

Put Citizens First

Public summary of Annual Report 2024

The National Ombudsman, the Ombudsman for Children and the Ombudsman for Veterans are there to help people, children and veterans, when things go wrong between them and the government. We challenge governments and other authorities to safeguard the standpoint of citizens in everything they do and to ensure that children's rights are observed.

The full 2024 Annual Report can be found at nationaleombudsman.nl/de-nationale-ombudsman/jaarverslagen

Introduction

In this summary of the Annual Report, we outline the work of the National Ombudsman, the Ombudsman for Children and the Ombudsman for Veterans in 2024, in the European and Caribbean Netherlands and beyond. As part of the Ombuds Agenda we examine the impact of 6 important themes: Fundamental Rights, Poverty, Participation and Influence, Access to Public Services, Quality of Life, and Life Course and Development.

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Put citizens first

A government that truly serves its citizens makes realistic and feasible plans. Cabinet plans should never lead to unrealistic or unlawful plans where others are blamed if things go wrong.

This includes the ambitious plans for better access to services, without having a clear plan for the necessary long-term investments by municipalities and administering agencies. Or the promise of generous compensation in the benefits scandal, while parents entitled to benefits now have to wait 78 weeks for a response to their objection. Actually helping people does not appear to be a priority in political debate. Bills, motions and amendments are often designed more to impress than for the good of citizens. Unrealistic promises create wariness and undermine trust and confidence in the government, particularly among the people for whom the plans were intended.

The state under the rule of law does not protect itself

In 2024, we repeatedly called on the government to listen better. Listen to citizens and involve them in the process of making laws and regulations. This also applies to the involvement of administering agencies. Their perspectives are still not adequately taken into account. In addition, advice and warnings from institutions that should protect the guarantees of our state under the rule of law, are not always taken seriously. An example is the advice on the asylum laws, which resulted in improper governance.

If signals and advice from society, the administering agencies and relevant institutions are not heard or are deliberately ignored, citizens will pay the price. The state under the rule of law does not protect itself.

What can citizens expect?

Everyone has the right to a government that respects fundamental rights, is responsive to people who are not heard and can be trusted by citizens. In other words, the government must be there for all citizens; especially in challenging situations.

The right to equal treatment is one of the fundamental principles on which the state under the rule of law is founded and it is not without

reason the first Article of the Constitution. That means more than just applying the same rules to everyone: it also requires protecting rights when they are compromised. Fundamental rights, such as the right to demonstrate, apply to everyone. This is especially the case for those who disagree with something. An adequate government should facilitate the exercising of this right, not restrict it.

The government will never be flawless. But when things go wrong, citizens should have the confidence that the government acknowledges and rectifies the problem. A good example is the recovery operation of *DUO Dienst Uitvoering Onderwijs* (Education Executive Agency of the Netherlands), which in the past used an algorithm that indirectly discriminated against students when checking their eligibility for student grants. DUO apologised and is working on a financial compensation for the affected students. To this end, staff talked to the students themselves to find out what they need. This has shown that it is possible to treat citizens in a dignified and proper manner. Attaining your rights is not something that you first have to earn as a citizen. Nor is it something that you only get once things have gone wrong, as was the case in the benefits scandal or the damage caused by gas extraction in Groningen.

It is important that children's rights are taken into account when new legislation and policies are made. This still does not happen often enough. We expect the government to ensure that their voices are heard. This is why a Child Rights Impact Assessment must always be conducted when new legislation is introduced so that children's rights are safeguarded. The Best Decision for the Child must always be sought when implementing existing laws.

Putting citizens first

The effect of not putting the interests of citizens, children or veterans first in policies or legislation will be significant. An example is pupils with disabilities who use school transport. They

are often picked up too late, too early or not at all. This means that they miss classes or get to school too late. And they are then often overstimulated. This happens because practical and financial considerations outweigh the interests of the child. In 2024, the Ombudsman for Children called on the minister to view school transport as a care issue and thus to focus on the individual interests of the child. In this way, they would be able to take the implications of decision-making into account and discuss this with the child.

Citizens are also still not adequately put first in services provided by the government. We see this, for example, in how municipalities engage their aggression protocols when dealing with citizens. After an emotional or difficult talk with a public employee, people sometimes receive a direct warning or even a restraining order. No attempt is made to first understand the reason for the behaviour. Was it aggression or an expression of despair? Could something in someone's private life be causing them to react in this way?

Doing what you promised

It is precisely the most vulnerable who do not receive the protection, recognition and support that they are entitled to in a state under the rule of law. 2024 was no exception in this regard. We saw a government that ignored signals, advice and rights and thus sidetracked citizens. Over the past year, citizens contacted us 25,000 times because they had gotten stuck on something or felt that the government had not treated them correctly. As Ombudsmen, we provided assistance where possible and challenged public authorities to improve their services. We continue to advocate for a government that does what it promises, for a government that treats citizens, children and veterans properly and puts their perspective first. *Putting citizens first.*

National Ombudsman and Ombudsman for Veterans,
Reinier van Zutphen

Ombudsman for Children,
Margrite Kalverboer

substitute Ombudsman,
Linda Molenaar



Reinier van Zutphen

Reinier van Zutphen has been the National Ombudsman since 2015. He was appointed by the House of Representatives and his term of office runs until 2027. He is also the Local Ombudsman for almost 83% of Dutch municipalities. He is also the Ombudsman for Veterans.



Margrite Kalverboer

Margrite Kalverboer was appointed to the post of Ombudswoman for Children by the House of Representatives in 2016. Her current term of office runs until 2028.



Linda Molenaar

Linda Molenaar was appointed to the post of substitute Ombudsman on 3 July 2024. In this role, she supports the National Ombudsman in his task of helping citizens and assisting the government in improving its services.

The work of the National Ombudsman

The work of the National Ombudsman primarily focuses on whether citizens are being treated fairly by the government. Is the government fair, does it communicate with citizens in an understanding manner and is the citizens' perspective sufficiently paramount? The National Ombudsman helps people when things go wrong between them and the government. We support them by providing answers and practical tools. And we show them the way to the appropriate help desks.

"The government often tries to solve problems with even more laws, regulations and complex processes. But that doesn't actually solve most of the problems that people have. Much of what needs to be done to really help people can already be done. It's mainly a matter of doing it!"

Reinier van Zutphen
National Ombudsman

Where necessary, we carry out additional investigations. We challenge government departments to take a different view on their services and processes, with the aim of preventing similar complaints in the future. We are also a helpdesk for employees of administering agencies, municipalities, the Central Government and for other professionals to enable them to be of better assistance to citizens with a request for help.

The National Ombudsman talks to citizens and the government. After all, it is not just their goal to help citizens, but also to help the government be more mindful of the citizens' perspective in everything it does. This includes talks in the Senate and House of Representatives, often about one of their studies, and regular individual talks with cabinet members. After the Cabinet took office on 2 July 2024, the Ombudsman invited several appointed government ministers and state secretaries for an introductory meeting. He also met the Prime Minister. In these meetings, he

gave an introduction to his office and the working method of his organisation. He also raised important issues that are relevant to society and the Ombudsman.

In conversations with administrators of national and local government departments, the Ombudsman addressed the problems and possible solutions that he had observed based on complaints, reports and his own investigations. Furthermore, the Ombudsman and/or his staff regularly meet with many social and social interest organisations, from the Salvation Army to Stichting Groninger Dorpen (Foundation of Villages in Groningen).

Propriety

Decency and fairness are a matter of principle for the National Ombudsman when he assesses and gives advice on actions of the government. Acting properly is about the government putting the perspective of citizens first. The Ombudsman has laid down the essence of decency and fairness in the Propriety Guide. As decency and fairness, as well as the relationship between citizens and the government, are subject to change, the Ombudsman worked on a new Propriety Guide in 2024. This guide was tested by professionals from various organisations that will have to work with the guide. The new Propriety Guide will be published in 2025.

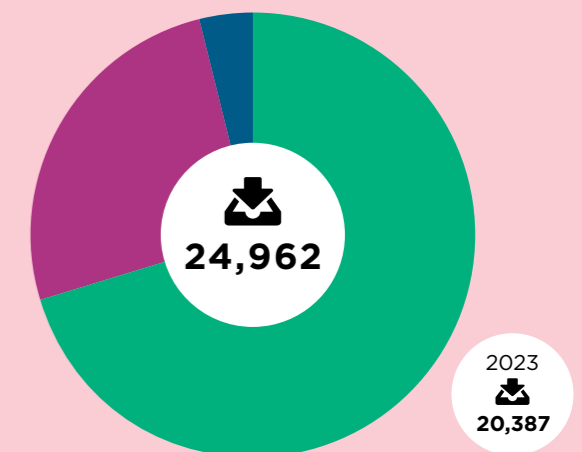
The Ombudsman has an online community, the *Raadbaak*, for professionals who work directly or indirectly with citizens. Almost 1,200 professionals have now joined this community. They share reports and knowledge, ask each other questions and discuss case scenarios. By learning with and from each other, they can provide assistance to



citizens more quickly and effectively. Using the *Raadbaak*, the Ombudsman and his researchers identify potential bottlenecks that may prompt further investigation. In addition to the *Raadbaak*, our website has a special section with specialist information on the complaints handling procedure and on the themes of the Ombuds Agenda. There is a Counsellor Helpline for complaints handlers, district policemen and social councilors, for instance.

The National Ombudsman is also the Ombudsman for all provinces and water boards, for 285 of the 342 municipalities and for almost all communal regulations. At the beginning of 2024, the Ombudsman for the province of Overijssel terminated his work and the municipalities and communal regulations that fell under its remit joined the National Ombudsman. This increased the percentage of municipalities affiliated with the National Ombudsman for complaints handling to 83%. The three special municipalities in the Caribbean Netherlands are also part of the work domain of the National Ombudsman, the Ombudsman for Children and the Ombudsman for Veterans.

Number of received requests



Specification of received requests

Complaints and trends	17,590
Questions and reports	6,461
Questions via Whatsapp	911

Increase and decrease of received requests

Increase compared to 2023

- Immigration and Naturalization Service (IND)
- Rent Tribunal
- Embassies and consulates
- Central Judicial Collection Agency (CJIB)
- Police
- Municipalities
- Joint arrangements
- Water boards
- Bailiffs

Decrease compared to 2023

- Education Executive Agency of the Netherlands (DUO)
- Dienst Toeslagen (Benefits)
- National Coordinator for Groningen (NCG)
- Mining Damage Institute Groningen (IMG)
- CAK
- Central Office for Motor Vehicle Driver Testing (CBR)

More information can be found in the annual figures supplement on our website nationaleombudsman.nl



PRACTICAL CASE STUDY

Inadequate assistance during transfer of care after tender

Paul* receives specialist mental healthcare supervision at home through the municipality of Nijmegen. A new tender by the municipality has resulted in him having to switch to another care provider. The current care provider is unable to deliver on its promise to ensure a smooth transfer of care because of a major outflow of staff. This meant that the transfer of Paul to the new care provider therefore had to be accelerated.

He had filed a complaint with the municipality (before the transfer to the new care provider). He was afraid that his transfer of care would not go smoothly and that he would relapse into depression. He felt that the municipality was not doing enough to prevent this happening. After the transfer, it did indeed become apparent that the new care provider was unable to provide the specialised care that Paul needed. It was not until two months later that he was assigned a care provider that could provide the right specialist care.

The municipality stated that it had done everything in its power to ensure a smooth transfer of care, but that the responsibility for care lies entirely with the care provider. Paul then filed a complaint with the National Ombudsman. The Ombudsman is of the opinion that the municipality did not act correctly towards Paul. The municipality remains responsible even if a task has been outsourced and should therefore have realised that the new care provider would be unable to provide the necessary care for Paul and other vulnerable people. The municipality should also have investigated Paul's concerns after having received his complaint.

** Not his real name*

The work of the Ombudsman for Children

The Ombudsman for Children ensures that children's rights are observed in the Netherlands and in the Caribbean Netherlands. Not only by the government, but also by organisations in the field of education, child care and healthcare, for instance. The interests of the child and the influence that the child should have on measures affecting the child are paramount. In doing our work, the IVRK (UNCRC, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child) is always the underlying principle.

"Children have the right to a good childhood and the love and care they need for their development. Their interests must be paramount in every law or decision that affects them. That is why it is essential to listen to children to understand what is important to them. Genuine involvement means that children actively participate, have a say and influence decisions."

Margrite Kalverboer
Ombudswoman for Children

Children, adults and professionals can contact the Ombudsman for Children if they believe that the government or organisations with a statutory duty involving children and young people are infringing children's rights. Reports may be focused on obtaining help or information but could also be a complaint about an individual situation. The Ombudsman for Children assesses how reports can be handled in a way that is in the child's best interests. Depending on the situation, the Ombudsman for Children's staff provide information or advice or they contact the organisation named in the complaint. The Ombudsman for Children can also initiate investigations in response to certain complaints and write reports about them.

We draw attention to the children's rights that are under pressure in our advice, letters and reports to the Cabinet, the House of Represent-

atives, municipalities and other authorities. The Ombudsman for Children also gives advice on bills and policy. In 2024, for example, advice was given on the draft bill and the draft Decree on Improving the Availability of Youth Welfare Support, the Private Member's Bill on Vaccination as a condition for admission to childcare facilities in the event of dangerously low vaccination rates, and the Dispersion Act (Spreidingswet). The Ombudsman for Children also focused on other important issues in 2024, including problems with school transport, children not going to school and social safety in schools.

In 2024, the Ombudsman for Children developed the Child Rights Impact Assessment (CRIA), which is an online tool that identifies the interests of groups of children, including vulnerable children, in four stages for the development of legislation, regulations and policy. The online tool can also be used to assess whether existing policy complies with children's rights. The final version of the Child Rights Impact Assessment has been available as an online tool on www.kinderrechtentoets.nl since 10 December. The Ombudswoman for Children called on all ministers to inform their staff of the CRIA and to encourage its use.



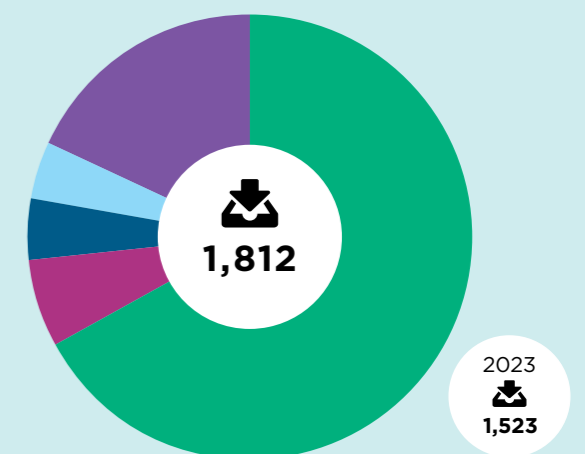
PRACTICAL CASE STUDY

Right to pocket money even under guardianship

Ben* is under guardianship and lives in a communal group. He doesn't receive any pocket money or clothing allowance. When he queried this, the communal group, the guardian and the municipality each referred to the other. This didn't answer Ben's question. He contacted the Ombudsman for Children and asked for help. The Ombudsman for Children contacted the guardian and explained that Ben is entitled to this and that he should not be the victim of uncertainty about who should pay the pocket money and clothing allowance. This is not in Ben's best interests. The authorities agreed with this standpoint and the outcome was positive. Ben now receives pocket money and a clothing allowance. Children have the right to an adequate standard of living (Art. 27 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child). Minors residing in youth welfare support institutions are entitled to have their living expenses covered (including pocket money and clothing allowance), just like any other child. As such, this is the responsibility of the parents. However, there are circumstances in which children cannot receive pocket money or a clothing allowance from their parents. In such cases, the municipality has a duty of care under the Child and Youth Act. The Ombudsman for Children has already made recommendations on this in its previous publications **Mag ik mijn zakgeld** (Can I have my pocket money?) (2017) and **Wie geeft mij(n) zak- en kleedgeld?** (Who gives me my pocket money and clothing allowance?) (2021)

* Not his real name

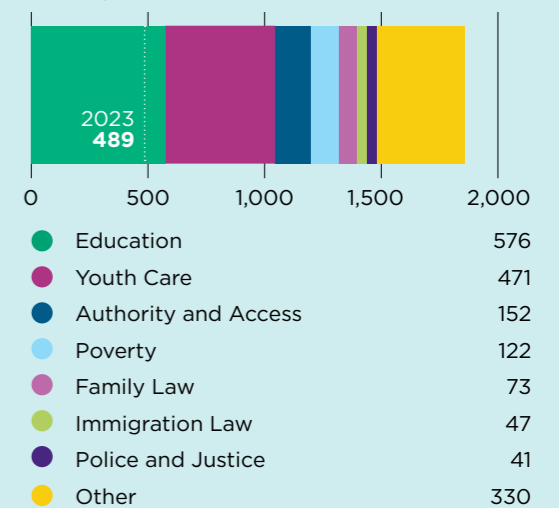
Number of received requests



Specification of received requests

Parents	1,216
Professionals	115
Grandparents	81
Children	76
Other	324

Subjects



"Children still get overlooked too often. The Child Rights Impact Assessment and the 'Best Decision' step-by-step plan can help professionals and policy-makers put the interests and rights of children into working practice. Both tools are meant to be a framework for reflection to critically examine for which children the intended policy and legislation have an unintentional negative effect. This can then be adjusted so that all children's rights are observed and their voices really count! It is important to also use the assessment tool for proposals in which it is not immediately clear that they concern children. An example could be the possible expansion of Schiphol Airport. What would the additional noise pollution mean for the development of children living close to the airport? Would they still be able to concentrate at school?"

Margrite Kalverboer Ombudswoman for Children

The work of the Ombudsman for Veterans

Since 2014, the National Ombudsman has also been the Ombudsman for Veterans. Veterans, ex-military personnel and their relatives can turn to the Ombudsman for Veterans if they have a complaint about the government. He ensures that veterans receive the recognition, care and information that they are entitled to. In addition, the Ombudsman for Veterans has the task of informing the government and the House of Representatives of their findings. In 2024, the Netherlands Veterans Institute (NLVi) estimated that there were 100,800 Dutch veterans, of whom 24,800 were still serving.

“Veterans, in addition to being veterans, are often someone’s (ex-)partner, father, mother, son or daughter. These people, due to the work of ‘their’ veteran, often live under special and unusual circumstances. It is important to be mindful of their special circumstances and the specific needs for care and support that arise from these circumstances. People with a close personal relationship to veterans deserve recognition and appreciation for the key role they play in the veteran’s health and physical and mental resilience.”

Reinier van Zutphen
Ombudsman for Veterans

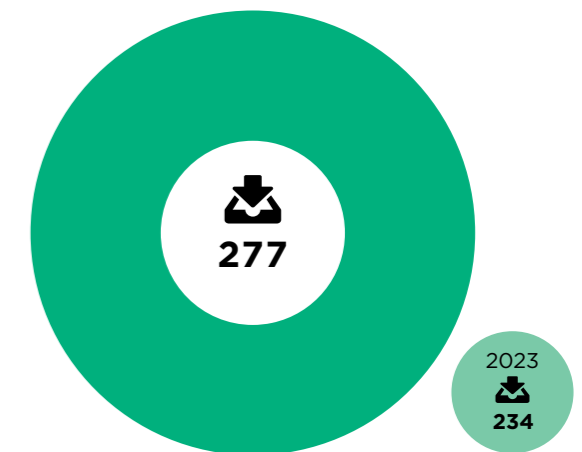
Support from the home front is crucial for veterans before, during and certainly after a mission. The Ombudsman for Veterans therefore looked specifically at the support for the close family of veterans in 2024. In the report **Erken mijn zorgen** (‘Acknowledge my concerns’), he concluded that the Ministry of Defence and the Netherlands Veterans Institute (NLVi) still do not sufficiently recognise and appreciate the position of veterans’ close family. This means that they fail to properly fulfil their special duty of care.

In April 2024, the Ombudsman for Veterans attended the opening by the Minister of Defence of Sparrenheuvel in Bosch en Duin. This sheltered accommodation for veterans was an initiative of the Salvation Army and the Netherlands Veterans Institute (NLVi) and resulted from the Ombudsman for Veterans’ 2022 report *Noodopvang Veteranen* (‘Emergency Shelter for Veterans’). Sparrenheuvel provides a safe and protected home for 12 to 14 veterans in need of care. Veterans are eligible if they suffer multiple problems, such as homelessness or imminent homelessness in combination with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), psychiatric problems and/or addiction.

In June, a symposium was held at the Netherlands Veterans Institute to mark the introduction of the Veterans Act and the Ombudsman for Veterans ten years ago. One hundred participants, including people who had been involved in the creation and implementation of the Veterans Act, six members of parliament and representatives of all sections of the armed forces, looked back on the past decade. The Veterans Act is the result of an initiative of the House of Representatives to improve the recognition, appreciation and care of veterans. After entry into force of the Act, the Inspector General of the Armed Forces also became Inspector of Veterans and the Ombudsman for Veterans was appointed alongside the National Ombudsman. Since then, our specialised team has been helping veterans even more.



Number of received requests



The received requests included:

- Lack of acknowledgement
- Income provisions
- Processing time
- Medical provisions
- Aftercare
- Reintegration
- Debt problems

PRACTICAL CASE STUDY

Support and anchor

Arie* is a 74-year-old veteran. One of the places he had been deployed to was Iraq. He now lives with his Mexican wife in Mexico. Arie suffers from severe post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). When Arie experienced multiple intense flashbacks, in which he relived his trauma, he wanted to go into therapy. There is a centre in the Netherlands that is specialised in treating people with PTSD, so he came back to the Netherlands for treatment there.

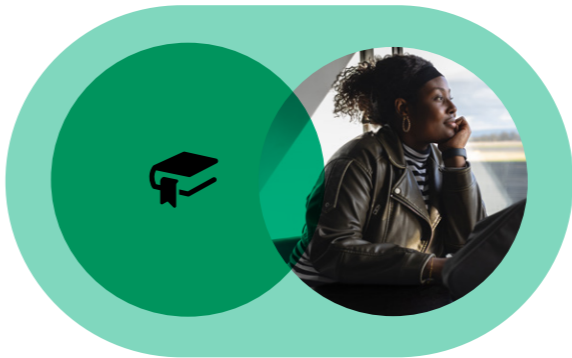
After his treatment, he decided to stay in the Netherlands, partly because he knew that his flashbacks would return. He wanted to be in the Netherlands to get therapy if and when that happened. Arie applied for a residence permit for his Mexican wife. He assumed that this would merely be a formality as she had previously lived in the Netherlands for many years. At that time, she also had a residence permit.

Months later, Arie received the bad news that the Dutch Immigration and Naturalisation Service (IND) were refusing to provide his wife with a permit. He was devastated. The therapy had been tough and he was very tired. He missed his wife, whom he had not seen for eight months and whose care he could really use at the time. Now that his application for a permit had been denied, they would not be able to see each other for even longer. Fortunately, Arie was told about the Ombudsman for Veterans and contacted us. We asked the IND to take another look at Arie’s case. Luckily, the IND understood Arie’s predicament. They explained how he could reapply for a permit as quickly as possible. The IND approved his application a week later. Arie then immediately booked an airline ticket for his wife. They can now fully focus on their happiness and health.

* Not his real name

The Ombuds Agenda

The topics on which the National Ombudsman, the Ombudsman for Children and the Ombudsman for Veterans focused on their own initiative are listed in the Ombuds Agenda. In 2024, these themes were:



Fundamental Rights



Poverty



Participation and Influence



Access to Public Services



Quality of Life



Life Course and Development



THE NATIONAL OMBUDSMAN IN THE FIELD

Ethnic profiling by the Royal Netherlands Marechaussee (KMar) during drug checks?

Alicia* picked up her sister-in-law, who was arriving in the Netherlands from Suriname. They had just sat down in the bus from Schiphol Airport on their way home when they were checked by KMar officers as part of the fight against drug crime. Alicia first complained to the KMar and then to the National Ombudsman about the check, which had great impact on her. Alicia suspects that her skin colour played a role in the decision to check her (ethnic profiling). She also complained about the way in which the check was carried out.

The Ombudsman concluded that the KMar did not adequately explain why the behaviour of the woman and her sister-in-law was grounds for a check. This means that the complaint about ethnic profiling was well-founded. The KMar should also have dealt with the woman's complaint better. We do not have a judgment on all of Alicia's complaints, such as the timing of the check of Alicia and her sister-in-law and whether a comment made by one of the KMar officers was discriminatory.

We consider the woman's complaint about the questions asked during the check to be unfounded.

Because the woman also complained about the way in which KMar's Complaints Committee dealt with her complaint, the Ombudsman also looked into this in this report. The Ombudsman considered this complaint to be unfounded, but advised KMar's Complaints Committee to explain how the committee works at the beginning of a hearing, so as to avoid false expectations.

Based on a similar individual complaint, the Ombudsman conducted an investigation on his own initiative into the working methods of the KMar at Athens Airport. In June 2024, the Minister of Defence stated that the KMar would incorporate the recommendations from the report **Grensoverschrijdende controles** ('Transgressive checks') in future instructions and briefings.

** Not her real name*



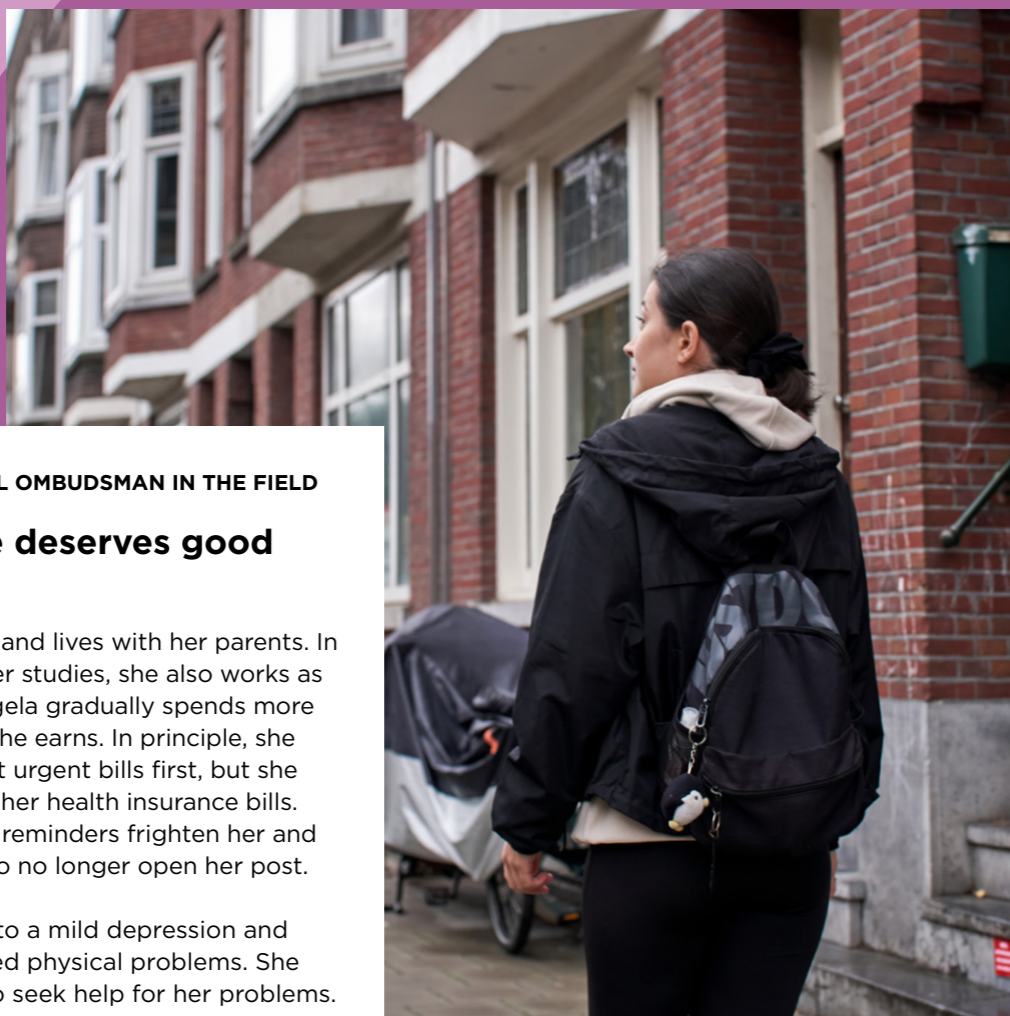
Fundamental Rights

The government must respect fundamental rights, including those of children, and comply with the law and international human rights treaties. The government must also make efforts to prevent the infringement of these rights. In 2024, the National Ombudsman particularly focused on housing, the reception of refugees and deprivation of liberty. The Ombudsman for Children also focused on the right of children to inclusive and appropriate education, care and youth welfare services and protection, and the right to a good standard of living.

If a housing association decides to demolish or renovate a house, residents are often involved inadequately or too late. And children are not consulted at all, even though the impact of having to leave your home is huge. Good and stable accommodation is essential for the healthy development of children. This is the conclusion of the joint study **Als je je huis moet verlaten** ('If you have to leave your home') by the National Ombudsman and the Ombudsman for Children.

The government expects citizens to blindly trust the security system, but offers too little in return. This is evident from our study **Blind vertrouwen?** ('Blind trust') on counterterrorism, extremism and radicalisation registrations of citizens. Supervision and legal protection must be well organised, precisely because government organisations cannot be completely transparent due to national security. It is now virtually impossible for citizens to challenge their registration. The Ombudsman called the minister to work on independent and permanent supervision.

Government agencies responded inappropriately to citizens who helped asylum seekers during the crisis in Ter Apel in the summer of 2022. This was evident from the study **Verboden hulp te bieden?** ('Is it prohibited to help?'). Tents and aid supplies were confiscated and there were threats of criminal prosecution. In discussions with the Ombudsman, the municipality, police and the Public Prosecution Service indicated their willingness to learn from the situation. They promised that in future they would take the humanitarian aspect into account more and that they would seek cooperation with citizens and organisations offering assistance. That is crucial. It is still likely that asylum seekers will have to sleep outside again because the registration centre is too full.



THE NATIONAL OMBUDSMAN IN THE FIELD

Everyone deserves good help

Angela* is 25 and lives with her parents. In addition to her studies, she also works as a cashier. Angela gradually spends more money than she earns. In principle, she pays the most urgent bills first, but she does not pay her health insurance bills. The payment reminders frighten her and she decides to no longer open her post.

Angela fell into a mild depression and also developed physical problems. She was unable to seek help for her problems. Her debt rose to 10,000 euros. One day, she received a card from the municipality with the message that she could call them if she needed assistance. But she was hesitant and did not dare call. She thought that debt assistance was the only way that the municipality would be able to help, but she was not interested in this.

A few months later, a municipal employee called on her at home. They told her that her health insurance company had informed the municipality about her payment arrears. This is a requirement by law. This enables municipalities to help residents sooner when they start to build up debts. Fortunately, Angela accepted this offer of help. Together with someone from the municipality, Angela listed her debts and made agreements with her creditors. She complied with the agreements and kept the municipality informed. Thanks to the help of the municipality and financial support from her parents, Angela is now almost out of debt.

* Not her real name



Poverty

The Ombudsmen see that more and more people are struggling. Declining purchasing power means that more and more people are experiencing financial worries. Life has become expensive and at times too expensive for many and the social minimum is not enough to make ends meet. The Ombudsmen raised the issue of citizens with financial worries. The Ombudsman for Children wants child poverty to be addressed in all areas that are important for a child's development.

The study **Hoe eerder hoe beter** ('The sooner the better') showed that there are major differences between municipalities in terms of the efforts they make to reach people with financial problems. Some municipalities only send a letter while others, in similar situations, write to an individual, call them and visit them at home. These differences are a problem because it takes an average of five years before people with debts approach the municipality for help. Timely identification of debts can prevent these debts from becoming more serious for people. The Ombudsman called on municipalities and fixed expenses partners such as landlords, health insurance companies and energy companies to agree on minimum requirements for early detection.

The National Ombudsman often monitors cases for years to ensure that actual improvements are made for citizens. In 2019, our own investigation on the payment of compensation by citizens revealed that the monthly amounts of the payment arrangements of the Central Judicial Collection Agency (CJIB) were often too high. Even citizens of good will had problems. This situation should have improved by the Review of Enforcement of Criminal Decisions Act (USB), which came into force in 2020. This provided more scope for customisation. In 2024, the Ombudsman concluded in the report **Innen tegen elke prijs** ('Collection at any cost') that the situation had improved overall.



THE NATIONAL OMBUDSMAN AND OMBUDSMAN FOR CHILDREN IN THE FIELD

Involve children and parents!

A parent tells their story: *"Unlike the municipality, as a parent, I think ahead. The municipality deals with one application at a time. They act on the basis of a single request for assistance and conceive a solution for this. But in the case of children like my son, they should look at how a long-term plan can be made so that he can get the help he needs until he turns 18."*

A child tells their story: *"No one ever talked to me. When I was 11, I myself had to say: 'I'm going to live with my grandparents. I've had enough.' When I was eleven! In fact, any adult woman who had taken the time to talk to a child could have figured that out. And that didn't happen. It's so important to do that with a child."*



Participation and Influence

Being able to participate in discussions, activities and decision-making fosters the support base for government policy and trust in the government. That is why Ombudsmen believe it is important that citizens and children have an influence on decisions and developments that directly affect them.

In recent years, the National Ombudsman and the Ombudsman for Children jointly investigated the participation of young people and adults in the social domain. As a result, we published the study **Participatie vanaf de zijlijn** ('Participation from the sidelines') in 2024 on participation in the Child and Youth Act and we made it available to all municipalities and Youth Care Netherlands (Jeugdzorg Nederland). Parents and young people were interviewed about their experiences with youth welfare support. They indicated that long-term plans were often lacking and that too much was being talked about children and young adults rather than with them.

The Ombudsmen called on municipalities, neighbourhood teams and health-care providers to ensure that parents and young people get a designated point of contact and that they are well informed throughout the process, including feedback on the decision-making. This also applies to advisory councils and youth councils. Youth participation in particular must be taken more seriously. There should also be a single helpdesk for complaints.

Advisory councils and youth councils indicated that adults and children were not being adequately involved in and had too little influence on their own youth welfare support programme. Parents, but certainly young people, feel that they are not given enough opportunities to express their opinions and often feel that they have not been sufficiently informed and taken seriously. There is also a great deal of uncertainty when it comes to the complaints procedure.



THE NATIONAL OMBUDSMAN IN THE FIELD

Application not possible without DigiD

Bernard* is 81 years old and receives a state pension. He manages to get by on this, but in recent years his energy bills have kept increasing. Because Bernard only receives a state pension, he thinks he may be entitled to assistance under the Temporary Energy Emergency Fund (TNE). He wants to apply for this, but very quickly encounters a number of obstacles.

Bernard discovered that you need a DigiD to apply (an official digital identity needed to log into digital platforms of Dutch government agencies including the Tax and Customs Administration). He does not have one and he is unable to create one: he does not have a mobile phone or internet at home.

Bernard asked his municipality whether they can apply on his behalf by phone. They say that this is not possible. This is a problem for

Bernard. How can he apply for assistance? He asked the National Ombudsman to help him. Our colleague Pim contacted the TNE to ask if they could help Bernard. Perhaps they could contact him by phone or even visit him to record his application? TNE quickly visited Bernard to arrange everything shortly after this request.

In the Netherlands, 2.6 million people do not have sufficient digital skills to be able to submit such an application themselves. The digital application option therefore excludes a large group of people who are also in dire need to government support. This is unacceptable. The Ombudsman will continue to draw attention to the need to make government support accessible to everyone.

** Not his real name*



Access to Public Services

Citizens are finding it more and more difficult to contact public authorities and administering agencies. They encounter long waiting times. Investigations by Ombudsmen have shown that many people find it difficult to apply for services and assistance, especially if they require multiple and long-term services. In such cases, citizens have to deal with various helpdesks, digital systems, laws and regulations and feel that they are being sent from pillar to post.

The government should not only be responsive, but also proactive. They shouldn't wait until a citizen contacts them, but they should take the first step more often to ensure that amenities reach the citizens who need them. In 2024, the National Ombudsman drew attention to this in **a letter** to and a roundtable discussion with the Standing Committee for Digital Affairs. Even though the privacy rules can sometimes be restrictive, it is also a matter of governmental courage and taking a different perspective of the relationship between citizen and government. Steps are being taken in the right direction. For example, the government issued the Proactive Services Act (SZW) for internet consultation. In 2024, the Senate also passed a law that makes it possible to automatically grant additional child benefit to parents who provide intensive care to a child.

The report **Leven met Q-koorts. 15 jaar na de epidemie, hoe is het nu?** ('Living with Q fever. 15 years after the epidemic. How are things now?'), published by the National Ombudsman in 2024, concluded that the government had never apologised for its actions during the epidemic and the consequences for those who became infected. This is still a bitter pill to swallow for many Q fever patients. They often still experience a lack of recognition and acknowledgement. They encounter all kinds of obstacles because the effects of Q fever

infection are unknown. Furthermore, little effort is being made to understand the impact on people's lives. Q fever patients often feel that their municipalities do not take them seriously and encounter problems seeking help.

The Ombudsman called on the government to offer Q fever patients their sincere apologies. It is also important to invest in knowledge and expertise on Q fever and to learn from previous situations in dealing with post-COVID patients, a virus that can cause similar long-term symptoms.

The minister stated that she did not think an apology was appropriate, because the court had ruled that the state had not acted unlawfully. The ombudsman believes this is a missed opportunity. After all, offering an apology means acknowledging that something went wrong and that the government played a part in this. He therefore asks the minister to really make a difference for these people this time. He also believes it is important that a specialized expertise center is established where patients can go. After all these years, this still does not exist.



THE NATIONAL OMBUDSMAN IN THE FIELD

Long waiting times and poor communication

Erika* lives in the earthquake zone in Groningen and her home has been damaged by gas extraction. Her application to the Mining Damage Institute Groningen (IMG) for compensation was rejected because the damage was not recognised as being earthquake-related. To her surprise, she heard that her neighbours with similar damage were being compensated. Erika felt that she has been treated unfairly and objected to the decision. The result is a long period of waiting, in which the IMG repeatedly requested an extension of the decision period. Erika agreed each time as she felt she had no other choice, until she read in a local newspaper that she is entitled to refuse the postponement and that IMG is obliged to respond within the set period.

Erika withdrew her consent for further postponement and officially gave the institute a notice of default. Despite these steps, IMG still failed to respond on time. She eventually filed a complaint with the National Ombudsman. The investigation showed that IMG did not communicate clearly enough and kept Erika waiting for a decision for more than a year. This unnecessary delay is unacceptable. The study emphasises the importance of the effective provision of information by government organisations, so that citizens know what they are entitled to and get clarity on procedures more quickly.

* Not her real name



Quality of Life

Changes to the environment where citizens live and work are bound to have an impact on their daily lives. The government often plays a major role in the changes to that environment. This is why it is important for the government to put the interests of citizens first. What can citizens expect from the government when there are changes to their environment? And what will the government do if things go wrong?

In 2024, the National Ombudsman focused on the integrated approach to strengthening and ensuring the sustainability of homes in the villages of Garrelswear, Leermens, Wirdum and Zeerijp. We also monitored the extent to which this 'village approach' took into account the interests of children and the recommendations published in our 2023 report **Herstel bieden: een vak apart** ('Providing recovery: a profession in its own right').

We spoke to various stakeholders in the second half of 2024. This revealed that the village approach had a difficult start. The Ombudsman continued to receive complaints and reports on issues such as recording of conversations, process information and communication about bottlenecks in the implementation.

The investigation also looked at damage compensation for the Almelo-De Haandrik canal in the province of Overijssel, where more than 400 homes were damaged during construction work. In 2024, the Ombudsman received new complaints about how the damage to homes near the canal had been dealt with. Our staff visited the area for two days in June 2024 and spoke to the affected residents. Dealing with the damage settlement was considered to be inadequate in terms of how humane, easy and lenient it was. In October 2024, the Ombudsman therefore sent a letter to the person responsible for dealing with the damage settlement, in which the following key points in the settlement were emphasised: a lenient attitude, diligence, well organised and transparent.



“For too long, we, as adults, have thought that the impact of a divorce on a child’s wellbeing and development is not that bad. But children are telling us that they can be greatly affected by a divorce. Particularly if the divorce is not amicable. They tell us that they especially miss having a good bond with their parents. These experiences can have an impact on the rest of their lives. That is why I call on all parents to continue to be parents to their children even after a divorce. You are separating as partners, but as parents you remain jointly responsible for the wellbeing of your children.”

Margrite Kalverboer
Ombudswoman for Children



Life Course and Development

Problems such as poverty, crime and violence can be passed from generation to generation. The Ombudsmen put this vicious circle of vulnerability on the agenda.

The Ombudsman for Children conducts a major study on the quality of life of children (8-12 year olds) and young people (13-18 year olds) every two years. In 2024, we not only looked at the offline world, but also at the experiences of children and young people in the online world for the study **Als je het ons vraagt** ('If you ask us'). This online world is becoming increasingly important for everyone, particularly for children and young people. 2,729 children and young people completed the questionnaire. They generally rated their lives as satisfactory. It is interesting to see that they are happier with their offline than their online lives. Young people are less satisfied with their life than children. It was particularly noteworthy that girls aged 13-18 were significantly less happy than boys of the same age or younger children. This was true for both their online and offline life. Furthermore, these girls reported feeling the most unsafe online. It also emerged that children and young people who do not identify as either boy or girl were the least happy about their offline life, but were more positive about their online life. The Ombudsman for Children is seriously concerned about these gender differences and therefore calls on the government to take age and gender differences into account.

Every year, about 40,000 children are told that their parents are going to separate. In 2024, the Ombudsman for Children again received many reports concerning complex divorces, i.e. divorces involving a lot of arguing. In the study **Ouders zijn onvervangbaar** ('Parents are irreplaceable'), we looked at the negative impact this has on children’s wellbeing. It emerged that children of divorced parents are more negative about the attention and love they receive from their parents, about the stability in the domestic situation and about the example set by their parents. This impact is significantly more negative in complex divorces. The impact is also more negative for girls than for boys. The Ombudswoman for Children called on parents to put their children’s interests first when making decisions in this regard. She also wants professionals and policy-makers to offer parents help during a divorce and to talk to children themselves when decisions have to be made during the divorce process.

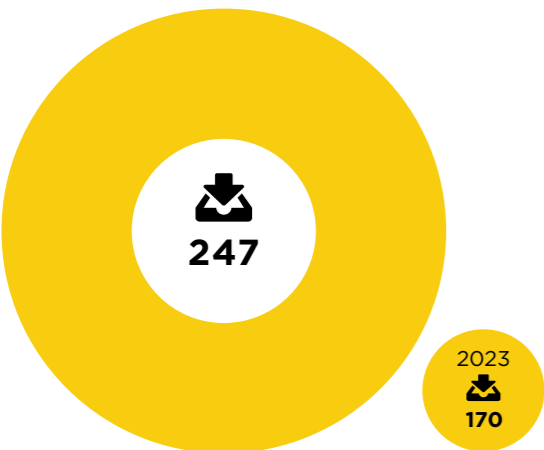
Caribbean Netherlands

Residents of Bonaire, St Eustatius and Saba can contact the National Ombudsman if they have complaints about the government. They can also file complaints about local government: public entities. The latter is notable because, unlike in the European Netherlands, citizens with complaints about public entities can also turn directly to the National Ombudsman and the Ombudsman for Children.

In 2024, the National Ombudsman and the Ombudsman for Children continued to stimulate the implementation of the recommendations they made in three reports on poverty in the Caribbean Netherlands. Although the government endorses the conclusions in the report, it is taking too long to implement them. The Ombudsmen emphasise that the solutions be developed together with the population (young and old) of the Caribbean Netherlands. In doing so, it is important to take into account the cultural differences, the small scale of the islands and the current lack of trust and confidence in the government.

In 2024, discussions on complaints handling also took place with the public bodies (i.e. the executive councils) of Bonaire and St. Eustatius. The National Ombudsman has been investigating this issue on its own initiative since 2022. In the coming period, the Ombudsman will continue discussions with public bodies, including Saba, on complaints handling.

Number of received requests



THE NATIONAL OMBUDSMAN IN THE FIELD

Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport (VWS) reconsiders welfare benefit for back patients

The National Ombudsman is concerned about a group of patients with back problems from Bonaire. They are still waiting for compensation after injuries that they sustained more than ten years ago when they were sent to Colombia for back surgery. We wrote a letter of concern about this to the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport (VWS) asking for a proper solution to be found for the deadlocked talks between the patients and the ministry.

In 2016, VWS had promised to compensate these patients for the injury they had suffered, based on a report by the Dutch Health and Youth Care Inspectorate (IGJ). However, the talks on the amount of compensation for these patients have deadlocked over the past years. The Ombudsman is concerned about the much stronger position of the government compared to the patients. The government is being assisted by the state advocate, but residents of Bonaire have no access to services such as a legal aid and advice centre. This is why the Ombudsman called for patients to be given easy access to legal assistance during a meeting with the ministry. He also requested them to consider asking an independent medically specialised advisor to review the situation and previous proposals. VWS has since indicated that it will respond positively to this request.

International activities

The National Ombudsman, the Ombudsman for Children and the Ombudsman for Veterans collect and share knowledge, expertise and experience with international counterparts. This will enable citizens to receive even better assistance, including in the Netherlands.

The ombudsmen's trips to other countries and incoming visits from abroad aim to boost knowledge exchange, to maintain mutual ties and to find out more about local situations. In 2024, the ombudsmen visited or had contact with countries including Belgium, Luxembourg, Greece, Serbia and Spain.

Collaboration with the Greek Ombudsman

In 2024 the fourth collaboration project with the Greek Ombudsman was launched. Once again, the Dutch embassy enabled us to further explore a number of topics with our Greek colleagues. The collaboration focused, among other things, on an update of an earlier joint exploration in the field of integration, and on climate change and its consequences for people's living conditions. The researchers shared how they had organised research on these topics and what they did with the results. The National Ombudsman contributed with an explanation of his involvement in the aftermath of the flood disaster in Limburg and previous research on energy transition.

Cooperation with the Serbian Ombudsman

In the cooperation project that is part of the Rule of Law programme of the European Union (EU) in Serbia, six activities took place in 2024. Three activities were aimed at the employees of the Serbian Ombudsman and two at the local ombudsmen there. A study visit was also made to the Spanish Ombudsman together with employees of the Serbian Ombudsman. Information was exchanged on the position and working methods of the Spanish Ombudsman and the differences and similarities in complaint handling in the Netherlands, Serbia and Spain were discussed. The cooperation in the context of this EU programme focuses primarily on the exchange of knowledge and experience in the field of complaint handling and its impact. Activities focus on the quick and effective resolution of complaints, the introduction of new insights in the field of complaint handling and what is needed for this within the organisation.

Aruba

Since October 2024, Aruba has, for the first time, an ombudsman. This means that all countries in the Kingdom now have an ombudsman institute. In meetings with the National Ombudsman there have been discussions about how the ombudsmen of the Kingdom can provide support in starting up the Aruban institute. The annual Kingdom consultation in 2024 was postponed to January 2025. The first consultation with the officials of the four ombudsman institutes of the Kingdom has since taken place in Aruba.

International Ombudsman Institute (IOI) World Conference

In 2024, the National Ombudsman organised the successful 13th edition of the International Ombudsman Institute (IOI) world conference. The theme of the conference was *Act together for our tomorrow*. The IOI was established in 1978 to promote cooperation between 200 independent local, regional and national Ombuds organisations from more than 100 countries. About 250 participants from Ombuds institutions around the world gathered in The Hague from 15 to 17 May. It was the first time in eight years that they were able to meet in person.

The King opened the conference. In his opening speech, he stated that *"Ombuds institutions can play a key role in boosting public trust in government. No government is infallible. There will always be mistakes and shortcomings. But your work helps ensure that problems come to light and errors are rectified. We can learn from things that go wrong. And by being open about them,*

we can all move forward together. So you can be proud of the crucial work you perform in the general public interest."

At the general meeting of members, the main agreements were laid down in the **The Hague Declaration**. One of the agreements made was to bring together global knowledge and experience on reaching different groups and communities in society in 2025. This applies in particular to those for whom participation in society is not self-evident.



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