



Dutch  
CardioVascular  
Alliance

# DCVA EXPLORATIONS

AUGUST 2024

VERSION 1



**Our ambition is to lower the cardiovascular disease burden by 25% in 2030.**

## Background and introduction

The ambition of the Dutch CardioVascular Alliance (DCVA) is **to reduce the cardiovascular disease burden by 25% by 2030**. A key way to achieve this goal is by promoting collaboration within the cardiovascular field and uniting forces. This can be done by identifying opportunities in research policy and funding, collectively leveraging them, and resolving potential bottlenecks. Collaboration instead of competition is essential to advancing the cardiovascular field.

To establish such collaboration, the DCVA has experimented in recent years with various ways to stimulate collaboration in research, including guiding so-called 'explorations' (in Dutch; verkenningen). Conducting and completing multiple explorations also provides an opportunity to evaluate the exploration process. Various perspectives indicate that the process of conducting an exploration is a valuable approach to establish national collaboration, which can also serve as a national basis for further collaboration. With this note, we take the initiative to describe the process—decision-making and approach—of an exploration and clarify the roles and responsibilities of the DCVA office and the DCVA Research Policy working group.

The goal of this document is to establish a clear and transparent working method for everyone and to share the lessons learned more broadly. We have described different forms of exploration so the form of exploration fits well with the intended goal and so supporting explorations remains feasible for the DCVA and contributes as much as possible to the shared ambition of the partners. The DCVA continues to strive for projects that are supported by multiple partners and that have a significant impact on reducing the disease burden.



## 1. What is an exploration, and why is it conducted?

In various ways, such as during pillar meetings or conversations with partners, the DCVA office can be informed of the need for national interdisciplinary collaboration around a scientific theme. An exploration can then be initiated (see point 3 for more information on starting an exploration).

An exploration is a broad consultation of relevant professional groups, such as patient representatives, scientists, funders, and policymakers, on a specific topic. During an exploration, the major challenges are mapped out, the potential impact of addressing those challenges is assessed, the ambitions of the involved stakeholders are identified, the collaboration between different disciplines is explored, and what can be achieved in the short and long term is determined. Additionally, what is required from the DCVA partners to successfully initiate such a program is described.

The primary **goal** of an exploration is to optimize and promote support and urgency for collaboration on a particular topic. It also clarifies whether the theme is a priority in the field. An exploration can also reveal that there is limited support and/or urgency and priority to start a specific initiative at the national level.

The **effect** of an exploration is that various experts come into structured contact at an early stage, exploring the joint opportunities. This provides insight into the greatest challenges in the field and works towards a shared urgency to address them. It also fosters support, enthusiasm, and insight into the opportunities that interdisciplinary collaboration offers.

Based on an exploration, the DCVA partners and their stakeholders seek the optimal way to further develop the recommendations (see point 3, and examples of ongoing and completed explorations are available on the website). An exploration can serve to bring parties together without requiring funding. Additionally, an exploration can serve as a tool to find and/or create concrete funding opportunities.

An exploration is **important** for potential funders to better understand how the project contributes to reducing the disease burden caused by cardiovascular diseases (the binding ambition of the Dutch CardioVascular Alliance). It also clarifies the relationship to their strategic agendas, such as the [Kennis- en Innovatieagenda](#), [Gezondheid en Zorg](#), [de landelijke hart- en vaatagenda](#), [de kennishiatenagenda's van verschillende wetenschappelijke verenigingen](#) en de [Cardiovasculair Technische Onderzoeksagenda](#).

Note: The DCVA does not have financial resources to execute large projects, but the DCVA has insight into funding routes and can, at an early stage, put the subject on the agenda and discuss it with various research funders. The DCVA advises using regular funding forms where appropriate.

## 2. What projects/topics are suitable for an exploration?

The DCVA focuses on explorations that:

1. Clearly contribute to the shared mission of the DCVA
2. Have the potential to be scientifically and clinically excellent or groundbreaking
3. Have a national and cross-domain and/or multidisciplinary character
4. Can achieve more impact using the [DCVA pillars](#)
5. Are widely supported, as preferably evidenced by knowledge and/or innovation agendas of DCVA partners.
  - The presence on a partner's agenda is seen as an advantage, as it indicates broad support from the relevant organization/association. On the other hand, we want to leave room for new ideas, so being on an agenda is not a requirement.
6. Are supported by partners and for which partners are willing to provide manpower and/or resources (see point 3).

## 3. How is an exploration started and conducted?

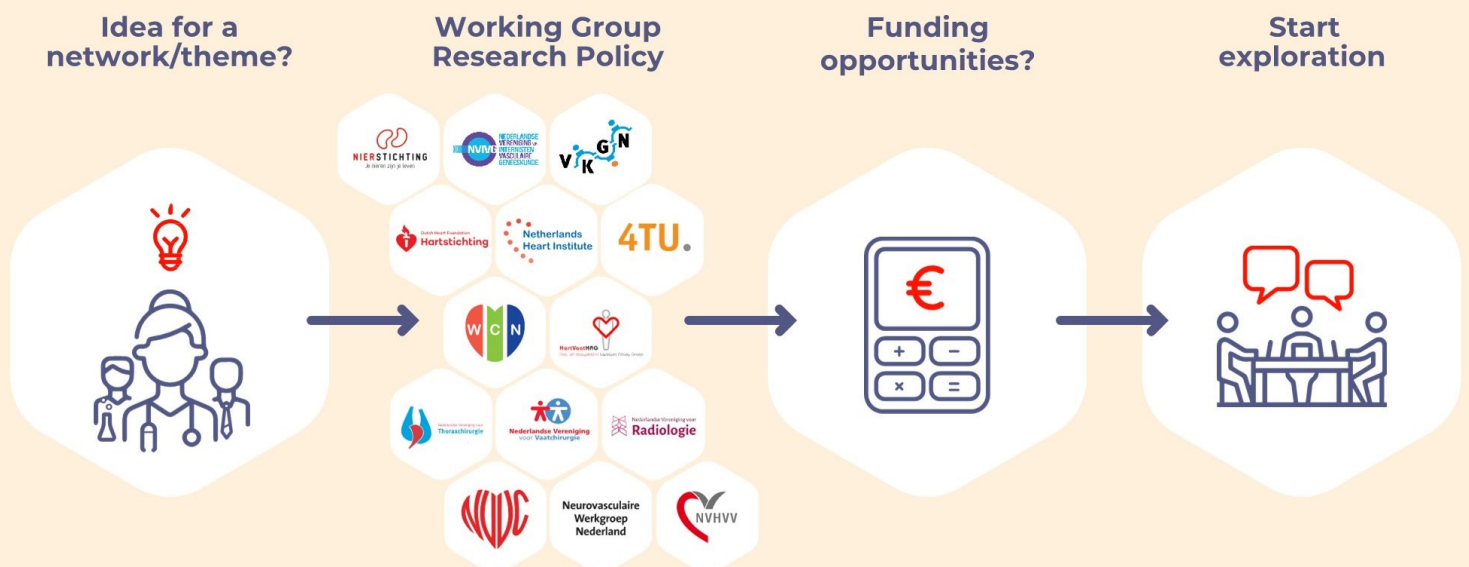


Figure 1: Process preceding the start of an exploration (Phase 0)

### Phase 0: Assessing Support Among Partners

The idea for a national exploration is discussed by partners (board, representative, or stakeholders) within the DCVA context (such as a working group or partner conversations). This idea is discussed within the Program Management Team and the [DCVA steering committee](#). They conduct a brief assessment of the suitability (see point 2) and may request additional information.

Next, it is assessed whether the partners support this topic (actively or passively) by discussing it in the [Research Policy working group](#). A project will be discussed for the first time in this working group for information and discussion, after which each partner can discuss the project and the interest within their own association/organization. During the next meeting (within six months at the latest), the project will be scheduled for decision-making, aiming for consensus. If consensus is not reached, a vote will be taken. If more than two partners actively participate and more than 50% of the present partners support the project, the exploration will be submitted with a positive recommendation to the Partner Assembly. The final decision will be made in the Partner Assembly.

At this stage, a partner can also indicate their desired **role** in the exploration. There is room for:

1. An active role (where a representative is appointed on behalf of the partner for the exploration and has the organization's mandate to attend meetings and arrange for a substitute if necessary). Partners who indicate that they want an active role but do not take on this role or later indicate that they no longer wish to do so can switch to passive role.
2. A passive role (where the partner is updated on the exploration during the meetings of the Research Policy working group and can provide input at these times).

Subsequently, the Research Policy working group estimates the appropriate **form** of exploration. This will be based on (1) partner support and willingness to commit; (2) urgency; (3) innovation potential. The working group discusses whether the necessary disciplines are involved and which expertise is still missing.

During the second meeting, the appropriate form of exploration will be chosen. A distinction is made between two forms:

### Exploration

- The topic is supported by at least two partners who actively want to contribute and is considered relevant by potential funders (through discussion in the [funders' working group](#)).
- The goal is to ensure that as many partners as possible are heard, and the field comes up with a joint plan.
- The DCVA office's role is facilitating, offering intensive support in connecting different partners and preparing the recommendation.
- The DCVA office has the capacity for up to two explorations simultaneously.
- Examples of completed explorations: one in the field of atherosclerosis, one in the field of aneurysms, and one in the field of hereditary cardiovascular diseases.

## Compact Exploration

- The topic is supported by at least two partners who actively want to contribute but is not directly relevant to multiple DCVA partners (for example, because it is monodisciplinary, or because the idea fits with existing initiatives or consortia, or is not on relevant agendas).
- The goal is to maximize opportunities in the scientific field.
- The DCVA office's role is advisory and connecting; for example, by (co-)organizing an information session or brainstorming meeting.
- The DCVA office has the capacity for up to three compact explorations simultaneously.
- Examples: Organized meeting around the GOLDEN study and around prehabilitation.

## Phase 1: Structuring

If there is broad support from various partners, the DCVA office, in consultation with interested partners, sets up the process. This may involve assembling a project committee, appointing a project leader(s), or selecting explorers (see point 4). This is tailored to the needs and depends on the capabilities of the DCVA office and the wishes and possibilities of the involved partners in supporting the DCVA. Depending on the timing within the year, the exploration is included in the annual plan for the following year, which is discussed in the Partner Assembly.

## Phase 2: Conducting the Exploration

The appointed persons (explorers; see point 4 for the selection process) are responsible for leading the exploration and preparing the recommendation in collaboration with all necessary disciplines, the research field, and relevant DCVA partners. It is important that the explorers ensure involvement and support in the field to increase the impact.

Key points during the exploration:

- Announcing the exploration in relevant work fields and among all partners, including the intended timeline (website/LinkedIn/DCVA newsletter can be used, but other means are also suitable).
- Gaining insight into developments in the field (existing and new initiatives).
- Determining the themes to focus in order to contribute to reducing the disease burden as much as possible
- Defining the focus.

The exploration may include the following actions:

- A stakeholder analysis
- Surveys
- In-depth interviews/input sessions with healthcare professionals and key stakeholders
- A roundtable meeting and/or prioritization session

Deliverable: The goal is to reach a broadly supported set of written recommendations (max a few A4) by the end of the exploration. These recommendations briefly outline, among other things, what patients and healthcare professionals need, where the most impact can be achieved and strengths in the field. See section 6 for a more detailed description of the desired outcome.

### *Phase 3: Presenting the Recommendation to DCVA Partners*

The recommendation document is discussed with the DCVA partners. Depending on the content and the discussions with the partners, the explorers receive feedback. Additionally, the consulted individuals or organizations should be provided with feedback on their input and how it has been incorporated. If there is mutual satisfaction with the exploration, the next step could involve determining how best to implement the recommendations, such as by organizing an expert or information session or by seeking appropriate funding opportunities.

After an exploration, the involvement of the DCVA office may either cease or change. This depends on the level of support among the partners, the outcomes of the exploration, and the need for further support from the DCVA. The DCVA always aims to stay informed about the follow-up steps taken based on the explorations and strives to provide feedback to the consulted individuals or organizations.

### *After an Exploration: Implementation Phase (in Dutch “Kwartiermaken”)*

Following an exploration, a funding application may be developed. This is the next step, carried out by implementation coordinators (in Dutch “Kwartiermakers”). The implementation coordinators are not necessarily the same individuals as the explorers. The role of the DCVA office in this phase is advisory, facilitating, and focused on building networks.

#### **4. Who Conducts an Exploration and How is This Determined?**

An exploration is conducted by experts in the field, as determined in Phase 1. This could involve 2-3 explorers, a steering group, and/or a project leader, who may be researchers, healthcare professionals, or (policy) staff members.

The selection of explorers is decided in consultation between the DCVA office and interested partners. This can occur through an application process or by invitation based on expertise. The selection process considers the representation of different centers, fields, complementary expertise and skills, involvement with the DCVA, and ambition to establish nationwide collaboration. We also aim to maintain a balanced distribution of gender and career stages. Once a proposal for the team composition is made, it is discussed within the Program Management Team, the steering group, the Research Policy working group, and the partners requesting the exploration. A partner may also be asked to provide an explorer.

If a funding application can be developed based on the exploration, the choice of implementation coordinators is open again. These may be the previous explorers, but this is not guaranteed. When discussing the advice with DCVA partners, suggestions and recommendations for the implementation phase are also requested. The experiences and preferences of the explorers are considered in this decision. The DCVA office, in collaboration with the funder, determines who will be the implementation coordinator. In the funding application written by the implementation coordinators, it is emphasized that it should not be assumed that they will automatically be the research leader or project leader.

#### **5. What is the Role of the DCVA Office?**

The general role of the DCVA office is to support and connect within the process. The explorers are responsible for the execution and content of the exploration, while the partners have a decisive voice when initiating an exploration. The role of the DCVA office at various stages is described in more detail below.

At Phase 0, when gauging support, the DCVA office's role is to discuss a project with partners and within the pillars, ensuring the project aligns with the shared ambitions and has the support of the partners. Following this, the DCVA office is responsible for organizing the process (Phase 1), which is discussed in collaboration with the Research Policy working group.

Depending on the project and the explorers' needs, the DCVA office can provide guidance at various stages during the exploration (Phase 2). This could include assistance with the initiation, planning, and coordination of the exploration. For instance, a project manager from within the DCVA can be called upon if needed. The DCVA office can also support discussions with partners, organizing networking events, political lobbying, or integrating the exploration into another pillar. Since there is a limit to the number of explorations that can be supported, the role of the DCVA office



also depends on available capacity. Ultimately, as a network organization, the DCVA office follows the ambitions and priorities of the partners. In this phase, the explorers are responsible for the execution and content of the exploration, while the DCVA office is responsible for regularly updating partners and maintaining an overview.

The DCVA office is responsible for validating the issued advice document with its partners (Phase 3). The DCVA is keen to remain involved if the continuation is supported by the partners.

## **6. What aspects/questions should explorations consider, and what recommendations are expected?**

Explorers are expected to take a cross-disciplinary view of the field and aim for maximum support and involvement in the exploration. The following questions are important to consider:

- How does the initiative contribute to the DCVA's ambition of reducing the disease burden by 25% by 2030?
- What are the biggest challenges?
- Which (research) projects and relevant groups currently exist (both nationally and internationally) that provide a foundation to build upon?
  - For example, consider [the DCVA data portal](#).
- What is needed to address these challenges?
- What should the initiative focus on, and why?
  - What are the needs of patients in research and care?
- What is the role of interdisciplinary and national collaboration?
  - Which disciplines should be involved?
  - Which [DCVA partners](#) might be relevant (for expertise, network, implementation, funding)?
- How do these issues/objectives contribute to existing relevant agendas and goals of DCVA partners? For example:
  - [Knowledge gap agendas](#) of scientific professional associations (see DCVA report)
  - [Knowledge and Innovation Agenda Health and Care 2024-2027](#) (VWS/EZK/Health~Holland)
  - [Knowledge and Innovation Agenda Key Technologies 2024-2027](#) (EZK/Top Sector HTSM)
  - [National Cardiovascular Agenda](#) (Heart Foundation)
  - [Cardiovascular MedTech Research agenda](#) (4TU.Health and DCVA)
- What opportunities are there for follow-up?
  - What opportunities for public-private partnerships exist in this area?
  - Which knowledge institutions are expected to participate in the intended program?
  - Are there [valorization](#) opportunities? Has there been contact with an impact officer or business developer?