

From Paper Logic to Living Agreements

A Governance Approach for Complex Transitions - The Positief Gezond Almere Case

"Agreements that live and breathe - so people and organisations can too."

Digna de Bruin - Founder, De Rechtmakers (2025)

INTRODUCTION

Transitions don't succeed on paper alone. They require agreements that are as alive as the systems they aim to change. In Positief Gezond Almere, thirteen partners chose to govern differently - blending legal clarity with trust, behaviour, and adaptability. This case study shows how a living agreement became their compass for navigating complexity and staying connected to purpose.

De Rechtmakers

From Paper Logic to Living Agreements: The Positief Gezond Almere Governance Approach

1. Executive Summary

Positief Gezond Almere (PGA) is a bold governance experiment in the Dutch healthcare and wellbeing transition. With 20 million in national transformation funding and thirteen diverse partners from hospitals to community organisations PGA set out to tackle a persistent challenge: how do you govern a complex, long-term transformation in a way that is alive, adaptive, and centred on people?

Instead of producing a rigid, risk-driven contract, PGA co-created a living agreement: a governance framework designed to grow with the collaboration, support relational trust, and remain relevant in the real-world dynamics of a transition.

The approach, facilitated by Digna de Bruin of De Rechtmakers, blends legal architecture with behavioural insight and systemic process guidance. It replaces 'paper logic' the illusion of control through ever-tighter documentation with a living compass that guides decision-making, conflict navigation, and mutual accountability.

This case study shares how PGA shifted from a static, control-oriented mindset to a governance approach that is human-centred, iterative, and rooted in shared purpose and what others in similar transitions can learn from it.

2. Context & Challenge

The Context

PGA emerged in a time of shifting expectations for healthcare and wellbeing systems. Across the Netherlands, organisations are being called upon to: respond to diversity in communities; collaborate beyond their institutional boundaries; and adapt continuously to the real needs of peoples lives.

In Almere, thirteen partners including health providers, municipalities, welfare organisations, and citizen initiatives committed to a multi-year transformation based on the Positieve Gezondheid philosophy. Their task: deliver integrated solutions and measure societal value, not just organisational output.

The Governance Paradox

Traditional governance tools in healthcare tend to be control-driven, static, and organisation-centred. This creates what Digna calls the 'paper reality': agreements that look solid in a binder but lack traction in the lived reality of collaboration. The risk is that governance becomes disconnected from purpose, and partners retreat into defensive behaviour when challenges arise.

The Core Challenge

How can multiple organisations with different languages, speeds, and interests make agreements that: 1) Hold the shared purpose at the centre; 2) Build trust instead of suspicion; 3) Adapt as the transition unfolds.

3. Approach & Method

Role of De Rechtmakers: PGA invited Digna de Bruin, founder of De Rechtmakers, to act as both legal architect and process facilitator. Her role was to design an agreement that was legally sound but not over-regulated, emotionally resonant, and flexible enough to accommodate the unknowns of a multi-year transition.

Core Principles

- 1. Start with Questions, Not Clauses:* Partners responded to foundational questions about purpose, risks, and value. These responses became the building blocks of the agreement.
- 2. Work on Three Levels:* Head - Heart - Gut. Governance discussions addressed cognitive, emotional, and intentional dimensions, deepening trust.
- 3. Balance Between Polarities:* Steering and giving space; clarity and acceptance of ambiguity; holding on and letting go; horizontal listening and vertical connection.
- 4. Relational Safety as a Governance Asset:* Treating the ability to voice disagreement without fear as a core governance outcome.

Working Process: Iterative drafting based on partner dialogues, refined with the Project Team, functioning as the 'traffic hub'. The process itself became the agreement-building exercise.

4. The Agreement as a Living Compass

The PGA agreement is not a 'one-shot' legal product but a living compass that guides collaboration. It avoids bureaucratic stacking by excluding the 185-page Transformation Plan, keeping focus on relational and adaptive culture.

Key Features

1. People Before Organisations
2. Purpose and Behaviour as Navigational Stars
3. Space for the Unknown
4. Plain Language for Empowerment
5. From Sanctions to Collaboration
6. Breathing Room for Learning

5. Outcomes & Early Impacts

Early outcomes include increased trust, more open conflict navigation, and stronger board alignment with purpose.

Partner Feedback

'It didn't feel like negotiating, but like solving a puzzle together starting from the whole, not individual interests.'

'The agreement feels alive. It's not something that sits in a drawer until there's a problem; it's something we keep using.'

6. Lessons Learned & Recommendations

Five key takeaways: Start with purpose, make the agreement a learning tool, treat relational safety as governance infrastructure, simplify legal form, and keep governance connected to the living world.

About De Rechtmakers

Founded by Digna de Bruin, De Rechtmakers combines legal expertise, behavioural insight, and systemic facilitation to design agreements that work in practice. More at: www.derechtmakers.nl