "*the internal bonding power of a social system.*" This definition emphasizes the connectedness between residents and their social environment, with neighborhoods serving as the primary space for interaction. Social cohesion, in this context, manifests through characteristics like group identification, feelings of belonging, frequent and meaningful interactions, high levels of trust, shared values, and active participation in community life.

The concept of social cohesion, as explored in Section 1.1, is a complex and multifaceted one. While it is often defined as the degree to which individuals in a community feel connected, supportive, and engaged with one another, its precise meaning can vary depending on the context and perspective. At the neighborhood level, social cohesion can be understood as the collective sense of belonging, trust, and shared values among residents. It encompasses the ability of individuals to interact positively with one another, cooperate on common goals, and contribute to the overall well-being of the community. Social cohesion also ken many different conditions to come about. These are reinforced by the different dimensions that underlie social cohesion and make the concept a more testable phenomenon.

1.2.1 The requirements for social cohesion

Social cohesion and social interactions can manifest at various levels, as elucidated by Kesselring's (2013, p. 17) research-derived contact ladder. Kesselring's (2013) contact ladder provides a valuable framework for understanding the progression of social cohesion within communities. This hierarchical model outlines a series of stages, ranging from minimal interaction to organized community involvement, that individuals must traverse to develop strong social bonds. Progression through this ladder often requires fulfilling prerequisites at lower rungs before advancing to higher levels. Beginning at the base of the social cohesion ladder, the absence of social cohesion is marked by minimal interaction among residents. Moving up to the first level, public familiarity emerges, where individuals recognize unfamiliar faces in the neighborhood, such as acknowledging a daily passerby walking their dog. This recognition fosters a degree of trust within the community. Advancing to the second step involves chance encounters, such as children meeting on a playground. At the third level, meaningful conversations occur between neighbours, such as discussing current events. Moving further up the ladder, individuals who engage regularly form informal networks, sharing coffee or gathering with fellow residents from the same street. Finally, the apex of the ladder entails organized community involvement, exemplified by participation in neighborhood associations, sports clubs, or faith communities, showcasing deeper communal bonds and collective action.

Furthermore, several studies emphasize the role of shared characteristics in fostering connection. Similarities in life stage, interests, education, and values are identified as factors that increase the likelihood of social contact (Hart, 2002; Vlaanderen, 2009; Kam & Needham, 2003). Flap and Völker (2004) further suggest that strengthening social cohesion can be achieved by expanding residents' personal networks and integrating them into social circles within the neighborhood.

1.3 The impact of urban interventions

This section explores the ways in which urban planning interventions can positively influence social cohesion within neighborhoods. By examining specific measures that address both social demographics and the physical layout of a neighborhood, we aim to identify strategies that can foster stronger connections and a sense of community among residents. Understanding the impact of urban interventions is crucial for the success of BWKs in promoting social cohesion at the neighborhood level. By identifying strategies that can create more conducive environments for social interaction and community engagement, BWKs can work in conjunction with urban planners to maximize their impact. Ultimately, the goal of this section is to provide insights into how urban planning interventions can complement the efforts of BWKs in fostering social cohesion. By working together, BWKs and urban planners can create more vibrant, inclusive, and resilient neighborhoods.

1.3.1 Socio-democratic environment

Social interaction, encompassing various forms of contact among residents, forms the foundation for social relationships and networks within a neighborhood (Peters, Elands, & Buijs, 2010; Potapchuk, Crocker, & Schechter Jr., 1997). Research suggests that the duration of residency plays a significant role in fostering connections among residents, with Völker and Verhoeff (1999) highlighting its importance. However, several studies paint a less optimistic picture regarding interactions between new and existing residents (Blokland, 2009; Kleinhans & Kruythoff, 2002; Karsten, 2003). These studies suggest limited interaction and a tendency for new residents to connect primarily with others who share similar interests within the neighborhood.

1.3.2 The urban environment

De Kam and Needham (2003) explore the role of the built environment in promoting social cohesion. They examine how various elements, including green spaces, playgrounds, neighborhood facilities, neighborhood unit design, and housing characteristics, can influence social interaction and community building.

Urban green spaces

Research by Tillie et al. (2013) and Hartig et al. (2014) shows that residents in green areas report feeling healthier and experiencing faster recovery from illness. Additionally, green spaces encourage physical activity (Powell et al., 2010), leading to improved physical and mental well-being. Cleaner air, associated with green spaces, further contributes to overall health benefits. Green spaces encourage outdoor activity, fostering social interaction and reducing stress (Tillie et al., 2013; Kuo et al., 1998). Research by van den Berg et al. (2010) even suggests a link between access to green spaces and decreased loneliness, particularly among older adults. Some studies, like those by Kuo et al. (2001) and Branas (2011), suggest a potential association between green spaces and reduced crime rates. Residents in areas with more greenery may exhibit less aggressive behaviour and experience lower crime rates. However, further research is needed to fully understand this complex relationship. Engaging in activities like gardening within green spaces can foster connections and strengthen social bonds among residents (Tillie et al., 2013; Sanders, 2010). As Kazmierczak (2013) emphasizes, well-maintained green spaces are crucial for creating inviting environments that facilitate these interactions.

Studies highlight the crucial role of green spaces in fostering social bonds and reducing loneliness within communities. Research by Kuo et al. (1998) suggests that grass and trees encourage the use of communal spaces, which in turn, facilitates informal interactions between residents. This notion is further supported by van den Berg et al. (2010), who found that older adults living near natural settings reported having more contact with friends and acquaintances, leading to reduced feelings of loneliness. These findings demonstrate a clear connection between urban green spaces and a positive impact on social cohesion.

Research by Hartig et al. (2014) suggests that natural environments can facilitate faster and more complete health recovery, potentially due to increased opportunities for walking and cleaner air. Open park designs, as noted by Jennings (2010), encourage recreational activities that foster positive social interaction among residents. Additionally, studies by Kuo et al. (2001) and Branas (2011) suggest a potential association between green spaces and reduced crime rates, with residents in greener areas exhibiting less aggressive behaviour. However, it's important to note that the relationship between green spaces and crime is complex and requires further investigation. Engaging in activities like vegetable gardening, as mentioned by Tillie et al. (2013), may offer faster stress reduction compared to passive activities. Furthermore, Sanders (2010) emphasizes the role of shared activities like gardening and caring for public spaces in strengthening social bonds within communities. Kazmierczak (2013) underscores the importance of well-maintained green spaces to create attractive and inviting environments that facilitate these positive social interactions and contribute to overall well-being.

An empirical example is the Rotterdam's Parkhaven, this urban renewal project transformed a former industrial area into a thriving public space, attracting residents of all ages and fostering a sense of community. A study by de Vries et al. (2022) found that the park has significantly increased social interaction and reduced crime rates in the surrounding neighborhood. Another is in the Utrecht Neighbourhood Kanaleneiland, The extensive network of green spaces in this neighborhood has been shown to improve residents' mental health, reduce stress levels, and promote physical activity (van den Berg et al., 2018). Additionally, the green spaces have fostered a sense of community ownership and pride among residents.

Playgrounds

Playgrounds play a crucial role in promoting social cohesion within communities, according to researchers Bennet et al. (2012). These spaces provide valuable opportunities for interaction between children and parents alike. This notion is further supported by De Kleuver et al. (2010), who report that one-third of parents and residents view playgrounds as meeting places. This highlights the importance of playgrounds in fostering connections and building a sense of community.

In Amsterdam Geuzenveld the neighborhood playground and community center have become focal points for social activity, attracting families and individuals of all ages. Studies have shown that these facilities play a crucial role in promoting social interaction and building strong community bonds (Van der Heijden et al., 2021).

Neighbourhood facilities

Research by Koedoot and de Haan (2005) highlights the crucial role of neighborhood associations in facilitating meetings and interactions between residents, thereby strengthening social cohesion. Their findings are supported by Hart (2002), who emphasizes the general importance of associations in

fostering social connections. Koedoot and de Haan (2005) further suggest that collective spaces within a neighborhood, such as community centres, vegetable gardens, or sports facilities, are essential for social interaction and community life. Sanders (2010) expands on this notion, arguing that residents need functional meeting spaces, like small shops or cafes, to build familiarity and connections. He emphasizes the potential of combining functionalities in these spaces, citing examples like schoolyards or petting zoos. De Vos (2018) highlights the role of meeting places in combating social isolation and mistrust within communities. Ouwehand (2018) echoes this sentiment, advocating for stores catering to immediate needs, such as greengrocers or bakeries, as well as neighborhood businesses like cobblers or carpenters. Additionally, Ouwehand suggests the inclusion of amenities like cafes, kindergartens, and community centres to further enhance the neighborhoods offerings and foster interaction.

Neighborhood facilities, including community centres, play a vital role in promoting social cohesion by providing spaces for interaction, engagement, and community building. By understanding the unique contributions of these facilities, policymakers and community leaders can develop strategies to enhance their effectiveness and create more vibrant and inclusive neighborhoods. The renovation of the community centre in The Hague's Duindorp has led to increased community engagement and a sense of belonging among residents. A study by De Jong et al. (2020) found that the centre has become a hub for social activities and has contributed to a reduction in social isolation.

The neighbourhood Unit

The concept of the Neighborhood Unit, as presented by Perry (1929) and discussed by Ouwehand (2018), emphasizes the importance of specific elements in promoting social cohesion. Essential Amenities like schools, parks, local stores, and a well-designed residential environment (including quality housing, street plans, and public spaces) are considered crucial for fostering connections within a neighborhood. Perry outlines six principles for creating a functional Neighborhood Unit:

1. **Appropriate size:** the unit should encompass enough residents to support an elementary school.
2. **Clear boundaries:** main roads should define the neighbourhoods perimeter.
3. **Adequate green space:** Parks and recreational areas should cater to the community's needs.
4. **Centralized public facilities:** schools and other facilities, like churches, should be centrally located and offer space for community activities.
5. **Strategic location of shops:** local shops should be situated at the neighbourhoods edges, preferably near intersections, potentially connecting with other neighbourhoods.
6. **Traffic management:** the internal traffic system should prioritize local needs and discourage unnecessary through traffic.

Research by De Hart (2002) and de Kam & Needham (2003) highlights the significant role of schools in fostering social cohesion. Schools serve as meeting places not only for students but also for parents, facilitating connections and interactions within the community. De Hart (2002) suggests that the attractiveness of housing (e.g., low-rise buildings and spacious layouts) and a high prevalence of homeownership can contribute to resident retention and a stronger sense of community. This, in turn, can lead to increased involvement with the neighborhood and a sense of shared responsibility for safety and well-being. De Hart further suggests that aesthetically pleasing neighborhoods can offer protection against decay, citing bay window houses as an example. Additionally, de Kam & Needham (2003) point out that homeowners tend to have more extensive social networks within their neighborhoods compared to renters.

In Eindhoven's Woensel the well-planned layout of this neighborhood, with a mix of housing types and green spaces, has fostered a strong sense of community and social cohesion. A study by Van der Meer et al. (2017) found that residents of Woensel have higher levels of trust, social networks, and civic engagement compared to residents of other neighborhoods in Eindhoven. The urban village design of the neighborhood Kralingen in Rotterdam has created a welcoming and inviting atmosphere, encouraging residents to interact with one another and participate in community activities. A study by Verhoeven et al. (2016) found that residents of Kralingen have higher levels of satisfaction with their neighborhood and a stronger sense of belonging.

Characteristics of housing

The aesthetic presentation of residences significantly influences residents' perceptions of their neighborhood and their feelings towards public spaces. Positioning kitchens towards the street or gallery side enables parents to supervise their children while they play outdoors, while placing living rooms at the rear ensures privacy for residents (Kam & Needham, 2003, p. 28). According to Kleinhans and Kruijthoff (2002, p. 78) communal gardens and galleries are valued by some as tools to foster social cohesion.

De Kam and Needham (2003, p. 39) offer recommendations for empowering residents to maintain control: ground-level housing placement whenever feasible; ensuring sightlines from residential buildings onto other residences and the intervening space, achieved through thoughtful siting to prevent obstruction by excessive greenery; integrating architectural elements like bay windows and staggered window placements; implementing urban planning strategies to deter potential offenders, such as (rail) roads and water features; and avoiding building configurations that conceal approachable sides from view. Expanding on these ideas, De Kam and Needham (2003, p. 40) advocate for social cohesion-focused design principles: promoting recognizability and 'place identity' in housing design; fostering conscientious behaviour through urban design; cultivating feelings of

safety; and mitigating the creation of overly large, economically segregated neighborhoods that distance residents from other residential areas and amenities.

1.3.3 What interventions hinder or weaken social cohesion

The literature highlights numerous factors that urban planners can leverage to foster social cohesion in their designs. However, it also identifies several interventions that may inadvertently hinder social cohesion. For instance, van Ginkel and Deben (2002, p. 20) suggest that high-rise buildings can create a negative perception of the neighborhood, particularly among families who may feel disconnected from the ground level, potentially leading to feelings of isolation and loneliness. Residents of high-rise buildings often report feelings of isolation and dissatisfaction, while mediocre housing quality diminishes interest and leads to shorter residency durations, resulting in weaker social bonds (Ginkel & Deben, 2002, p. 28).

Moreover, De Hart (2002, p. 13) asserts that ethnic heterogeneity can impede community development, as individuals may be more inclined to interact primarily within their own ethnic groups, potentially limiting bonds between residents of different backgrounds. Additionally, De Hart (2002, p. 233) suggests that neighborhoods characterized by a high proportion of single individuals, frequent population turnover, a significant immigrant population, and physical deterioration tend to exhibit lower social cohesion and heightened levels of insecurity.

Furthermore, research conducted in Gelderland indicates that public spaces with limited visibility are perceived as unsafe, such as streets passing behind houses or sidewalks with tall hedges in front yards (Bos & Horjus, 2018). Similarly, streets with excessive pavement and minimal green space are viewed as less pleasant and experience fewer social encounters (Bos & Horjus, 2018).

1.3.4 The implementation for the BWKs

By creating attractive and inclusive public spaces, fostering opportunities for social interaction, and promoting a sense of community ownership, these interventions can contribute to stronger social bonds, reduced crime rates, and improved quality of life for residents.

BWKs can play a crucial role in leveraging these urban planning interventions to promote social cohesion within their neighborhoods. By collaborating with local governments and advocating for the implementation of effective strategies, BWKs can help to create more vibrant, inclusive, and resilient communities.

Additionally, BWKs can organize community events and activities that utilize these urban spaces to further foster social interaction and engagement. By working together with residents and local authorities, BWKs can contribute to the ongoing development and improvement of their neighborhoods, ensuring that they remain vibrant and thriving communities for years to come.

Chapter 2 – The theoretical framework

2.1 The dimensions of social cohesion

The work of Forrest and Kearns (2000; 2001) offers a strong foundation for understanding social cohesion through their multidimensional approach. They view social cohesion as the harmonious development of diverse groups within a society, focusing on shared economic, social, and spatial standards. This highlights the complex nature of social cohesion, encompassing various aspects of communal living beyond just one dimension.

Forrest and Kearns (2000) propose five distinct dimensions of social cohesion, providing a comprehensive framework for analysing the concept of social cohesion and whether these dimensions contribute to foster social cohesion. Unlike many studies that solely focus on general trust or social network building, their framework also considers domains like equality, security, and living environment. It's important to note that excelling in one dimension doesn't guarantee strength in another (Beauvais & Jenson, 2002; Dekker & Bolt, 2005; Kearns & Forrest, 2001; Kearns & Forrest, 2000). These five dimensions are:

1. Social solidarity and wealth distribution (equality): This refers to a society's ability to ensure fair distribution of resources and minimize economic disparity.
2. Social security and social control (safety): This dimension focuses on the level of security citizens feel in their communities and the effectiveness of social control mechanisms.
3. Social networks and social capital (social contact): This refers to the strength and quality of relationships between individuals and groups within a society.
4. Locality and identity (living environment): This dimension explores the sense of belonging and attachment to a specific place and the shared identity it fosters.
5. Shared values and political culture (commitment and trust): This dimension focuses on the shared beliefs, values, and trust that bind a society together, enabling collective action and governance.

This multidimensional perspective provides a valuable lens for analysing the potential contributions of BWKs to social cohesion within Utrecht's neighborhoods. By examining the five dimensions of social cohesion outlined by Forrest and Kearns, this research can gain a deeper understanding of how BWKs may be influencing these critical aspects of community life. The following sections of the research will delve deeper into each of the five dimensions outlined by Forrest and Kearns.

Equality

The first dimension of social cohesion examines the interplay between equality and inequality and their influence on social cohesion. Inclusive social services are fundamental to fostering social solidarity (Ranci, 2011; Kearns & Forrest, 2001). These services, encompassing areas like education,

healthcare, housing, and transportation, ensure equal access and opportunity for all members of society. In a cohesive society, a shared responsibility exists towards achieving fairness. Everyone, regardless of social divisions, should have equal access to crucial services and public infrastructure (Novy, Loos, & Stolle, 2012). This broadens the scope of social cohesion beyond mere social inclusion, linking it to the functioning of democracy and the overall "health" of society, a concept discussed further in the fifth dimension (commitment and trust).

Kearns and Forrest (2000) highlight the negative impact of income disparities on social cohesion, stating that *"income inequality puts pressure on social cohesion through the stress, frustration and family conflict it produces, which in turn leads to problems of crime and violence"* (p. 999). Ranci (2011) emphasizes the need to look beyond the positive correlation between social cohesion and economic growth and acknowledge the potential negative relationship. Economic growth can sometimes lead to social polarization, as not all sections of society benefit equally from these advancements.

Keans and Forrest further highlights the concept of social mobility, distinct from physical or spatial mobility, this refers to the ability of individuals to progress and develop within different social groups and "regions" within a society (Hsieh & Pugh, 1993). Communities with high levels of inequality between classes, where poverty seems "innate" and social mobility is limited, generally experience lower levels of social cohesion. For instance research from WRR (2018) in collaboration with the Dutch Central Office of State Statistics (2018) tentatively suggests that residents with a Dutch background perceive lower neighborhood cohesion in areas with a higher share of non-Dutch residents. This study shows a significant correlation between 'feeling at home' and ethnic diversity. Additionally, the study acknowledges the role of individual characteristics, such as age, income, household composition, and benefit utilization, in shaping perceptions of neighborhood cohesion.

Safety

Kearns and Forrest (2000) highlight security as a crucial dimension of social cohesion. Some researchers, like Komter et al. (2000), even view social cohesion primarily through the lens of creating a safe society. Similarly, the WRR (2018) considers social security as a central indicator of social cohesion. Within this dimension, Kearns and Forrest distinguish between three key elements:

1. Objective safety: this refers to the actual occurrence of crime, such as theft or violence. It can be measured by crime rates and offender statistics.

2. Subjective safety: this describes people's perceptions of safety and feelings of security (Noije & Wittebrood, 2007; Ruijsbroek, Droomers, Groenewegen, Hardyns, & Stronks, 2015). Unlike delinquency, which is readily quantifiable, measuring subjective safety is more complex due to its multifaceted nature, encompassing "a multitude of emotions, views and opinions" (Wittebrood & Oppelaar, 2006, p. 9). Wittebrood (2006) clarifies that a general feeling of insecurity signifies unease

rather than specific fear of crime. It's important to note that delinquency and subjective safety aren't always strongly linked. A decrease in crime doesn't necessarily translate to a proportional increase in feelings of safety.

3. Social control: this refers to how individuals and society regulate behaviour in public spaces.

Blokland (2009) defines it as "*monitoring and (where possible) intervening in the actions of others.*"

This can take three forms:

- Informal: neighbours watching each other's homes.
- Functional: utilizing neighborhood guards.
- Formal: deploying security personnel and police.

Kearns and Forrest emphasize the importance of social control for social cohesion. An environment with sufficient social control fosters positive feelings of safety among citizens, encouraging them to utilize public spaces more frequently, thus further enhancing security (Newman, 1972). By addressing both the physical security of communities and the psychological sense of security among residents, policymakers and community leaders can contribute to fostering strong social cohesion and enhancing the overall well-being of individuals and communities.

Social contact

The third dimension of social cohesion, as highlighted by Kearns and Forrest (2000), focuses on social contacts between citizens. Cohesive societies are characterized by strong social networks, where individuals actively interact and form connections. These networks foster social capital (Putman, 2007), allowing communities to address social problems collectively. There are three types of social capital as highlighted by Kearns and Forrest (2000):

- Bonding social capital: this arises within groups (e.g., families, friends), creating strong ties between members. While this provides a sense of security and belonging, it can also lead to inward-looking behaviour and exclusion of outsiders (Putman, 2007). This highlights the importance of scale – strong cohesion within smaller groups can have the opposite effect on broader society.
- Bridging social capital: this forms between diverse groups (e.g., different ethnicities, social classes), often through weaker ties. These connections are valuable as they expose individuals to different perspectives and encourage broader civic participation (Wetenschappelijke Raad voor het Regeringsbeleid, 2018).
- Citizen counter binding: this concept, introduced by Schuyt (1997), recognizes and respects differences between groups, preventing them from escalating into destructive social behaviour. It creates "common ground" among individuals from diverse backgrounds (Brandsen, Dekkers, & Evers, 2010).

Policymakers can play a crucial role in promoting social cohesion by fostering social connections and networks. Initiatives like neighborhood events and intercultural festivals can encourage initial contact between individuals and groups (RMO, 2005). However, simply bringing people together does not guarantee positive and lasting connections. Building trust is essential for forming strong networks and enabling communities to collaborate (Gijssberts & Maliepaard, 2012). Ultimately, truly cohesive societies are characterized by trust and the ability to address challenges through collective action (Kearns & Forrest, 2001).

Living environment

The fourth dimension of social cohesion, as emphasized by Forrest and Kearns (2001; 2000), focuses on area identity, place attachment, and the role of public spaces. A sense of connection to one's local area (area identity) can contribute to feelings of security, community, and shared values (Dekker & Bolt, 2005). However, it is important to consider the scale at which this identity forms. While it can strengthen local connections and participation, it can also lead to the exclusion of outsiders and hinder participation in the broader society (Kearns & Forrest, 2000). This phenomenon, known as "miniaturization" by Fukuyama (1999), highlights the potential conflict between local and broader cohesion.

Opportunities for people to meet and interact are crucial for social cohesion. Public spaces play a vital role in fostering these encounters, allowing for both casual encounters and deeper connections (Blokland, 2009; Wetenschappelijke Raad voor het Regeringsbeleid, 2018). These spaces can facilitate the development of "public familiarity," a sense of comfort and recognition amongst strangers, which can ultimately help build trust and social cohesion (Blokland, 2009). The relationship between physical mobility and social cohesion is complex. Increased mobility can bridge societal divides by making it easier for people from different backgrounds to connect. However, it can also weaken local social networks and communities by making local interactions less frequent (Kearns & Forrest, 2000). Additionally, limited mobility can lead to social exclusion if it restricts individuals' ability to access opportunities and participate in society (Cases, 2007). Therefore, creating accessible and well-connected communities where mobility is a tool for inclusion, not exclusion, is crucial for fostering social cohesion (Stanley, et al., 2011; Ferreira & Batey, 2007).

Commitment and trust

The final dimension of social cohesion, identified by Kearns and Forrest (2000) encompasses three key aspects. The first aspect are shared values within communities, a cohesive society thrives on shared values that guide individuals and allow them to pursue common goals. These values establish moral principles and codes of behaviour that promote positive interaction within the community. However, recent trends like depolarization (weakening of traditional social groups) and individualization have contributed to a diversification of values, sometimes leading to conflicts.

Policies aimed at promoting social cohesion in this context often focus on active citizenship, social participation, and tolerance (Kearns & Forrest, 2000).

The second aspect is trust in the rule of law and political institution. Kearns and Forrest (2001) emphasize the importance of a strong civic culture, where shared values and opinions find expression within institutions, including the legal system. In a cohesive society, citizens are not passive consumers of information, but actively engage with their community and participate in political processes. This includes having trust in the rule of law and the functioning of political institutions, believing that their voices are heard and their participation makes a difference, inspired by Almond & Verba (1965). A lack of trust in institutions can lead to a sense of "democratic deficit," where citizens feel disconnected from the political process (Dekker K. , 2007; Wetenschappelijke Raad voor het Regeringsbeleid, 2018).

The final aspect, political participation, beyond simply having the desire to participate, citizens must also have the capacity and opportunity to engage with political institutions and hold policymakers accountable. This requires legislation and policies that are designed to be accessible and responsive to citizens' varying abilities and backgrounds (Wetenschappelijke Raad voor het Regeringsbeleid, 2018). Citizens need not only to trust the rule of law but also feel empowered to "act" within it. This includes ensuring access to information and resources that enhance their understanding of the political context and decision-making processes. Tailoring approaches and information to suit different cognitive abilities can also be helpful (Wetenschappelijke Raad voor het Regeringsbeleid, 2018). Ultimately, fostering a cohesive society from this perspective requires a foundation of shared values, trust in institutions, and an environment that encourages active and empowered civic participation.

The five dimensions of social cohesion as suggested by Kearns and Forrest (2000; 2001) provide a valuable framework for understanding the factors that contribute to the strength and vitality of neighborhoods. By measuring these dimensions and addressing the underlying factors that influence them, policymakers and community leaders can take steps to foster stronger social cohesion and create more vibrant and resilient communities.

2.2 How to measure social cohesion

Kearns and Forrest (2000) define social cohesion as encompassing five dimensions including equality and income distribution, aspects of safety and social order, the quality of interpersonal connections, a sense of community identity, the availability and quality of communal spaces, and participation and trust in political institutions and legal systems. A society characterized by high social cohesion would exhibit minimal divergence in values, low levels of social conflict, limited income inequality, strong social ties, and a moderate level of attachment to the locality or residence area.

A consideration of social cohesion permeates across diverse policy domains. For instance, policymakers evaluate how specific legislation impacts societal equality, how educational frameworks facilitate interactions between different social groups, and how healthcare services can be made accessible to diverse populations.

Table 2 presents a comprehensive framework for understanding the multifaceted nature of social cohesion, drawing upon the work of Kearns and Forrest (2000). This framework outlines five key dimensions that contribute to the overall strength and resilience of a community, within each dimension, specific factors are identified as indicators, representing the components that contribute to the overall strength of that dimension. These indicators provide a more granular understanding of the various elements that contribute to social cohesion and allow for a more nuanced analysis of community dynamics. This framework provides a valuable tool for analysing community dynamics, identifying areas of strength and weakness, and developing targeted interventions to promote social cohesion.

Table 2, The five dimensions of social cohesion and their indicators (Kearns & Forrest, 2001; 2000)

Equality	Safety	Social relations	Living environment	Engagement and trust
Inclusive social services	Objective security (delinquency)	Bonding: group contact (inclusion/exclusion)	Area identity	Shared values
Income differences	Subjective security (feelings of safety)	Bridging: cross-group contact	Facilitating meeting in space	Trust in politics and the rule of law
Social mobility	Social control	Social participation	Physical mobility	Participation in policy process

Building strong social cohesion hinges on understanding its multifaceted nature across different scales. Social cohesion at the neighbourhood level, characterized by strong social networks and a sense of security fostered through daily interactions, does not necessarily translate to national unity. Social cohesion on the national level, on the other hand, emphasizes a shared sense of belonging and common values – a more abstract concept compared to the tangible experiences of local communities. This distinction necessitates employing different approaches and policy instruments at various levels. For this study, it is important to distinguish between social cohesion at national and neighbourhood level so that it can be seen which measures from the national level trickle down to social cohesion at the neighbourhood level. Forrest and Kearns (2000) argue that dimensions like social security and control might hold less relevance for national policy. However, this view overlooks the interconnectedness of national policies with local realities. For instance, national policies on economic disparities between urban and rural areas can significantly impact local social cohesion.

Kearns & Forrest (2000) offer a helpful framework for understanding relevant social cohesion dimensions across scales:

- National focus: policies here primarily target promoting shared values and reducing economic disparities between urban and rural areas. This fosters a sense of national unity and belonging.
- Local focus: urban-level policies prioritize social safety and control measures, along with strengthening political participation and fostering local identity and attachment. These efforts create a sense of community within a specific geographic area.
- Neighborhood focus: social cohesion thrives at the neighborhood level through direct interactions. Here, strengthening social networks (social capital) and promoting a sense of security and control are crucial for building strong bonds among residents.

The optimal approach to social cohesion also considers the demographic makeup of the target community. In growing cities, social cohesion might involve creating a "light community" – a sense of connection that bridges diverse groups (Cassiers & Kesteloot, 2012; Atkinson, 2014). However, smaller villages with a more homogenous population might require a more robust social network and a stronger sense of community control. Recognizing these nuances is essential for crafting effective interventions. Ultimately, social cohesion is not a one-size-fits-all concept. By acknowledging the role of scale and tailoring policies to address the specific needs and characteristics of different communities, we can create a more inclusive and connected society. This requires recognizing the diversity in citizens' preferences and abilities for close-knit living arrangements. Effective social cohesion initiatives must cater to this spectrum of needs and aspirations. Table 3 shows how urban governance has an influence on the different dimensions of social cohesion at the three levels.

Table 3, The dimensions of social cohesion and the attention of urban governance at the different levels (Kearns & Forrest, 2000)

Dimension of social cohesion	National	Local	Neighbourhood
Equality	✓✓	✓	✓
Safety		✓✓	✓✓
Social relations		✓	✓✓
Living environment	✓	✓✓	✓
Engagement and trust	✓✓	✓✓	✓

- ✓✓ Domain in which urban governance attention and effects are clearly evident
- ✓ Domain in which there is a case for greater attention from urban governance
- Focus of this research

This research recognizes the importance of understanding social cohesion at multiple scales: national, local, and neighborhood levels. This multi-level perspective allows for a more comprehensive analysis of the factors influencing social cohesion and the potential impact of interventions like the BWK. Kearns and Forrest (2000) highlight the importance of three key dimensions of social cohesion: equality, living environment, and engagement and trust. These dimensions are particularly relevant at the neighborhood level, where BWKs operate. As outlined in Table 3, the dimensions of equality, living environment, and engagement and trust are crucial for understanding and measuring social cohesion at the neighborhood level. These dimensions capture the multifaceted nature of social cohesion and provide a framework for analysing the factors that contribute to or hinder its development. The neighborhood level is particularly crucial for understanding the impact of BWKs on social cohesion. This is because BWKs are deeply embedded within specific neighborhoods and their effectiveness is closely tied to the local context. By focusing on the neighborhood level, this research can delve into the nuances of how BWKs interact with residents, local organizations, and the broader community. This level of analysis allows for a more nuanced understanding of the factors that contribute to or hinder social cohesion within specific neighborhoods.

The dimensions of equality, living environment, and engagement & trust are essential for understanding and measuring social cohesion at the neighborhood level. By addressing these dimensions, policymakers can create more equitable, inclusive, and vibrant communities. This research emphasizes the importance of a holistic approach to fostering social cohesion, considering the interconnectedness of these various factors.

Chapter 3 – Context

3.1 Social cohesion in the municipality of Utrecht

This chapter delves into the social fabric of Utrecht, the Netherlands, using a combination of national data (CBS) and neighbourhood specific interviews. It explores residents' perceptions of social cohesion, trust, hopefulness, and well-being, revealing both positive trends and areas requiring attention.

While national data suggests a decrease in frequent neighbour contact across the Netherlands, Utrecht residents report a generally positive experience within their neighborhoods (CBS, 2023; Gemeente Utrecht, 2024). Internal research within the municipality indicate that residents perceive their neighborhoods as pleasant and comfortable, with a social cohesion score hovering around 6.0 in recent years. However, significant disparities exist across different areas, with scores ranging from a low of 4.7 to a high of 7.0 (Gemeente Utrecht, 2024). This highlights the need for targeted strategies to foster stronger connections within specific neighborhoods, particularly those scoring lower on the social cohesion index. Social cohesion (1-10), was calculated based on the following statements:

- People hardly know each other in this neighbourhood
- People interact in a pleasant way in this neighbourhood
- I live in a pleasant neighbourhood where people help each other
- I feel at home with the people living in the neighbourhood

A survey from the independent research firm ‘Meetellen Utrecht⁴’ focusing on residents in vulnerable situations sheds further light on social interaction within neighborhoods. While 55% of respondents felt they had sufficient contact with neighbours, 34% reported a lack of connection (Meetellen Utrecht, 2023). This underscores the importance of initiatives that promote social inclusion and bridge potential gaps in social networks, especially for residents who may face additional challenges in building connections. The report also reveals a reassuring level of trust among Utrecht residents, with approximately 71% expressing trust in their fellow citizens. This figure has remained relatively stable in recent years. However, a concerning trend emerges regarding hopefulness for the future. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a sharp decline in optimism about the Netherlands' future, reaching 43% in 2023 (CBS, 2023). Residents appear less pessimistic about Utrecht's future compared to the national outlook (Gemeente Utrecht, 2024). This suggests a potential disconnect between perceptions of the national climate and the more localized environment within the city.

⁴ Research firm Counting Utrecht (*onderzoeksbureau Meetellen Utrecht*)

Social well-being scores in Utrecht have dipped slightly since 2019, dropping from 7.8 to 7.6 in 2023 (Gemeente Utrecht, 2024). This decrease coincides with a rise in the number of residents feeling unimportant within society and disadvantaged due to their background (Gemeente Utrecht, 2024; Meetellen Utrecht, 2023). These findings point to a potential erosion of social inclusion within the city and highlight the need for initiatives that address feelings of marginalization and promote a sense of belonging for all residents.

The report from Meetellen Utrecht emphasizes the significant influence of income and education level on perceptions of social cohesion, trust, hopefulness, and well-being (Meetellen Utrecht, 2023). Residents with lower income and education levels consistently report more negative experiences across these indicators. This paints a worrying picture of potential social stratification within Utrecht, where certain groups may be experiencing a lower quality of social life. Addressing these disparities requires a multi-pronged approach that tackles issues like access to resources, employment opportunities, and educational attainment (Gemeente Utrecht, 2024).

Age also plays a role in shaping social experiences within the city (CBS, 2010; CBS, 2023). Here, the CBS states that younger residents (18-29) report lower levels of social cohesion and face discrimination more frequently. Conversely, older residents (65+) struggle more with feelings of hopefulness about the future and experience a decline in social well-being. These findings suggest the need for age-specific interventions that promote social connection and a sense of purpose for younger residents, while also providing support systems and fostering a sense of community for older populations. A concerning 19% of Utrecht residents reported experiencing discrimination in the past year (Gemeente Utrecht, 2024). Here the municipality of Utrecht states that skin colour, ethnicity, or descent is the most common basis for discrimination, followed by sex or gender. Streets are the most frequent location for reported discrimination, highlighting the pervasiveness of this issue in everyday life. Workplaces and job applications also emerge as significant settings where discrimination occurs (Gemeente Utrecht, 2024). These findings necessitate a multifaceted approach that tackles discriminatory practices within institutions and public spaces, while also promoting intercultural understanding and fostering a more inclusive city environment.

While Utrecht boasts generally positive perceptions of social cohesion and trust within neighborhoods, these reports underscore the existence of significant disparities and areas for improvement. The decline in social well-being and hopefulness, particularly among vulnerable populations, necessitates targeted interventions that promote social inclusion, address feelings of marginalization, and create a more equitable social fabric for all residents. By acknowledging the challenges and implementing data-driven strategies, Utrecht can strengthen its social cohesion and foster a more vibrant and inclusive community for all. It is important to note that changes in survey questionnaires may limit direct comparisons with previous data on discrimination experiences. Future

research efforts could benefit from maintaining consistent methodologies to ensure reliable trend analysis over time.

3.2 The community centre and the neighbourhood team

Utrecht boasts a well-developed network of community centres, serving as crucial public hubs that foster social interaction and resident engagement. These centres transcend the function of mere buildings, transforming into vibrant spaces where individuals from all walks of life can connect, explore interests, and contribute to the neighbourhood's social fabric. Community centres function as a platform for a diverse range of activities catering to a variety of demographics (Gemeente Utrecht, 2024; DOCK, 2024). From engaging children in cooking workshops to offering yoga and singing classes for adults, these centres cater to recreational pursuits. Additionally, intellectual stimulation is fostered through reading clubs and lectures on various topics. Furthermore, community centres provide a casual environment for social interaction, facilitating games afternoons and casual coffee gatherings with neighbours (Gemeente Utrecht, 2024; DOCK, 2024).

The essence of these centres lies in their ability to empower residents to become active participants in shaping their local community. Recognizing the diverse skillsets and interests within a neighbourhood, community centres actively encourage resident-organized activities (Gemeente Utrecht, 2024). This could involve residents with expertise in billiards, languages, or health and wellness sharing their knowledge by organizing workshops or events. The DOCK social brokers act as a resource for residents, offering guidance and facilitating the process of organizing activities within the centres (DOCK, 2024). With a multitude of community centres spread across Utrecht, residents have the opportunity to find a centre that aligns with their specific needs and interests. Individual centres may cultivate a focus on artistic pursuits, cater to families with young children, or provide a space for specific cultural groups to gather (DOCK, 2024). This caters to the diverse tapestry that is Utrecht's population, ensuring inclusivity and fostering a sense of belonging within various communities.

Here, the municipality shows that it strives to have a broad reach with community centres. From big events to small intimate moments. Community centres are also indispensable in Dutch urban development, which is why they are also within the legal framework in the municipality (Rijksoverheid, 2024). This means that financial support is given annually and the municipality is responsible for the realisation of the community centres themselves.

In 2015, the Netherlands witnessed a significant shift in social care landscape with the implementation of the *Wet Maatschappelijke Ondersteuning* (Wmo)⁵ and the *JeugdWet*⁶

⁵ The Social Support Act (*Wet Maatschappelijke Ondersteuning*)

⁶ Youth Act (*de JeugdWet*)

(Rijksoverheid, 2024). This legislative move decentralized a substantial portion of social care responsibilities to local municipalities. Utrecht's approach to social care reform was characterized by a clear vision emphasizing accessibility, personalization, and seamless integration into residents' daily lives (Gemeente Utrecht, 2024; DOCK, 2024). The guiding principle, captured in the phrase "care close by and tailor-made", prioritized light-touch interventions wherever possible, reserving specialized care for situations requiring more intensive support (Gemeente Utrecht, 2024). To translate this vision into reality, the municipality established a collaborative framework involving two key organizations: Lokalis, specializing in youth and family care, and Buurteamorganisatie Sociaal Utrecht⁷, dedicated to adult care (Gemeente Utrecht, 2024; DOCK, 2024). These entities work together to establish neighborhood teams, forming the cornerstone of Utrecht's social care delivery system.

The bedrock for care and support within Utrecht is the "Utrecht (care) model," a three-tiered framework outlining a continuum of care (Gemeente Utrecht, 2024). The model encompasses the social base, basic care, and supplementary care. Neighborhood teams fall within the basic care tier, serving as the primary point of contact for residents seeking assistance in various life domains (Gemeente Utrecht, 2024). This includes, but is not limited to, employment, education, financial management, health, and education. Notably, the Utrecht care model functions as a municipal policy directive, outlining the expected actions and guiding principles for neighborhood teams regardless of the specific organization operating them. This ensures consistency and alignment with the municipality's overall vision for social care delivery across the city.

3.2.1 An evaluation of Utrecht's community centres policy

In a study from Labyrinth Onderzoek & Advies⁸ (2020) for the municipality of Utrecht several community centres were evaluated. This study examines the effectiveness of the Utrecht municipality's "Community centres Policy". The analysis reveals positive trends in occupancy rates, increasing from an average of 25 hours per week in 2012 to 42 hours in 2019 (measured by property counters) (Labyrinth, 2020). Resident satisfaction with space availability for resident-driven initiatives also shows modest growth, rising from 35% to 38% according to the Utrecht Monitor. These findings suggest a generally successful policy in fostering community centre utilization.

However, the research highlights a key area for improvement: outreach. While the social value of community centres is demonstrably high, evidenced by the increased occupancy and resident satisfaction, the current approach fails to reach a broader segment of the population (Labyrinth, 2020). Notably, the study identifies a gap in youth engagement, suggesting a need for tailored offerings to attract this demographic. Additionally, the distribution of community centres across the city is uneven,

⁷ Social Neighborhood Team Organization (*Buurteamorganisatie Sociaal Utrecht*)

⁸ Labyrinth Research & Consulting from Utrecht municipality (*Labyrinth Onderzoek & Advies*)

potentially limiting accessibility for certain residents. The data, gathered through surveys of users, visitors, managers, and volunteers, emphasizes the significant social value of these centres. This value is further substantiated by the quantitative data presented within the report (Labyrinth, 2020) .

Encouraging and facilitating the operation of community centres is recognized as a vital component of the municipal welfare policy.

To further enhance the policy's success, a strategic focus on expanding outreach and attracting a more diverse user base is crucial. The following recommendations aim to address this challenge:

1. **Cultivating an inclusive environment:** while both visitors and non-visitors generally hold positive perceptions of community centres, non-visitors are more likely to associate them with specific demographics, such as the elderly or unemployed. To rectify this perception and encourage broader participation, a shift towards emphasizing inclusivity is necessary. This can be achieved through a more diverse range of activities, ensuring all residents feel welcome within the community centre. (Labyrinth, 2020)
2. **Enhancing visibility and awareness:** many residents have a general understanding that community centres host activities; however, a significant portion lacks specific knowledge about the offered programs, the option to organize events themselves, and the universal accessibility of these centres. We recommend a city-wide promotional campaign that clarifies the functions of community centres, emphasizes their welcoming nature, and highlights the ability of residents to participate across different neighbourhoods. The current term "community centre" may inadvertently imply exclusivity. Communication strategies should emphasize that all Utrecht residents are welcome in any community centre, while acknowledging the importance of maintaining a balance between neighbourhood-specific and city-wide activities. (Labyrinth, 2020)
3. **Strengthening communication efforts:** the research identified challenges with current communication strategies employed by individual community centres. Residents often lack clear information about available activities and programs. To address this, we recommend a more centralized approach to communication, led by the municipality. This would involve developing a professional marketing and communication strategy for all community centres, ensuring consistent messaging and efficient outreach across the city. (Labyrinth, 2020)
4. **Refining triangular consultations:** triangular consultations, involving users, managers, and volunteers, have been implemented at most centres and are generally viewed positively. However, there is room for improvement. Establishing a core user team within each consultation is recommended to ensure continuity and representation. Additionally, the voice of volunteers is currently underrepresented. We recommend incorporating volunteers formally

into these consultations, leveraging their experience and fostering a stronger sense of engagement. Furthermore, clear communication regarding participant roles and expectations within the consultations would benefit all stakeholders. (Labyrinth, 2020)

3.3 The Neighbourhood Workroom approach

The BWK approach distinguishes itself through its holistic perspective on resident needs. Unlike traditional services that address single aspects of an individual's life, the BWK recognizes the interconnectedness of various living domains, such as housing, finances, social connection, and mental well-being (BuurtWerkKamer Coöperatie, 2024). This comprehensive view allows for a more nuanced understanding of resident challenges and facilitates the development of solutions that address multiple areas simultaneously. This integrated approach presents a valuable advantage for both residents and authorities.

The BWK's strength lies in its ability to connect with residents who are typically difficult for traditional social services to reach. These "hard-to-reach" residents, often labelled as "care avoiders," may have experienced negative interactions with formal institutions in the past, leading to distrust or reluctance to seek help (BuurtWerkKamer Coöperatie, 2024). The BWK's informal setting, fostered by resident ownership and a focus on mutual support, creates a safe space where these residents feel comfortable and engaged. This not only empowers them to access needed services but also fosters active participation within the neighbourhood, a key accomplishment of the BWK model (BuurtWerkKamer Coöperatie, 2024). Residents who were previously isolated or disengaged can develop a sense of belonging and contribute their skills and experiences to the betterment of their community.

The BWK operates with minimal barriers to entry. Residents can access support without appointments or cumbersome paperwork, promoting a "low-threshold" environment (BuurtWerkKamer Coöperatie, 2024). This ease of access allows for immediate intervention when difficulties arise. Conversely, residents within the BWK can leverage their established connections and understanding of formal systems to facilitate referrals to official agencies on behalf of their neighbours (BuurtWerkKamer Coöperatie, 2024). This "upscaling" process fosters a bridge between residents and formal institutions, navigated with a sense of informality and personal connection. Residents within the BWK can act as trusted guides, helping their neighbours understand the application process, navigate bureaucracy, and feel more comfortable accessing essential services (BuurtWerkKamer Coöperatie, 2024).

By addressing resident needs in a comprehensive manner, the BWK model generates significant cost savings for municipalities and social service agencies. The resident-driven activities within the BWK lead to:

- More comprehensive applications to city services, reducing the need for clarification or follow-up.
- Reduced reliance on housing corporations for minor repairs, as residents are empowered to address small issues proactively.
- Lower levels of neighbourhood disturbances, fostering a more peaceful and cohesive community environment.
- Decreased debt among residents through financial literacy workshops and budgeting assistance offered within the BWK.
- Prevention of evictions through early intervention and support in addressing rental arrears or property maintenance concerns.
- Streamlined benefits and care processes, as residents within the BWK can assist neighbours in navigating complex application processes and accessing essential support services.

Consequently, the BWK model offers a "wonderful revenue model" by reducing the financial burden on various social service providers, including municipalities, housing associations, benefit agencies, health insurers, and care institutions (BuurtWerkKamer Coöperatie, 2024). This cost-effectiveness is another key advantage of the BWK approach. Furthermore, the social return on investment is substantial, as the model fosters a more empowered, resilient, and connected community.

Chapter 4 – Method

4.1 Research sites and participants

The research focused on three strategically selected BWK’s, each serving a distinct community with unique characteristics:

- TOP (Amsterdamsestraatweg, 2e Daalsedijk): situated in a diverse neighborhood, this BWK caters to residents from various backgrounds, fostering a vibrant multicultural space.
- De Verbinding (Zuilen, the Schaakbuurt): located in a rapidly developing area experiencing an influx of newcomers, The Connection plays a crucial role in integrating new residents and fostering a sense of community amidst ongoing change.
- Het hart van Leidsche Rijn (Leidsche Rijn centre): operating in a relatively new neighborhood, this BWK works proactively to build social connections from the ground up, shaping a strong sense of community within a growing area.

For the selection rationale, these three BWKs were chosen to provide a representative sample of the diverse contexts and challenges faced by BWKs across Utrecht. By including a BWK in a well-established, multicultural neighborhood (TOP), a BWK in a rapidly developing area (de Verbinding), and a BWK in a new neighborhood (Het hart van Leidsche Rijn), the research aimed to capture a comprehensive picture of how BWKs function and contribute to social cohesion in different settings.

Table 4 presents the evolution of social cohesion scores for three neighborhoods in Utrecht: Schaakbuurt, 2e Daalsebuurt, and Leidsche Rijn-centrum, from 2015 to 2023. This data is crucial for understanding the broader context within which BWKs operate and assessing their potential impact on social cohesion within these specific communities.

Table 4, Level of social cohesion in Utrecht neighbourhoods Schaakbuurt, 2e Daalsebuurt and Leidsche Rijn-centrum (Utrecht, 2024)

	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Schaakbuurt e.o.	5,8	5,8	5,8	5,8	5,8	5,9	6,0	6,0	6,1
2e Daalsebuurt e.o.	5,3	5,3	5,4	5,3	5,3	5,5	5,6	5,9	5,8
Leidsche Rijn-centrum						5,7	5,8	5,9	5,8

While the data reveals fluctuations in social cohesion scores across the years, a general trend of stability emerges. The Schaakbuurt, for example, consistently maintained a score of 5.8 from 2015 to 2018, followed by a slight increase to 6.1 in 2023. The 2e Daalsebuurt experienced a similar pattern, with a gradual increase from 5.3 in 2015 to 5.8 in 2022 and a slight decline in 2023. Despite the overall stability, notable variations exist across neighborhoods. The Leidsche Rijn-centrum, a

relatively new neighborhood, has shown a consistent increase in social cohesion scores since 2015, reaching 5.8 in 2023. This suggests that the development of social cohesion can be a dynamic process, particularly in emerging communities. Understanding these neighborhood-specific trends is crucial for assessing the potential impact of BWKs on social cohesion. In neighborhoods with relatively high and stable social cohesion scores, such as Schaakbuurt, BWKs may play a complementary role in strengthening existing social bonds and addressing specific needs. In neighborhoods with lower scores, like 2e Daalsebuurt, BWKs may have a more significant role in fostering social cohesion by providing opportunities for community building and support.

Within these locations of the BWK, interviews were conducted with 3 different groups. These different groups are highlighted below, as well as the interviews with municipal workers:

BWK coordinators: semi-structured interviews were conducted with the coordinators from each BWK. These coordinators hold a central leadership role, overseeing operations, program development, and community engagement. Their in-depth interviews explored:

- How social cohesion principles are integrated into the planning and decision-making processes of the BWK.
- Strategies employed to identify and address the specific social cohesion needs of the local community.
- Practices implemented to ensure accessibility and inclusivity for a diverse range of residents, regardless of background, ability, or socioeconomic status.
- Collaboration efforts with local organizations and the municipality to strengthen the impact of the BWK.

Volunteers and social workers: interviews were conducted with volunteers and social workers at each BWK. These individuals provide crucial frontline support and have direct contact with residents who utilize the BWK's services and programs. Their insights shed light on:

- Resident experiences and perceptions of social cohesion within the BWK environment.
- The effectiveness of specific programs and resources in fostering social connections among residents.
- Challenges encountered in building social bonds within the community and potential strategies for improvement.

BWK users: understanding the user perspective is essential. Interviews with residents who regularly utilize the BWK provided valuable insights on:

- Their motivations for using the BWK and the perceived benefits for social cohesion.
- The types of support and social interaction they experience at the BWK.

- Suggestions for improvement regarding accessibility, inclusivity, and meeting the evolving needs of residents.

Municipal workers: there are three interviews conducted with municipal workers of the municipality of Utrecht, these interviews provide valuable insight into:

- Understanding the broader policy framework within which BWKs operate.
- Gaining insights into funding decisions and resource allocation for BWKs and other community initiatives.
- Exploring the extent of collaboration between the municipality and BWKs in promoting social cohesion.

Table 5 and 6 provides a comprehensive overview of the interviews conducted in the research. This table includes essential information about the interviewees, including their function within the BWK, text code for identification, interview date, duration, and corresponding appendix location. These tables serves as a valuable reference for understanding the data collection process and accessing specific interview transcripts for further analysis. The inclusion of text codes facilitates easy identification of individual interviewees within the text of the research, while the interview dates and durations provide context for understanding the timing and length of each interview session. The appendix references shows the full transcripts for in-depth analysis and verification.

Table 5, List of interviewees with text code, interview duration, date, and location appendix

	Function	Text code	Date	Interview time	Appendix
De Verbinding	Coordinator	VC1	4-6-2024	37:56	p. 38
	Voluntary worker	VV1	4-6-2024	16:54	p. 53
	Voluntary worker	VV2	4-6-2024	16:18	p. 63
	Resident	VR1	31-5-2024	13:34	p. 2
	Resident	VR2	31-5-2024	14:35	p. 22
Het Hart van Leidsche Rijn	Coordinator	HC1	12-6-2024	31:06	p. 100
	Intern	HI1	12-6-2024	10:35	p. 93
	Resident	HR1	4-6-2024	06:42	p. 8
	Resident	HR2	12-6-2024	11:47	p. 13
	Resident	HR3	12-6-2024	08:35	p. 34
TOP	Coordinator	TC1	12-6-2024	21:28	p. 74
	Intern	TI1	12-6-2024	11:43	p. 86
	Resident	TR1	13-6-2024	15:11	p. 26
	Resident	TR2	13-6-2024	18:21	p. 30

Table 6, List of interviewees with text code, interview duration, date and location appendix of municipal workers

Function	Text code	Date	Interview time	Appendix
Social policy	MW1	11-7-2024	31:01	p. 119
Social policy	MW2	11-7-2024	22:55	p. 124
Leidsche Rijn district social policy	MW3	17-7-2024	19:18	p. 129

4.2 Data collection methods

For this research, semi-structured interviews were selected as the primary data collection method to gather insights from all participant groups. Looking at the work of Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) on how qualitative interviews emphasize that semi-structured interviews are well-suited for exploring topics where the researcher aims to understand participants' subjective experiences, motivations, and perceptions. This aligns with the goal of exploring social cohesion within BWKs, as the open-ended nature of the interviews allows participants to express nuanced views on their experiences within the community rooms. Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) highlight that semi-structured interviews allow researchers to adapt their questioning to delve into unanticipated themes, making this method suitable for studying dynamic, interpersonal phenomena such as social cohesion. Forrest and Kearns (2001) show that for research on BWKs, semi-structured interviews are therefore essential, as they can reveal detailed insights into aspects such as equality, inclusion, and trust—key elements of social cohesion that are best understood through participants' firsthand accounts and reflections on their interactions within community spaces. The interview questions (appendix 1) were designed to align with the research objectives, particularly focusing on the dimensions of social cohesion that are central to this study: equality, living environment, and commitment & trust.

The process of formulating the research questions was grounded in the theoretical framework established for this study, with a specific focus on social cohesion as the guiding principle. Social cohesion, a multi-dimensional concept, encompasses various aspects of how communities function and how individuals feel connected to one another and their environment. These dimensions—equality, the living environment, and engagement or trust—serve as critical elements that inform how individuals experience social spaces, particularly the role of community spaces such as BWKs (neighborhood rooms).

To ensure the interview questions adequately addressed these dimensions, the theoretical framework was used as a foundation. This approach allowed for targeted questions aimed at exploring how BWKs contribute to fostering social cohesion within the community. For instance, under the dimension of equality, questions were focused on accessibility and inclusion, probing whether people

from diverse backgrounds (cultural, socioeconomic, ability) have equal opportunities to engage in BWK activities (Appendix 1). For living environment, the questions explored the atmosphere of the space and its adequacy in meeting community needs. Under commitment and trust, the questions aimed to assess whether a sense of trust and shared responsibility is fostered within the BWK setting.

Conducting the Interviews

Before commencing the interviews, informed consent was obtained from all participants, ensuring that they understood the research objectives and their voluntary participation. In line with ethical research practices, participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the use of audio recordings for transcription, and their right to withdraw at any point. By obtaining explicit consent, the research ensured transparency and built trust with the participants, which was critical in gathering honest and open responses.

The interviews were conducted in private, comfortable settings that facilitated a conducive environment for meaningful dialogue. The privacy of these settings encouraged participants to express their thoughts and experiences freely, without fear of judgment or repercussion. All interviews were audio recorded with the participants' consent, ensuring the accuracy of the data collected and providing a reliable source for subsequent transcription and analysis. The use of semi-structured interviews allowed for an adaptable interview process where the researcher could ask follow-up questions or clarify points, thus gaining deeper insights into issues that were particularly relevant to the research. This method was particularly useful when discussing the complex dynamics of social cohesion, as it allowed participants to share not only factual information but also their personal experiences and perspectives on how BWKs foster or hinder community connection.

Ethical Considerations

Throughout the data collection process, ethical considerations were a priority. Orb, Eisenhauer and Wynaden (2001) argue that maintaining confidentiality and obtaining informed consent are critical in research that involves personal narratives and potentially sensitive topics. This article discusses the ethical implications of qualitative research, especially in terms of building trust and transparency with participants, in studies on social cohesion, participants may share personal insights about community dynamics, cultural inclusivity, and social issues within BWKs (Orb, Eisenhauer, & Wynaden, 2001). The careful attention to ethical guidelines, as noted in this research, allows participants to openly discuss their experiences without fear of repercussions, leading to richer data.

4.3 Data analysis methods

The data collected through semi-structured interviews were analysed using thematic analysis that focuses on identifying, organizing, and interpreting patterns or themes within the data. This approach

is particularly effective for examining complex social phenomena, such as social cohesion, as it allows for a deep exploration of participants' perspectives and experiences. Thematic analysis was selected for its flexibility and suitability for addressing the research questions, which aim to understand how neighborhood community rooms and the BWKs contribute to social cohesion across the dimensions of equality, living environment, and engagement & trust.

The thematic analysis followed the six-phase process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), ensuring a systematic and rigorous approach to data analysis. These phases include familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report.

Familiarization with the Data

The first stage of the analysis process involved becoming thoroughly familiar with the data. After the interviews were transcribed verbatim, the researcher carefully read through each transcript multiple times to gain a deep understanding of the content. This phase allowed a deep dive in the data, noting initial impressions, interesting points, and potential areas for deeper analysis. During this phase, the audio recordings are revisited to ensure that the transcripts accurately reflected the participants' words and to capture any nuances in tone or emphasis that might have been missed during transcription. This step was crucial in building an initial sense of the overarching topics discussed by the participants and setting the stage for the more detailed analysis that followed.

Generating Initial Codes

The next phase involved systematically coding the data. Coding is the process of identifying specific segments of the data that relate to the research questions and labelling them with succinct descriptive tags (codes). In this study, coding was driven by both deductive and inductive approaches. The deductive approach was based on the dimensions of social cohesion that informed the research questions (equality, living environment, and engagement & trust), while the inductive approach allowed for the emergence of new, unanticipated insights from the data.

A coding framework was developed, incorporating codes related to each of the three dimensions of social cohesion. However, the coding process remained open to new themes, such as “challenges in social cohesion” or “innovative approaches to community engagement”, which emerged inductively during the analysis.

Searching for Themes

Once all the data had been coded, the next phase involved searching for themes. A theme represents a pattern in the data that is significant to the research questions and can provide insight into the role of BWKs in fostering social cohesion. This phase involved examining the relationships between codes and grouping them into broader themes. This phase was iterative, to revisit the coded data and refine the emerging themes to ensure they accurately captured the essence of the participants' responses. The

goal was to create themes that were internally coherent, meaning the data within each theme were closely related, while also being distinct from other themes.

Reviewing Themes

In this phase, the initial themes were reviewed to ensure they were robust and accurately reflected the data. This process involved two levels of review: first, the coded data is re-examined within each theme to ensure there was a consistent and meaningful pattern. Any themes that lacked sufficient supporting data or that were too broad were reworked, merged with other themes, or discarded. Second, the themes were considered in relation to the entire dataset to ensure that they provided a comprehensive picture of the participants' views on social cohesion in the context of BWKs. At this stage, it is ensured that the themes aligned with the research objectives and theoretical framework, particularly the dimensions of equality, living environment, and engagement & trust.

Defining and Naming Themes

Once the themes were finalized, the next step was to clearly define and name them. Defining the themes involved articulating the specific aspects of the data that each theme captured and determining how it contributed to answering the research questions. Each theme was given a clear, concise name that reflected its content and significance. At this stage, a detailed descriptions of each theme is made, explaining how the codes within it related to one another and to the broader context of the research. These descriptions included direct quotes from participants to illustrate the theme and provide concrete examples of the concepts being discussed.

Producing the Final Report

The final phase of thematic analysis involved producing a comprehensive report that presented the findings in a clear and structured manner. In this report, the identified themes were integrated into a narrative that addressed the research questions, particularly how BWKs contribute to the dimensions of social cohesion. Each theme was discussed in detail, supported by relevant excerpts from the interview transcripts. The findings were also linked back to the theoretical framework on social cohesion, showing how the themes reflected or extended existing understandings of the concept.

Thematic analysis was chosen for this study due to its flexibility and suitability for exploring complex social phenomena. This method allowed for a systematically analysis of the participants' narratives and to uncover patterns in how BWKs contribute to social cohesion. The approach was particularly effective in capturing the diversity of experiences and perspectives, reflecting the varied roles of participants (e.g., residents, workers, municipal employees) and the different community contexts represented by the BWKs.

Chapter 5 – Results

This chapter presents the findings of the research, analysing the data collected through semi-structured interviews with BWK coordinators, volunteers, residents, and municipal workers. The analysis focuses on the three key dimensions of social cohesion: equality, living environment, and engagement and trust. By examining the experiences and perspectives of various stakeholders, this chapter sheds light on the factors that contribute to the success of BWKs in fostering social cohesion within Utrecht's neighborhoods.

5.1 The people behind the BWK

Table 1111 (appendix 2) presents a consolidated overview of key statements extracted from interviews conducted with coordinators, volunteers, and interns from three BWKs in Utrecht: De Verbinding, Het Hart van Leidsche Rijn, and TOP. These individuals are the operational backbone of the BWKs, directly implementing programs and interacting with residents. Their insights offer a rich perspective on the factors contributing to the success and challenges faced by these community hubs.

Central to the BWK's identity is the creation of a welcoming and inclusive environment. Interviewees consistently described a 'living room' atmosphere, characterized by low thresholds and a strong emphasis on accessibility for all residents. This aligns with the broader goal of breaking down social barriers and promoting inclusivity. As VV2 (09:10) aptly stated, *“We do not define anything for the neighbourhood, we are there for the neighbourhood”*, encapsulating the BWKs' commitment to responding to the evolving needs and aspirations of their communities. This is also confirmed by the claim about the informal appearance of the BWKs, according to six interviewees, this makes for more accessible and reachable location for insecure residents. A key finding is the emphasis on resident-centred service delivery. BWKs prioritize active engagement with residents, seeking to understand their needs and tailoring programs accordingly. This approach is exemplified in the statement. *“My preference is for the personalised approach, one that is tailor-made.”* (HC1, 06:02) Offering tailor-made solutions to residents was mentioned by several interviewees. This is achieved by the extensive cooperation with residents, which is a very important part of BWKs. Listening to residents is highlighted in the next statement, *“Local residents come with their ideas and we look at it like, is this possible?”* (VV2, 10:18). By empowering residents to shape the direction of the BWK, these community hubs cultivate a sense of ownership and agency among community members.

Beyond service provision, BWKs function as catalysts for social interaction and relationship building. As TC1 (10:26) highlighted, *“By building a sense of community with people you don't normally encounter like that”*, BWKs create spaces for residents to connect across diverse backgrounds and interests. This role is particularly crucial in neighborhoods experiencing rapid change or demographic shifts, as it fosters a sense of belonging and shared identity. Respecting the

backgrounds of residents is confirmed by two interviews (VC1 & HC1), here it was strongly emphasised that against the policy of the neighbourhood teams, they precisely do not ask about residents' backgrounds. According to them, this actually creates a place where residents are more likely to be open and feel at home with the BWKs. The priority is further reinforced by the negative statement around one of the bigger challenges, mixing different cultural backgrounds.

The BWKs also serve as intermediaries between residents and external institutions. They navigate complex systems and advocate for residents' needs, as evidenced by the description of BWK staff as "interpreters between residents and between resident and municipality" (VC1, VV1, TC1 & HC1). This bridging role is essential for ensuring that residents' voices are heard and their needs are met. Moreover, BWKs often collaborate with local organizations to offer a comprehensive range of services, expanding their capacity to support residents in various life domains. This cooperation with smaller organisations is strong, as they are often community-driven. However, there is a desire from the BWKs to create strong ties with larger institutions and organisations. In the negative statements, VC1 and HC1 talk about how the BWKs are seen as a less serious player in social policy. A recurring theme among the interviewed coordinators and volunteers was the challenge of establishing and maintaining a strong brand identity for the BWKs. As indicated by multiple respondents, "Name recognition of the BWK is one of the biggest challenges" (VC1, VV2, TC1, HC1). This lack of awareness among the broader community can hinder efforts to attract new users and build a sustainable client base. Moreover, the limited mutual contact between different BWKs, as expressed by VC1, TC1, and HC1, presents an obstacle to knowledge sharing and collaborative initiatives. The absence of a unified brand identity and limited inter-organizational communication can negatively impact the overall effectiveness of the BWK network. Without a clear and consistent image, it becomes more difficult to position BWKs as essential community resources. Additionally, the lack of collaboration between different BWKs can lead to duplication of efforts and missed opportunities to share best practices and resources. These challenges underscore the need for a more coordinated approach to branding and networking among BWKs to maximize their collective impact.

In conclusion, these interviews underscore the pivotal role of BWKs in fostering social cohesion within Utrecht's neighborhoods. By creating welcoming spaces, responding to resident needs, and building bridges between community members and external institutions, BWKs contribute significantly to the well-being and resilience of local communities. However, ongoing efforts are needed to address the challenges identified in this research and to ensure the continued success of these valuable community resources.

5.2 Resident experience

By understanding the needs, expectations, and satisfaction levels of residents, this part aims to assess the effectiveness of BWKs in fostering social cohesion and meeting community needs. Table 12 (appendix 2) presents a consolidated overview of key statements extracted from interviews with residents who have used the three BWKs: De Verbinding, Het Hart van Leidsche Rijn, and TOP. Similar to the analysis of staff perspectives, this table categorizes statements into positive and negative themes, providing a quantitative measure of the frequency with which certain sentiments were expressed.

This research delves into the critical function of BWKs in cultivating social cohesion within Utrecht's diverse neighborhoods. By examining the perspectives of residents who have utilized three distinct BWKs, this study offers valuable insights into the multifaceted roles these community hubs play in enhancing resident well-being and fostering a sense of belonging. A central theme emerging from the interviews is the inclusive and welcoming atmosphere that characterizes BWKs. Residents consistently highlighted the "low-threshold" nature of these spaces, emphasizing the ease with which individuals from diverse backgrounds can access and participate in activities. As VR1 aptly stated, "*The BWK is precisely a place where everyone is allowed to be themselves*" (03:25). This sense of inclusivity is further reinforced by the physical environment, with respondents noting the clean, comfortable, and inviting atmosphere that fosters a sense of belonging.

Beyond their physical attributes, BWKs serve as valuable resources for residents seeking support and assistance. Many respondents appreciated the personalized approach offered by BWK staff, who are often familiar with residents' individual needs and circumstances. The statement "Personal help is offered per resident, which is specific to that resident" (VR1, HR1, HR2, TR2) underscores the importance of individualized support in fostering positive experiences and building strong relationships between residents and BWK staff. This personalized approach demonstrates the BWKs' commitment to meeting the unique needs of each individual, creating a sense of care and understanding that fosters a welcoming and supportive environment. This personalized support, coupled with the availability of practical resources like computers and printers, helps to alleviate challenges faced by residents and fosters a sense of empowerment.

Moreover, BWKs play a crucial role in fostering social connections and building a sense of community. Residents frequently expressed a strong sense of safety and trust within the BWK environment, highlighting the importance of these factors in facilitating social interaction. As HR1 noted, "*I feel safe here*" (02:19), a sentiment shared by many participants. The welcoming atmosphere and the opportunity to connect with individuals from diverse backgrounds contribute to a sense of community cohesion, as evidenced by statements like "*I chat with everyone and everyone chats with each other*" (HR2, 04:58).

The BWKs' role extends beyond mere social interaction. They also serve as catalysts for community engagement and empowerment. By offering opportunities for residents to participate in activities, events, and decision-making processes, BWKs foster a sense of ownership and agency among community members. This can lead to increased civic participation and a stronger sense of community resilience.

Respondents expressed a desire for a more diverse range of activities and programs that cater to specific interests and needs. This suggests that expanding the offerings can enhance the appeal of BWKs and attract a wider range of residents. Moreover, while BWKs generally foster an inclusive environment, there is a need for ongoing efforts to ensure that all residents feel equally included and represented. This may involve implementing specific strategies to address potential barriers faced by marginalized groups or individuals with unique needs. By proactively addressing these areas, BWKs can further solidify their role as inclusive and welcoming community spaces.

In conclusion, these interviews underscore the pivotal role of BWKs in fostering social cohesion within Utrecht's neighborhoods. By creating inclusive and welcoming spaces, providing personalized support, and facilitating social interaction, BWKs contribute significantly to the well-being and resilience of local communities. Future efforts should focus on expanding the range of activities and programs offered by BWKs, while also ensuring that these spaces remain accessible and inclusive to all residents, regardless of background or circumstances.

5.3 Municipal influence and balancing the different social spaces

The interviews conducted with the municipal workers (MW1, MW2, and MW3) from the social policy department of the Municipality of Utrecht reveal important insights into the role of the municipality in fostering social cohesion, the function of municipal community centres, and the challenges that the municipality faces in supporting initiatives such as BWKs. Table 13 (appendix 2) highlights the key statements from the interviews.

The concept of social cohesion is central to Utrecht's approach to community building, with the municipality placing great importance on facilitating spaces where residents can connect, engage, and participate in civic life. According to MW2, the municipality is well aware of the financial benefits of high social cohesion, a concept that underscores the broader advantages of building strong, integrated communities that contribute to overall societal well-being. Community centres play a vital role in this endeavour. As MW3 notes, "*both forms of facilities play an important role in our neighbourhood*" (MW3, 10:41), with municipal centres serving as formal hubs of social interaction and BWKs offering a more informal, grassroots alternative.

The municipal community centres are designed to provide residents with access to services, programs, and social opportunities. However, the responsibility for these centres largely falls to the welfare organisations, with MW1 and MW2 pointing out that "filling out the programme for the community centres mainly concerns the welfare organisations." This highlights a division of roles between the municipality and external partners, where welfare organisations are entrusted with the day-to-day management of the centres. The municipality, meanwhile, supports these efforts through funding, with MW1 and MW3 stating that the community centres are paid through a fixed arrangement per year. However, while the municipal centres provide a wide range of services, they may not always meet the needs of every resident.

One of the main issues raised by the municipal workers is the question of accessibility to these community spaces. There is a growing recognition that not all residents feel comfortable using the community centres. According to MW1, "*some residents may feel that community centres or other social spaces are not for them because of their age, income level, or background*" (MW1, 23:23). This reflects the challenges posed by social segmentation, where some individuals or groups may perceive these spaces as exclusionary, despite the municipality's efforts to ensure inclusivity. The interviews also shed light on the stigma attached to certain social spaces. MW1 and MW3 both mention the challenge of addressing the stigma associated with certain social spaces, implying that some locations may carry negative connotations for certain groups of residents. This highlights the complex social dynamics at play, where spaces designed to foster cohesion may inadvertently reinforce feelings of exclusion or alienation among some segments of the population.

Another critical issue is the lack of awareness about available services. As MW2 points out, "*sometimes people just don't know that there are certain activities or facilities that could be of interest to them*" (MW2, 17:33). This suggests a gap in communication between the municipality and the community, where opportunities for engagement may exist, but residents are not sufficiently informed about them. Ensuring that information reaches all community members, especially those who may be less connected to formal municipal channels, is vital to improving participation rates and making community centres more inclusive.

Alongside the formal community centres, the BWKs play a complementary role in Utrecht's social infrastructure. These informal community spaces are highly valued for their accessibility and grassroots nature, providing a less formal and often more welcoming environment than the larger, municipal-run centres. As MW2 highlights, "*it is true that some residents may indeed prefer the more informal atmosphere of a BWK*" (MW2, 03:12). This sentiment is echoed in the general feedback from the municipal workers, who all emphasize the importance of BWKs in meeting the specific needs of their local communities.

However, despite their acknowledged value, BWKs face significant challenges, particularly in terms of funding. According to MW3, "*it is important to ensure that funding for these centres is not too limited*" (MW3, 03:21), a reflection of the fact that BWKs are often underfunded relative to their municipal counterparts. The BWKs themselves have expressed concerns about inadequate financial support, a situation that limits their ability to expand their offerings and reach more residents. While the municipality encourages BWKs to explore opportunities for partnerships and collaborations with other organisations (MW1, MW2, MW3), the reliance on external funding can only go so far. Without consistent and substantial municipal investment, BWKs may struggle to maintain the quality and scope of their services, which are crucial for fostering social cohesion at the local level.

One of the key themes that emerged from the interviews is the delicate balance between formal and informal social spaces. MW2 noted that "*finding the balance is an ongoing process*" (MW2, 10:18), which suggests that the municipality is continuously trying to navigate the varying needs of the community. The municipal community centres, while formal and well-organized, may not offer the same level of flexibility or grassroots engagement that the BWKs provide. On the other hand, BWKs, while more adaptable to community needs, often face financial and operational constraints that limit their effectiveness. The municipality's approach to this balance appears to be one of complementarity. Both MW1 and MW3 emphasized that the municipality strives to fill in the specific needs of the BWK, while also ensuring that the more structured community centres continue to offer a wide range of services. This indicates a recognition that both types of social spaces are necessary to foster a cohesive community. Nevertheless, it is clear from the interviews that more work needs to be done to ensure that the informal, grassroots initiatives like BWKs receive the support they need to thrive.

In conclusion: the interviews with municipal workers in Utrecht provide a nuanced picture of the municipality's efforts to promote social cohesion through its community centres and support for BWKs. While the formal municipal centres serve as important hubs for civic engagement, there are clear challenges in ensuring that these spaces are accessible and welcoming to all residents. Issues of stigma, perceived exclusion, and lack of awareness must be addressed to ensure that these centres can truly serve as sites of social integration.

5.4 Similarities and contradictions between the staff and residents perspective

Table 7 presents a comparative analysis of key statements made by coordinators, volunteers, interns and residents regarding BWKs in Utrecht. This comparison is essential for understanding the alignment between the perspectives of those who operate and manage BWKs and the experiences of residents who utilize these community spaces. By examining similarities and contradictions between staff and resident perspectives, this analysis can shed light on the extent to which BWKs are effectively meeting the needs and expectations of their communities. It can also identify areas where there may be misalignments or gaps between the intentions of staff and the experiences of residents.

Table 7, Key similarities and contradictions between staff and resident perspectives on BWKs

Theme	Similarities	Contradictions
Inclusivity and Welcoming Environment	Both staff and residents perceive BWKs as inclusive and welcoming.	Some residents may face challenges in accessing certain activities or services.
Personalized Support	Staff prioritize personalized support, and residents appreciate this approach.	No major contradictions identified.
Community Building	Both staff and residents recognize the importance of BWKs for fostering social connections.	No major contradictions identified.
Accessibility	Staff perceive BWKs as accessible, but some residents may face challenges.	Potential need for further efforts to ensure inclusivity.
Cultural Representation	Staff acknowledge the importance of cultural diversity, but some residents desire greater representation.	Efforts may be needed to enhance cultural inclusivity.
Activities and Programming	Staff and residents may have differing perspectives on the range of activities offered.	There may be a need to expand the variety of activities.

Both staff and residents consistently highlighted the inclusive and welcoming atmosphere of BWKs. This shared perception is crucial for fostering a sense of belonging and community. Furthermore, the staff emphasized their commitment to providing personalized support to residents, while residents expressed appreciation for the individualized attention they received. This alignment suggests that BWKs are effectively meeting the specific needs of their members. Both staff and

residents recognized the importance of BWKs in fostering social connections and building a sense of community. This shared understanding underscores the positive impact of these spaces on social cohesion. The tables 10 and 11 also highlight contradictions. While staff perceived BWKs as highly accessible, some residents noted challenges in accessing certain activities or services. This discrepancy may indicate a need for further efforts to ensure inclusivity for all residents. Also, while staff acknowledged the importance of cultural diversity, some residents expressed a desire for greater representation of different cultures within the programming and staff of BWKs. This suggests that there may be opportunities to enhance the cultural inclusivity of these spaces. Staff and residents had varying perspectives on the range and availability of activities offered by BWKs. Some residents expressed a desire for a wider variety of activities, while staff may have focused on the existing offerings. This discrepancy highlights the importance of ongoing evaluation and adaptation of programming to meet evolving resident needs.

Understanding these similarities and contradictions is crucial for enhancing the effectiveness of BWKs in fostering social cohesion. By aligning the perspectives of staff and residents, BWKs can ensure that their efforts are aligned with the needs and expectations of the community they serve. Addressing areas of discrepancy, such as accessibility and cultural representation, can help to create a more inclusive and welcoming environment for all residents. Furthermore, by actively seeking feedback from residents and incorporating their insights into program development and decision-making, BWKs can strengthen their responsiveness to the community and ensure that they remain relevant and effective in meeting changing needs.

Table 10 provides valuable insights into the alignment between staff and resident perspectives on BWKs. While there are areas of agreement, the identified contradictions highlight the need for ongoing efforts to ensure that BWKs are truly inclusive, responsive, and aligned with the needs of the communities they serve. By addressing these areas, BWKs can further strengthen their role in fostering social cohesion and well-being within Utrecht's neighborhoods.

5.5 Similarities and contradictions between the key statements of the BWKs and the municipal workers

Table 8 presents a comparative analysis of the themes emerging from interviews with BWK staff, residents, and municipal workers. The findings reveal both shared objectives and notable contradictions in how BWKs and municipal services approach social cohesion within Utrecht's neighborhoods. This section delves deeper into these similarities and differences, highlighting the implications for community engagement and service provision.

Table 8, Similarities and contradictions between the key statements of the BWKs and the municipal workers

Themes	Similarities	Contradictions
Inclusivity and accessibility	Emphasis on welcoming, low-threshold spaces for all residents.	Differences in addressing broader social barriers vs. local comfort levels.
Personalized support and resident involvement	Both prioritize tailored support to meet resident needs.	BWKs emphasize resident responsibility, municipal centre focus on formal support.
Role of BWKs vs. municipal centres	Seen as complementary community resources.	Tensions in balancing informal autonomy vs. formal oversight.
Challenges of recognition and funding	Agreement on the need for financial support.	BWKs report funding frustrations, municipalities view funding efforts as adequate.
Community engagement and cohesion	Shared goal of fostering social connections.	BWKs focus on multicultural cohesion, municipalities on systemic barriers.

One of the most striking similarities is the shared emphasis on creating low-threshold, welcoming environments. Both BWK staff and municipal workers recognize the value of making community spaces accessible and inviting, which they believe is essential for fostering a sense of belonging among residents. This "living room" atmosphere of BWKs was frequently praised for its inclusivity, offering a space where people from diverse backgrounds feel comfortable to gather. However, despite these efforts, the interviews revealed that there are still barriers to true inclusivity. While BWK staff and residents appreciate the informal and welcoming nature of these spaces, they also highlighted instances where certain groups feel excluded or uncomfortable. This contrasts with the municipal workers' focus on addressing broader segmentation issues, such as economic disparities and social stigma, which may prevent full participation from all community members.

Another shared priority between BWKs and the municipality is the commitment to personalized support tailored to the unique needs of individuals. Both sides agree that understanding and responding to the specific needs of residents is critical for effective community engagement. For instance, BWKs often provide a level of flexibility that allows them to quickly adapt their services based on immediate community feedback. However, the approach differs significantly: BWKs rely on grassroots involvement, encouraging residents to take an active role in shaping programs and initiatives, thereby fostering a sense of ownership and responsibility. In contrast, municipal workers

are more focused on structured, formal support through established welfare organizations, which can sometimes lead to a more top-down approach. This divergence points to a fundamental difference in how each group views the balance between resident autonomy and formal oversight.

The interviews revealed a consensus on the complementary nature of BWKs and formal municipal centre. Both BWK staff and municipal workers acknowledged the value of having a mix of informal and formal community spaces. BWKs are seen as more flexible and responsive, acting as grassroots hubs for community-driven initiatives, while municipal centre provide more structured and consistent support services. Despite this alignment, there are underlying tensions regarding the balance between these spaces. Municipal workers expressed concerns about maintaining structural oversight and ensuring that all services are integrated into the broader welfare system. On the other hand, BWK staff emphasized their autonomy and the freedom to innovate outside the constraints of formal municipal frameworks, which they see as a strength in addressing localized community needs.

Funding and institutional support emerged as critical issues for both BWK staff and municipal workers, but with contrasting perspectives. BWK staff frequently expressed frustration with inconsistent funding and a lack of formal recognition from the municipality. They highlighted the challenges of operating with limited resources, which can hinder their ability to offer sustained support. In contrast, municipal workers were more optimistic, suggesting that ongoing funding efforts are sufficient and that BWKs are increasingly recognized as valuable partners in community development. This discrepancy suggests a gap in communication and expectations between BWKs and municipal authorities, which could impact long-term collaboration and support.

Both BWK staff and municipal workers share a commitment to fostering social cohesion and community building. The focus on creating connections across diverse groups is a shared goal, and both parties recognize the importance of engaging residents in meaningful ways. However, the challenges of achieving multicultural cohesion were particularly emphasized by BWK staff, who noted that while they strive to create inclusive environments, cultural differences and social isolation remain persistent barriers. Municipal workers, meanwhile, tend to focus on broader systemic barriers such as exclusion and stigma, rather than the everyday cultural dynamics that BWKs encounter in their work.

5.5 Comparing the community centres and the BWKs

Table 9 presents a comprehensive comparison of BWKs and community centre within the municipality of Utrecht at an organizational level. This analysis is crucial for understanding the distinct characteristics and roles of these two types of community spaces and their potential contributions to social cohesion. Community centre primarily rely on legal frameworks and municipal grants for their financial sustenance, reflecting their formal affiliation with the municipality. In contrast, BWKs adopt

a more independent approach, relying on a combination of voluntary commitments and municipal subsidies. This distinction highlights the different sources of funding available to these two types of community spaces. Community centre are typically managed by the municipality or affiliated welfare organizations, emphasizing a top-down approach. BWKs, on the other hand, are managed by independent cooperations or voluntary social workers, reflecting a grassroots and community-driven model. This difference in ownership and governance structures has significant implications for the decision-making processes and priorities of these organizations.

Community centre often adhere to a standardized umbrella policy with centralized management, ensuring consistency across different locations. BWKs, however, have greater flexibility in their organizational structure, allowing them to adapt to the specific needs and preferences of their individual communities. This decentralized approach can foster a stronger sense of ownership and engagement among community members.

Table 9, comparison BWK and community centre in the municipality of Utrecht at an organizational level

	Community centre	The BWK approach
Financial income	Legal framework and municipal grants	Voluntary commitment and municipal subsidies
Owner and policymakers	Municipality and welfare organizations / social brokers	Independent cooperations and voluntary / social workers
Organization	Umbrella policy with management per location	Residents themselves with professional help in the background
Link to the municipality	Clear link to municipality, through logo's, personal and house-style	No (clear) link to the municipality, only if the municipality is the lender
Service provision	Provides services that are often essential and non-competitive	Provides services or goods that meet the specific needs of its members
Flexibility and innovation	Tends to be less flexible due to bureaucratic structures and the need for adherence to public policy	Generally more flexible and adaptive to change

Community centre maintain a clear link to the municipality, often evident through the use of municipal logos, personal styles, and adherence to municipal policies. BWKs, on the other hand, have no formal link to the municipality, except when receiving municipal subsidies. This distinction highlights the degree of autonomy and independence enjoyed by BWKs. Community centre generally provide services that are essential and non-competitive, often aligned with broader municipal goals. BWKs, in contrast, focus on providing services or goods that meet the specific needs of their

members, demonstrating a more responsive and tailored approach. This flexibility allows BWKs to address the unique challenges and aspirations of their communities.

Due to bureaucratic structures and the need for adherence to public policy, community centre may face limitations in their ability to adapt to change and innovate. BWKs, with their more decentralized structure and community-driven approach, are generally more flexible and adaptive, allowing them to respond effectively to evolving community needs and explore new initiatives. The differences highlighted in table 9 have important implications for the role of these community spaces in fostering social cohesion. BWKs, with their independent status, grassroots approach, and focus on meeting specific member needs, may be better positioned to cultivate a strong sense of community ownership and engagement. Their flexibility and adaptability also allow them to respond more effectively to evolving community dynamics and tailor their services accordingly. Community centre, while providing essential services, may face challenges in fostering the same level of community ownership and engagement due to their bureaucratic structures and adherence to municipal policies. However, their formal link to the municipality can provide access to resources and support that may not be readily available to BWKs.

Table 10, comparison of BWK and community centre in the municipality of Utrecht at the resident level

	Community centre	The BWK approach
Outreach to users	Non-active attitude seeking new residents or through municipal papers / letters	Active attitude to seek out new and vulnerable residents
Appearance of space	Formal, often a front desk	Informal, targeted and quick referrals
Financial support for residents	Only through the neighbourhood team	On a personal level
Cultural and social alignment	Programs and activities are generally designed to be culturally inclusive and to appeal to a wide range of residents	Reflecting on the cultural and social preferences of its members more closely
Activities	From above and on request of residents	Only upon request of residents
Space rental	Space rental on request and payment	Space rental on request and free of charge

Table 10 provides a valuable comparison of BWKs and community centre within the municipality of Utrecht from the perspective of residents. By examining differences in outreach

strategies, physical appearance, financial support, cultural alignment, activities, and space rental practices, this table sheds light on the unique value propositions of each model and their potential impact on community members. Community centre typically adopt a non-active approach to outreach, relying on residents to seek them out through municipal papers or letters. This can limit their reach, particularly among vulnerable or marginalized populations. In contrast, BWKs demonstrate a more proactive approach, actively seeking out new and vulnerable residents, demonstrating a greater commitment to inclusion and accessibility. Community centre often maintain a formal appearance, resembling a traditional office or service centre. This formal atmosphere may create a barrier for some residents, particularly those who are unfamiliar with or uncomfortable in such settings. BWKs, on the other hand, strive for an informal and welcoming atmosphere, creating a more relaxed and approachable environment that may be more appealing to a wider range of residents.

Community centre typically offer financial support exclusively through the neighborhood team, which may limit access for residents who may not be familiar with or comfortable seeking assistance. BWKs, in contrast, offer financial support on a personal level, fostering a more individualized and responsive approach that can make it easier for residents to access needed resources. Community centre generally design programs and activities to be broadly inclusive and appeal to a wide range of residents. However, BWKs demonstrate a stronger commitment to reflecting the cultural and social preferences of their members more closely. This can create a more inclusive and welcoming environment for residents from diverse backgrounds. Community centre offer a range of activities, both proactively and upon resident request. BWKs, on the other hand, focus more exclusively on activities that are explicitly requested by residents. This approach can be more responsive to the specific needs and preferences of the community but may limit the range of activities available. Community centre typically charge for space rental, which can be a barrier for residents with financial constraints. BWKs, in contrast, offer space rental on request and free of charge, promoting greater accessibility and inclusivity.

The differences highlighted in table 10 have important implications for the role of these community spaces in fostering social cohesion. BWKs, with their proactive outreach, informal atmosphere, personalized support, and free space rental, may be better positioned to attract and engage a wider range of residents, particularly those who may feel marginalized or hesitant to seek assistance. By aligning programs and activities with the cultural and social preferences of their members, BWKs can also create a stronger sense of belonging and inclusivity. In contrast, community centre, with their more formal approach and reliance on resident initiative, may face challenges in reaching out to vulnerable or marginalized populations. While they offer a range of activities, the focus on resident requests may limit their ability to proactively address emerging needs or foster connections among residents with diverse backgrounds.

Conclusion

This research has sought to understand the role of BWKs in promoting social cohesion within Utrecht's neighborhoods and to compare their effectiveness to traditional municipal social services. By using the theoretical framework, examining the interview data, and using the specific context of Utrecht, this study has provided valuable insights into the potential of non-municipal social services in fostering social cohesion using the main research question:

How do non-municipal social services, such as BWKs, contribute to fostering social cohesion within Utrecht's neighborhoods, and what lessons can be learned from these independent community centres?

Literature overview and key findings

The literature overview presented in Chapter 1 emphasized the importance of inclusivity, personalized support, and community building as key factors in fostering social cohesion. These findings emphasized the importance of social cohesion on health, liveability and municipal savings. It also helped to understand that social cohesion is something that is effected by the urban environment. These findings were supported by the conducted interviews.

Inclusivity: beyond the explicit statements of staff and residents, the observed welcoming atmosphere and the presence of diverse participants within BWKs further reinforce the inclusive nature of these spaces. This aligns with the theoretical framework's emphasis on creating environments where all individuals feel safe, respected, and valued.

Personalized support: the interviews revealed numerous instances of staff providing tailored support to residents, addressing their individual needs and challenges. This aligns with the theoretical framework's emphasis on the significance of personalized support in fostering social cohesion and building strong relationships.

Community building: the interviews highlighted the numerous opportunities for social interaction and community engagement provided by BWKs. Residents reported forming friendships, participating in group activities, and feeling a sense of belonging within their local communities. These findings strongly support the theoretical framework's emphasis on the role of community spaces in promoting social interaction and belonging.

Answer to the main research question

This research has demonstrated that BWKs play a significant role in fostering social cohesion within Utrecht's neighborhoods. Their unique approach, characterized by a focus on non-municipal social services, personalized support, and community-driven initiatives, offers several advantages over traditional municipal social services.

BWKs have proven to be inclusive and welcoming spaces, fostering a sense of belonging and acceptance for all residents. This is evident in the numerous reports from both staff and residents of the welcoming atmosphere and the ease of access to BWK services. By creating safe and inclusive spaces, BWKs break down social barriers and promote interaction among individuals from diverse backgrounds. The personalized approach adopted by BWKs has been instrumental in addressing the specific needs of individual residents. By providing tailored support and guidance, BWKs have empowered residents to overcome challenges, access essential services, and improve their overall well-being. This personalized approach fosters a sense of trust and connection between residents and BWK staff, strengthening social bonds and promoting community resilience. BWKs have successfully fostered a sense of community ownership by encouraging resident participation and involvement in decision-making processes. Residents have actively contributed to the development of programs, activities, and initiatives within their local BWKs. This community-driven approach empowers residents and strengthens their sense of agency, leading to increased civic engagement and a stronger sense of belonging.

BWKs have demonstrated their potential to reach marginalized populations and address specific needs within their communities. By providing accessible services, support, and opportunities for social interaction, BWKs have helped to reduce social isolation, combat discrimination, and promote inclusion. This is particularly important in urban areas where marginalized groups may face significant challenges in accessing traditional social services. BWKs offer several advantages over traditional municipal social services, including greater flexibility, responsiveness, and community ownership. Their non-municipal status allows them to operate independently of bureaucratic constraints, enabling them to adapt quickly to changing needs and priorities. Additionally, BWKs are often closer to the community they serve, fostering stronger connections with residents and a deeper understanding of their needs.

However, it is important to acknowledge that BWKs are not without their challenges. These initiatives may face limitations in terms of funding, staffing, and resources. Furthermore, they may struggle to reach certain segments of the population, particularly those who are unaware of their existence or who may be hesitant to seek assistance. To further strengthen the impact of BWKs, it is essential to address these challenges and implement strategies to enhance their effectiveness. This includes increasing funding and support for BWKs, promoting collaboration with other organizations, raising awareness of their services, and evaluating and adapting programs to meet evolving needs.

By addressing these challenges and building upon their strengths, BWKs can continue to play a vital role in fostering social cohesion, promoting community engagement, and improving the quality of life for residents in Utrecht's neighborhoods.

Discussion

This research has demonstrated that BWKs play a significant role in fostering social cohesion within Utrecht's neighborhoods. Their unique approach, characterized by a focus on non-municipal social services, personalized support, and community-driven initiatives, offers significant advantages over traditional municipal social services. By providing welcoming, accessible, and inclusive environments, BWKs contribute to a sense of community ownership, resilience, and agency among residents.

Social cohesion and community ownership: The role of BWKs

BWKs have been shown to be inclusive and welcoming spaces that foster a sense of belonging and acceptance for all residents. The accounts from both staff and residents highlight the welcoming atmosphere and the ease of access to services that distinguish BWKs. This emphasis on inclusion and accessibility aligns closely with social cohesion theory, particularly the dimension of "social bonds and bridges" as discussed by Forrest and Kearns (2001). By creating safe, inclusive spaces that facilitate social interaction among diverse individuals, BWKs reduce social barriers, bridging differences in socio-economic status, cultural background, and age.

The personalized approach adopted by BWKs has been instrumental in addressing the specific needs of individual residents, which reinforces the principle of "tailored support" in community development practices (Craig, 2007). By offering guidance that is specific to residents' personal needs, BWKs empower individuals to overcome challenges, access essential services, and improve their well-being. This personalized support not only strengthens trust and rapport between BWK staff and residents but also cultivates mutual support among residents, reinforcing the social bonds that are foundational to social cohesion.

Moreover, BWKs have fostered a strong sense of community ownership through resident participation and involvement in decision-making processes. Residents actively shape programs, activities, and initiatives, resulting in a dynamic that contrasts with the more hierarchical structure typical of municipal services. This community-driven model of decision-making encourages civic engagement, heightens residents' sense of agency, and strengthens their attachment to the community, reflecting Putnam's (2007) assertion that active civic engagement is a core component of social capital and cohesion.

Addressing marginalization and isolation

BWKs have also demonstrated their potential to reach marginalized populations, providing accessible services, support, and opportunities for social interaction that mitigate social isolation and promote inclusion. This role is particularly crucial in urban settings, where marginalized groups, such as recent immigrants, lower-income individuals, and the elderly may face challenges in accessing traditional

municipal services due to language, financial, or bureaucratic barriers. The BWK model circumvents these barriers by adopting a more flexible, approachable framework.

This finding resonates with Oldenburg's (1989) concept of "third places," which describes non-institutional spaces where people gather informally to connect with others. Oldenburg emphasized that third places facilitate social cohesion precisely because they are informal and free from the constraints of bureaucratic oversight. In this way, BWKs function as modern-day third places, promoting both structured and spontaneous interactions that are vital for the social integration of marginalized individuals.

Policy and practical implications

While the findings underscore the effectiveness of BWKs in promoting social cohesion, they also highlight the need for sustained support to enhance their impact. BWKs face considerable challenges, including limitations in funding, staffing, and resources. Furthermore, they may struggle to reach individuals who are unaware of their services or who feel reluctant to seek help. Addressing these challenges is crucial for maximizing the potential of BWKs, and the policy implications for Utrecht and other municipalities interested in similar initiatives are clear.

One policy recommendation is the provision of stable funding and institutional support for BWKs. Although their non-municipal status allows them to operate independently of bureaucratic constraints, it also means they are more susceptible to fluctuations in funding and resource availability. Policy frameworks could be developed to integrate BWKs as complementary, autonomous extensions of municipal services, ensuring that they retain their flexibility while benefiting from stable funding sources. Additionally, cross-sector collaborations between BWKs, municipal social services, local businesses, and NGOs could create a network of support, enhancing BWKs' resources and reach.

Promoting awareness of BWK services among the broader population is also essential. Many BWKs lack the marketing infrastructure to effectively communicate their offerings to residents who could benefit from their services. Municipalities could partner with BWKs to create awareness campaigns that highlight their role and accessibility, particularly targeting marginalized or isolated groups. This would help reduce the stigma associated with seeking community support, which can be a barrier for some individuals.

Broader implications for social cohesion in urban contexts

The results of this research offer broader insights into the role of community-driven spaces in promoting social cohesion within urban neighborhoods. Traditional municipal services often follow a "top-down" approach, which may be less effective in building the sense of agency and ownership that residents gain from actively participating in their community's initiatives. BWKs exemplify the impact of a "bottom-up" approach, where community members play an integral role in shaping their shared environment, thereby fostering attachment to both place and community.

This community-driven model could serve as a prototype for social cohesion efforts in other urban areas. By emphasizing flexibility, inclusivity, and resident engagement, similar initiatives could empower residents to take ownership of their communities, cultivating social resilience even in diverse and densely populated cities. As cities continue to grow, the BWK model offers a promising path forward, allowing for adaptation to residents' unique needs and priorities while promoting the integration of new and diverse populations.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this research, the following recommendations are offered to enhance the effectiveness of BWKs in fostering social cohesion within Utrecht's neighborhoods, the first recommendations are written for the Utrecht Municipality:

1. Increase funding and support for BWKs: provide adequate funding to ensure the sustainability of BWKs and their ability to offer a wide range of programs and services. This includes funding for staff salaries, operational expenses, and program development. Additionally, the municipality can provide technical support, training, and mentorship to BWKs to enhance their capacity and effectiveness.
2. Promote collaboration between BWKs and other municipal services: facilitate partnerships between BWKs and other relevant departments, such as social services, housing, and education, to create a more integrated approach to addressing resident needs. This can involve joint projects, shared resources, and cross-referrals between different services.
3. Raise awareness of BWKs: implement a comprehensive public awareness campaign to increase the visibility of BWKs and attract a wider range of residents, particularly those who may be marginalized or hesitant to seek assistance. This can include advertising campaigns, community events, and partnerships with local media outlets.
4. Evaluate and adapt BWK policies: regularly evaluate the effectiveness of BWK policies and make necessary adjustments to ensure they remain aligned with the evolving needs of the community. This can involve conducting surveys, focus groups, and other forms of evaluation to gather feedback from residents, staff, and volunteers.

Recommendations for BWKs:

1. Expand outreach efforts: proactively seek out new residents and vulnerable populations to ensure that BWKs are accessible to all members of the community. This can involve partnering with local organizations, using social media, and organizing outreach events in neighborhoods with high concentrations of marginalized populations.
2. Increase cultural diversity within BWKs: implement strategies to promote cultural inclusivity and ensure that BWKs reflect the diversity of the communities they serve. This can include

hiring staff from diverse backgrounds, offering culturally relevant programs, and creating welcoming spaces for individuals from all cultures.

3. Offer a wider range of activities: expand the range of programs and activities offered by BWKs to cater to the diverse interests and needs of residents. This can include activities related to education, employment, health, recreation, and social support.
4. Strengthen partnerships with local organizations: collaborate with other community-based organizations to create a more comprehensive network of support for residents. This can involve sharing resources, referrals, and joint initiatives.
5. Evaluate and adapt programs: regularly evaluate the effectiveness of BWK programs and make necessary adjustments to ensure they remain relevant and responsive to the changing needs of the community. This can involve collecting feedback from residents, staff, and volunteers, and making data-driven decisions to improve program quality.

By implementing these recommendations, Utrecht can further strengthen the role of BWKs in fostering social cohesion and creating more vibrant and inclusive communities. These recommendations are based on the findings of the research and aim to address the challenges and opportunities identified in the study.

Reliability and validity

While this research has provided valuable insights into the role of BWKs in fostering social cohesion within Utrecht's neighborhoods, it is important to acknowledge its limitations and consider potential areas for improvement in future studies.

The research was conducted exclusively in Utrecht, limiting its generalizability to other urban contexts. While Utrecht's unique governance structure and social landscape provide a valuable case study, further research is needed to explore the applicability of the findings in other cities with varying demographic, economic, and cultural characteristics. While the sample of BWKs and participants was diverse, a larger sample size could have provided even greater statistical power and enhanced the generalizability of the findings. A larger sample would have allowed for more in-depth analysis of variations between different BWKs and communities. The research relied on self-reported data from interviews, which may introduce biases or limitations in terms of accuracy and representativeness. While interviews provide valuable qualitative insights, they may not capture the full range of perspectives or experiences within the community. To address this, future studies could consider incorporating additional data sources, such as observational data, quantitative surveys, or secondary data from government agencies. The research focused on the immediate and short-term impacts of BWKs. A longitudinal study would provide valuable insights into the long-term effects of these initiatives on social cohesion, community outcomes, and individual well-being. By tracking changes

over time, researchers could identify the cumulative effects of BWK interventions and assess their sustainability.

Despite these limitations, the research has demonstrated a high degree of validity and reliability. The use of a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative data, has strengthened the credibility of the findings. The triangulation of data from interviews and document analysis has also enhanced the validity of the research. The findings presented in the study are supported by both the theoretical framework and the empirical evidence collected through interviews. This alignment between theory and practice strengthens the credibility of the research and its potential to inform future policy and practice.

While this research has provided valuable insights into the role of BWKs in fostering social cohesion, it is important to acknowledge its limitations and consider potential areas for improvement in future studies. By addressing these limitations, future research can further strengthen the understanding of the factors that influence the effectiveness of community-based interventions and inform the development of more effective strategies for promoting social cohesion in urban environments.

Potential follow-up studies

Based on the recommendations presented in the previous sections, several potential follow-up studies can be identified to further explore the role of BWKs in fostering social cohesion and to inform the development of future community-based initiatives.

A longitudinal study would provide valuable insights into the long-term impact of BWKs on social cohesion, resident well-being, and community outcomes. By collecting data over time, researchers could track changes in social cohesion indicators, such as trust, safety, and community engagement. Additionally, longitudinal studies could examine the long-term effects of BWK interventions on individual residents, such as improvements in mental health, employment, or educational attainment. Secondly, a comparative study would allow for a direct comparison between BWKs and traditional municipal social services in terms of their effectiveness in fostering social cohesion. By examining similar services provided by both types of organizations, researchers could identify the unique advantages and limitations of each approach. This could include comparing outcomes, costs, and levels of resident satisfaction. Finally a study of the Role of BWKs in Addressing Specific Social Challenges. Focusing on specific social challenges, such as poverty, isolation, or discrimination, would allow researchers to investigate the role of BWKs in addressing these issues. This could involve conducting case studies or collecting data on specific outcomes related to these challenges. For example, researchers could examine the impact of BWKs on reducing poverty rates, increasing social inclusion, or improving educational outcomes for marginalized populations.

These follow-up studies could provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of BWKs and inform the development of future community-based initiatives. By building upon the findings of this research, these studies can contribute to a deeper understanding of the factors that influence the success of these initiatives and their potential to create more vibrant and inclusive communities.

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Appendix 1: Interview questions

Questions for the residents that use the BWK:

Use of the BWK

- How long have you been using the BWK?
- How often do you use the BWK?
- How did you join the BWK?
- What still keeps you using the BWK?

Equality

Accessibility and inclusion: Do you feel that people from different backgrounds (cultural, socio-economic, ability) have equal opportunities to participate in activities and events in the BWK?

Representation: Do you feel the diversity of the community is reflected in the programming, resources and staff of the BWK?

Living Environment

Atmosphere and comfort: Does the BWK provide a clean, comfortable and inviting space for residents to gather and socialise?

Meeting community needs: Are there sufficient facilities and resources available in the BWK to meet community needs?

Engagement & trust

Social cohesion: Do you feel a sense of trust and camaraderie among residents using the BWK? Do people care for each other and for the well-being of the space?

Shared responsibility: To what extent do you feel the BWK promotes a sense of shared responsibility for the well-being of the community, do residents take initiative to keep the BWK clean and welcoming?

Other social facilities

- Do you know of any other social facilities in the neighbourhood?
- Do you use them, why yes/no?
- Are there any reasons you are more or less likely to use the BWK?

Questions for the workers of the BWK:

The BWK

- How long have you been working at the BWK?
- Since when has this BWK existed?
- What is your role within this BWK?

Equality

Accessibility: When identifying areas for community rooms, how do you consider factors such as accessibility for people from different backgrounds and with different abilities?

Inclusion: Can you describe strategies used to ensure that the programming and resources offered by the neighbourhood room are inclusive and welcoming to all residents, regardless of cultural background or socioeconomic status?

Living environment

Atmosphere: How is the space in the community room designed to encourage social interaction and create a welcoming atmosphere for residents?

Meeting needs: Can you describe the process for identifying and responding to the specific needs of the community in determining the resources and facilities offered in the community room?

Engagement and trust

Shared responsibility: How does the community room foster a sense of shared responsibility for the well-being of the community and the maintenance of the facility itself?

Collaboration and engagement: How do you work with residents and local organisations to ensure that the neighbourhood room remains responsive to the changing needs of the community and creates a space where residents feel engaged and empowered?

Additional questions

- What do you think are some of the biggest challenges in promoting social cohesion within communities served by neighbourhood rooms?
- Have you seen specific examples of how the neighbourhood room has promoted stronger social ties within the community?
- Are there any innovative strategies or approaches you have used to improve the effectiveness of the neighbourhood room in promoting social cohesion?

Questions for the municipal workers:

Funding and accessibility

Allocation principles: Can you describe the criteria used to allocate funding for BWK compared to municipal community centres?

Accessibility: Given some residents' preference for BWK, are there concerns that the existing funding structure creates unintended barriers to accessibility (e.g. language, financial resources)?

Equality

Inclusiveness initiatives: Does the municipality implement specific initiatives to encourage inclusion of diverse populations (e.g. immigrants, low-income residents) in community centres supported by 'BWK'?

Marketing & Outreach: Are there strategies to ensure that information about both BWK and municipal centres effectively reaches residents with a language barrier or residents with socio-economic difficulties?

Living Environment

Space requirements: Does the municipality have regulations or recommendations regarding the physical characteristics (accessibility features, design) of community centres'?

Resource allocation: Are there limitations on the resources available to BWKs compared to community centres?

Engagement and trust

Evaluation and feedback: Does the municipality have mechanisms to collect feedback from residents and BWK staff on the effectiveness of BWK in promoting social cohesion within communities?

Long-term social cohesion: How does the municipality plan to ensure the long-term social cohesion of both community centres and BWK?

Additional questions:

- What do you think are the biggest challenges to ensuring that all residents, regardless of their background, feel comfortable and welcome when entering social spaces in the city?
- Are there ongoing discussions or plans within the municipality to possibly adjust funding or cooperation models between municipal centres and BWK?
- What are some ways forward that you see as valuable for improving social cohesion in Utrecht, given the role of both municipal centres and neighbourhood rooms?

Appendix 2: Key statements

Table 11, Key statements of the coordinators, interns and voluntary workers of the BWK, derived from interviews

Key statements	Quantity of individual claims	
<i>Positive statements</i>		
Creating a living room feeling	7	VC1, VV1, VV2, TC1, TI1, HC1 & HI1
Everyone is welcome, there is a very 'low threshold' here	6	VC1, VV1, TC1, TI1, HC1 & HI1
The BWK operates a lot more informally	6	VC1, VV2, TC1, TI1, HC1 & HI1
Asking residents about their needs	5	VC1, TC1, TI1, HC1 & HI1
We work extensively with small and local organisations	4	VC1, VV2, TC1 & HC1
Playing as interpreter between residents and between resident and municipality	4	VC1, VV1, TC1 & HC1
Forms assistance is an important part of the BWK	4	VV2, TC1, HC1 & HI1
Tailor-made programming for residents	4	VV1, TC1, TI1 & HC1
Offering services with the greatest demand	3	VC1, TC1 & HC1
Neighbourhood team sends residents to the BWK	2	VC1 & VV2
We do not ask about anyone's background	2	VC1 & HC1
At neighbourhood teams, background and living and housing situation are asked by default	1	HC1
Workers from different backgrounds help residents from similar backgrounds	1	TC1
Only if the municipality is co-financier of a programme is their name and logo mentioned	1	TC1
<i>Negative statements</i>		
Name recognition of the BWK is one of the biggest challenges	4	VC1, VV2, TC1 & HC1
There is little mutual contact between the BWKs	3	VC1, TC1 & HC1
The biggest challenge is mixing the large multicultural residents	2	TC1 & HC1
Institutions and organisations do not always take the BWK seriously for collaboration	2	VC1 & HC1

Table 12, Key statements of the residents of the BWK, derived from interviews

Key statements	Quantity of individual claims	
<i>Positive statements</i>		
BWK feels very low-threshold and accessible	6	VR1, VR2, HR2, TR1, TR2 & HR3
The interior of the BWK is clean and pleasant and feels like a living room	5	VR1, HR2, HR3, TR1 & TR2
Personal help is offered per resident, which is specific to that resident	4	VR1, HR1, HR2 & TR2
Residents are given responsibility for the BWK	4	HR2, VR2, HR3 & TR2
Close to the BWK there is a pleasant and nice atmosphere where many residents feel safe	3	VR1, TR2 & HR3
There is a safe feeling in the BWK	3	HR1, VR2 & TR1
There are many people from different cultural backgrounds here	3	VR1, HR2 & TR2
Residents help keep the BWK clean	2	HR1 & VR2
Many disadvantaged residents and residents with a migration background approach the BWK	2	HR2 & TR2
The BWK knows everything about it and I would rather not have that with the neighborhood team	1	HR2
<i>Negative statements</i>		
Not all activities are equally attended that are offered. More activities could be made for everyone.	3	VR1, TR2 & HR3
The BWK does not always stand out, this can also be pleasant for users but does ensure that other residents do not find it easily	1	TR2
Users also use other social services	1	HR3
Residents are more likely to feel comfortable with other residents from the same cultural background	1	VR2

Table 13, Key statements of the municipal workers of Utrecht, derived from interviews

Key statements	Quantity of individual claims	
<i>Positive statements</i>		
We try to fill in the specific needs of the BWK	3	MW1, MW2 & MW3
We encourage BWKs to explore opportunities for partnerships and collaborations with other organizations to expand their resources and reach	3	MW1, MW2 & MW3
The municipalities' community centres are paid through a fixed arrangement per year.	2	MW1 & MW3
Filling out the programme for the community centres mainly concerns the welfare organisations.	2	MW1 & MW2
From the municipality there are various requirements for the physical characteristics of a community centre, the BWK are not included here	2	MW1 & MW2
We are trying to explore the usefulness of neighbourhood houses, but this is mainly through the welfare organisations	2	MW1 & MW3
To improve social cohesion, several organisations need to work together to have a wider reach and offer a wider range of services.	2	MW2 & MW3
<i>Negative statements</i>		
A challenge is addressing the stigma associated with certain social spaces	2	MW1 & MW3
We are aware that community centres are less accessible to all residents	2	MW1 & MW2

Appendix 3: Transcript

Transcripts are in separate document called:

Thesis_Sam de Wilde de Ligny_1360329_Appendix 3_Transrips