

## Citizens need an accessible government specifically tailored to them: Record number of second-line complaints at the Flemish Ombudsman Service

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**In 2025, the Flemish Ombudsman Service received 10,158 questions and complaints, with a remarkable increase in the number of second-line complaints. A growing cohort of citizens ends up at the Flemish Ombuds Service when procedures are too complex, when they struggle with digital public service desks, or when communication from governmental actors is unclear. According to Flemish Ombudsman, Myriam Parys, these signals show that there is still room for improvement for the Flemish Government when it comes to becoming more accessible, transparent, and responsive. That is why she is advocating more than ever for a government that is tailored to the needs of the people.**

### Record number of second-line complaints

In 2025, the Flemish Ombudsman Service passed the threshold of 10,000 questions and complaints: an increase of 16% compared to 2024 and ten times as many as after its inauguration in 1999. In particular, the number of second-line complaints rose sharply. These are complaints for which citizens did not reach a solution with a complaints service of the Flemish Government, and in which the Flemish Ombudsman Service mediates. With a whopping 2,672 second-line cases, the Flemish Ombudsman Service recorded a 10% increase compared to 2024, a record high. Two out of three of these complaints were resolved amicably, resulting in reconciliation or clarification for the citizen.

*“The continuously rising number of complaints is not, in my view, a sign of a failing government”,* says Flemish Ombudsman Myriam Parys. *“Citizens have become more assertive, know their rights better, and find their way to the Flemish Ombudsman Service more easily.”* Each complaint reveals where things go wrong in the interaction between the government and its citizens. The Flemish Ombudsman Service has a dual mission: to look for solutions in individual cases and to formulate structural recommendations that help build a government that can regain public trust.

### Where citizens encounter the most difficulties: Energy, environment and mobility

The top three themes of second-line complaints in 2025 were:

**1. Energy (25.7%)**

- Complaints about the installation of the digital meter
- Incorrect or tardy information about the retroactive investment bonus of Fluvius

**2. Environment (17%)**

- Difficulties with the digital Environment Desk (Omgevingsloket)
- Dissatisfaction about rising drinking water prices and regional tariff differences

### **3. Mobility and public reconstruction (15.7%)**

- The new penalty policy of De Lijn
- Long waiting lists for driving exams or vehicle inspections

“I observe that good communication is crucial in the relationship between the government and its citizens,” says Flemish Ombudsman Myriam Parys. “We see that small misunderstandings can have major consequences, especially when information is unclear or not provided on time, and we still see this too often.”

In energy-related cases, citizens received threat epistles about the digital meter, even when they already had an appointment scheduled for an installation. Shifting conditions concerning bonuses, such as with the EPC label bonus, or incorrect information about the retroactive investment bonus, caused confusion, resulting in some applications to be submitted after the expiration date. At Mijn VerbouwPremie, the conditions were even altered up to three times in one year. Subsequently, citizens were still eligible for the bonus when preparing their file, but no longer after a few months when submitting it.

In environmental cases, citizens struggled with labyrinthine permit procedures and with the digital Environment Desk (Omgevingsloket). Additionally, there was dissatisfaction with the increase in drinking water prices and the large regional price differences between drinking water companies.

In mobility-related cases, complaints about De Lijn mainly concerned fines that were imposed even when citizens were in possession of a valid subscription. There were also complaints about the long waiting lists for scheduling vehicle inspections and driving exams.

#### **Dear government: Trust your citizens**

The Flemish Ombudsman Service calls for a government tailored to its citizens. This calls for realistic procedures, comprehensible communication, and room for correcting lapses of judgement.

“Trust operates reciprocally,” tells Parys. “It is important that citizens trust the government. Conversely, however, the government must also place the necessary trust in its own citizens. That point is still made far too scarcely. A small lapse of judgement taking place, a wrong checkbox being ticked off, or a document being forgotten upon request should not lead to disproportionate consequences. Give people the right to make mistakes.”

#### **Key recommendation: Ensure accessibility**

The main recommendation from the annual report is to make the Flemish government more accessible to everyone. In 2025, the Flemish Ombudsman Service saw citizens encounter difficulties due to:

- Digital service desks that are not user-friendly,
- Limited accessibility of services by telephone,
- Governmental communication spread across multiple platforms,
- Opaque expectations about which actions citizens are supposed to take.

According to Parys, the accessibility of government services is a basic right for everyone. “Citizens must be able to reach a government service both digitally and non-digitally. Furthermore, when a case becomes too complex for a citizen, a human being must still be able to talk to another human being. This gives them reassurance.”

### Other recommendations

In addition to accessibility, the Flemish Ombudsman Service highlights three other points of attention:

- **Respectful interaction:**

Communication between the government and its citizens is under duress. Public service providers sometimes experience citizens as overly persistent or demanding, while citizens in turn often experience a lack of empathy and humanity during their interactions with the government. Mutual respect is essential.

- **Privacy and data protection:**

Citizens are concerned about which personal data the government retains and how that data is used. The government must be transparent about their usage of data and must therefore establish clear standards for data processing.

- **Legal certainty:**

Unexpected policy changes or a lack of transitional measures create uncertainty and can result in the loss of bonuses that citizens were evidently counting on. For example, the conditions for Mijn VerbouwPremie were altered up to three times in one year. Citizens need to know where they stand when it comes to their interaction with the government.