

# **Young Voices for Utrecht's Countryside – Policy Sprint**

## **Purpose**

This sprint gives young people a real chance to influence Utrecht's countryside policy. The province has opened a consultation window (Jan 6–Feb 16, 2026) for feedback on its 10-year plan for water, soil, nature, climate, and agriculture. Our goal is to help youth turn their ideas into official advice notes (“zienswijzen”) that will be submitted to the province.

## **Why Youth Engagement Matters**

- Young farmers and applied science students are directly affected by future rules on soil, water, and farming.
- Youth voices are often missing in policy debates, yet they bring fresh, practical perspectives.
- This sprint connects the youth with the policy making process and shows how their input can shape real decisions.

## **Target Group**

### **We focus on:**

- Aeres University MFSI students and Teachers ( Master Food Systems Innovation).
- Young farmers (up to 40 years old, eligible for provincial grants).
- Interested youth with a background or interest in sustainability and rural issues.

This group is realistic and will be split into 3 mixed groups upon arrival.

**Date and Time:** Jan 8, 2026, 9:00–13:00

## **Value for Participants**

- The advice from participants will be submitted by Duurzaam Utrecht2030 as official feedback to the province.
- They will gain experience in policy engagement and collective problem solving.
- They connect with peers, policymakers, and regional based organisations.
- They practice turning ideas into concrete, actionable proposals.

## **The Agenda (4 Hours)**

**Program Lead and Internship Commissioner:** Ineke Malsch

**Facilitator(Intern):** Abdul-Razak Adams

**09:00 – 09:30 | Welcome & introduction** (by Adams and Ineke respectively)

**09:30 – 10:45 | Round 1: Reality Check Together (World Café Conversations)**

Each table deals with one concrete challenge based on the UPLG themes.

- **Table 1 (Water):** The province expects extreme rainfall and flooding in lower polder areas. How do we protect farms without bankrupting them?
- **Table 2 (Soil/Pollution):** 1000 kilos of PFAS pesticides enter Utrecht's soil yearly. The province wants stricter rules. What support do young farmers need to switch methods?
- **Table 3 (Future Farming):** There is €3.5 million available for young farmers to be sustainable. If you were designing the grant rules, what specific equipment or tech would you fund?

**10:45 – 11:00 | Coffee Break**

**11:00 – 12:15 | Round 2: Shaping the Solution Together ('Zienswijze')**

- Groups pick one topic from Round 1.
- Task: Write an Advice Note to the Province.
- Prompt: We support X, but we are worried about Y. We propose Z.

**12:15 – 13:00 | The Pitch & Vote**

- Each group has 3 minutes to present their advice.
- Vote on the top 2 suggestions.
- Closing remarks from the internship Commissioner (Ineke) explain how these notes will be submitted as formal feedback to the province( UPLG) process).

## THE CHALLENGE CARDS

Each section(rounds) will be printed in an A4 sheet and placed on the tables. This will guide the participants through Round 1 (The Reality Check together) and Round 2 (shaping the solution together) without the need to explain the rules repeatedly.

### Card 1: The Water challenge

**Theme:** Floods, Droughts, and "Wet Feet"

#### **The Situation (What the Province proposes):**

To prepare for climate change (extreme "water bombs" and droughts), the Province plans to raise groundwater levels significantly. They want to turn the rural area into a "sponge" to protect nature and hold water for dry periods.

#### **ROUND 1:**

##### **The Reality Check (Discussion)**

**The Problem:** Higher water levels might save nature, but they make fields muddy. Heavy tractors get stuck, and some crops rot in wet soil.

##### **Discuss:**

1. If the water level rises on your land, can you still farm the way you do now?
2. Who pays the bill if a "water bomb" destroys your harvest?
3. Is "floating machinery" a real solution, or just a fantasy?

#### **ROUND 2:**

**The Solution (Drafting)** Stop discussing and Start deciding.

Write your official advice.

1. **We support** the goal of making Utrecht climate-proof...
2. **BUT we are worried** that raising groundwater levels will [ insert specific risk to farmers ]...
3. **THEREFORE, we propose** the Province [ insert specific solution]...

## **CARD 2: THE SOIL & CHEMISTRY CHALLENGE**

**Theme:** Clean Earth vs. A Living Wage

### **The Situation (What the Province proposes)**

The Province wants to drastically reduce the use of chemicals (pesticides, fertilizer) to stop pollution. There is a specific focus on stopping PFAS and nutrients from leaching into the soil and drinking water.

### **ROUND 1:**

#### **The Reality Check (Discussion)**

**The Problem:** Everyone wants clean soil, but current farming business models often rely on these inputs to ensure a stable harvest.

- **Discuss:**
  1. What is the biggest barrier to stopping chemical use tomorrow? (Is it cost? Risk? Lack of technology?)
  2. If you ban these inputs, will yields drop? By how much?
  3. What exactly do you need to switch to "clean" farming without going bankrupt?

### **ROUND 2:**

**The Solution (Drafting)** Stop discussing and Start deciding.

Write your official advice.

- **We support** the vision of a pollution-free soil in Utrecht...
- **BUT we are worried** that a fast ban on inputs will [ insert specific risk]...
- **THEREFORE, we propose** that the transition plan includes [ insert specific solution]...

## **CARD 3: THE €3.5 MILLION CHALLENGE**

**Theme:** Investing in the Future Farm

### **The Situation (What the Province proposes)**

The Province has a budget of **€3.5 million** available to help the agriculture sector transition to a sustainable future. They need to decide exactly how to spend this money over the next 10 years.

## **ROUND 1:**

### **The Reality Check (Discussion)**

**The Problem:** Government grants are often too complicated to apply for, or they fund technologies that don't solve daily problems.

- **Discuss:**

1. If you had a check for €3.5M, what would you actually buy to help young farmers?
2. Does the money go to high-tech sensors, or education and training?
3. How do we ensure this money goes to young entrepreneurs, not just big industrial giants?

## **ROUND 2:**

**The Solution (Drafting)** Stop discussing and Start deciding.

Write your official advice.

- **We support** the investment of €3.5 million into the sector...
- **BUT we are worried** that the current grant rules will [ insert specific risk]...
- **THEREFORE, we propose** that this fund prioritizes [ insert specific solution]...