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de Kinderombudsman.



Ombudsagenda 2021

Contents

Introduction 3

1 Fundamental Rights 4



- Ombudsman's views on proper use of data and algorithms 4
- Detention in the Caribbean Netherlands 4
- Housing problems 4
- A child's-eye view of the 2021 social agenda 5
- The position of refugees in the Caribbean Netherlands 5
- The handling of ethnic profiling complaints 5



Participation and Influence 6

- A citizens' perspective on decentralisation 6
- The best decision for the child (toolkit application Art. 3 UNCRC) 6

3 Access to Public Services 7



- Underutilisation of public services 7
- Supporting former URMs on the path to independence 7
- Support for informal caregivers 7
- Lessons from the Covid crisis 8
- Follow-up on MijnOverheid 8
- Investigation into emergency care for veterans 8
- Review of investigation into reintegration in the Ministry of Defence 9
- Complaint handling by Certified Institutions in youth care 9



4 Poverty 10

- Poverty among single parents and their children in the Caribbean Netherlands 10
- Concern about minimum incomes 10
- Sole entrepreneurs and debt relief 11



5 Liveability 12

- Environment and Planning Act 12
- Energy transition 12
- The impact of gas extraction in Groningen 13
- Infrastructure in the Caribbean Netherlands 13

Introduction



2020 turned out to be a year unlike any other. The Covid-19 pandemic impacted everyone's lives on a day-to-day basis. Many citizens needed the government more than ever before. Entrepreneurs needed financial support, people who lost their jobs needed social benefits, and children needed laptops to continue their education online. At the same time, the government became less accessible to its citizens. Counters were closed and some government services suddenly became unavailable.

Aspects of good governance such as accessibility, responsibility and reliability come under closer scrutiny in times of crisis. Some processes falter, while others make unexpected leaps forward thanks to the ingenuity and improvisation of those who find ways to apply rules more flexibly in times of crisis. Once again the importance of clear and unambiguous government communication has been brought home to us. Double standards and uncertainty about what is and what is not permitted can quickly lead to unrest among citizens. Especially at a time when things have seldom been so uncertain. In 2021 we will continue to help all citizens – adults, children and veterans – when they encounter problems in their dealings with the government, whether or not Covid-related. We do this by pointing them in the right direction, giving advice, mediating and conducting investigations. In addition, we continue to challenge government at all levels to look at their work and the services they provide from new angles. So that in everything they do they take the perspective and the interests of all citizens to heart.

In the Ombudsagenda 2021, we feature the topics we want to focus on this year. In essence, our focus is the same as last year's: on themes which are just as relevant – perhaps even more relevant – due to the Covid crisis and its social consequences. On the theme of *Fundamental Rights*, our focus for 2021 will include an investigation into current concerns about the use of ethnic profiling and the handling of complaints on this issue. We will also zoom in on housing: a pressing social problem for many different groups of citizens and their children, despite the fact that adequate housing is such a crucial prerequisite to participating in society.



On the theme of *Participation and Influence*, our activities in 2021 will include examining the decentralisation of various public services and how this has failed to meet the expectations of many citizens. As local ombudsman for three quarters of Dutch municipalities, the National Ombudsman wants to see how citizens can exert their influence in areas of responsibility that are transferred to municipalities.

When it comes to *Access to public services*, we focus on many different topics, from informal caregivers to emergency support for veterans and complaint handling at certified institutions. We are also going to look at underutilisation of public services. Does the government always do enough to ensure that citizens actually make use of provisions set up specifically to help them?

Poverty is also a theme that is high on our agenda due to the Covid crisis. The aspects we plan to look at include access to debt relief for sole traders earning close to minimum wage, and we will pursue our investigations into the current situation as regards poverty in the Caribbean Netherlands, this time among single parents and their children.

On the theme of *Living Environment*, we will continue to focus on the impact of the gas extraction in Groningen which has led to a lot of damaged houses in the area, but also on the energy transition, where we are working to safeguard the position of ordinary citizens.



As the National Ombudsman, the Ombudsman for Children and the Ombudsman for Veterans, we will continue to make the case that the government is there to serve the interests of all citizens – adults, children and veterans. And through our monitoring and investigations we will work to ensure that the government really does fulfil this role.



1 Fundamental Rights

In 2021, as in previous years, the National Ombudsman and Ombudsman for Children will be fully committed to protecting the fundamental rights of citizens of all ages. During the Covid crisis, all manner of fundamental rights have been subject to intense public debate, both those of adults and those of children and young people. These include privacy, public health, the right to demonstrate and freedom of movement. However, the situations with regard to refugees and the ever-increasing housing shortage are also affecting the fundamental rights of citizens. In the Caribbean Netherlands, the ability to satisfy basic needs – such as access to food and water – is not always a given, and the fundamental rights of citizens are under pressure. Across society, the fundamental rights of all citizens, regardless of age, are as relevant to government action as they ever were.



Ombudsman's views on proper use of data and algorithms

For the Ombudsman, it is essential for the government to be 'fair, understanding and straightforward'. By acting in this way, the government inspires confidence among its citizens. The use of data and algorithms, however, can increase the distance between citizens and government, because it replaces or can replace the personal aspects of official services. As a result, the government fails to be 'understanding, fair and simple' in some cases, leading to distrust among citizens. The Ombudsman has formulated a vision of what citizens should be able to expect from the government in terms of data and algorithm use, with a view to building and maintaining public confidence in the government.

Detention in the Caribbean Netherlands

Residents of Saba or Sint Eustatius who are sentenced to detention, many of them young adults, have to serve their term in the penitentiary institution on Bonaire. As there is no penitentiary institution on Saba or Sint Eustatius, they are detained some 800 kilometres away from their families. This has an impact on the detainee and their right to family life during their sentence. Once the detainee has served their sentence, reintegration is important, not least for the socioeconomic situation of the person concerned. A reintegration process would be possible on their island of origin.

The National Ombudsman will investigate the impact on the detainee of serving a sentence away from their island of origin. The Ombudsman will also examine opportunities for reintegration at the end of the sentence and its effects in terms of making a return to society.

The Ombudsman's view of detention in the Caribbean Netherlands extends beyond the islands of Saba, Sint Eustatius and Bonaire to include cooperation with the ombudsmen of Curaçao and Sint Maarten.

Housing problems

Housing is an essential condition for participation in society. The Dutch constitution and various international treaties state that the government has an obligation to work towards adequate housing for all.



Yet many people in Dutch society still struggle to find a place to live. Lack of housing is often not an isolated issue, but is related to wider social problems such as debt and poverty, mental and physical health and issues of safety. In recent years, the National Ombudsman and the Ombudsman for Children have raised a number of housing problems, including the problem of self-sufficient homeless people and the effects of housing problems on children. Together with the local ombudsmen for adults and children, they are holding central government to account on its obligations with regard to the housing shortage. Through action plans and additional financial resources, the government is working to increase the number of homes in the future.



In 2021, the National Ombudsman will continue to monitor conditions on the tight housing market. What is the role of the government and various public bodies in this regard? And what can citizens expect from the government based on that role?

The Ombudsman is also looking at the situation of new status holders. This group are entitled to independent housing, but often have to spend a long time living in an asylum seekers' centre while they wait for housing to be allocated. This obstructs the reception system for asylum seekers and stands in the way of effective civic integration.

Dutch people who return to the Netherlands after having emigrated also face housing problems. The same applies to families with children who are compelled by circumstances to look for a new home. In such cases, the rights of the child are also at stake. The National Ombudsman therefore works together with the Ombudsman for Children to examine the role the government should play in these situations.

A child's-eye view of the 2021 social agenda

In 2020, the Ombudsman for Children's biennial questionnaire went online, inviting children in the Netherlands to share their own experiences and the problems they encounter. This led to the publication of two reports: one in May 2020 and one in November. In 2021, the Ombudsman for Children will address various parties responsible for taking action in response to these results. The findings for the Caribbean Netherlands will be presented in 2021. The Ombudsman for Children will compile the findings – both from the Netherlands and the Caribbean Netherlands – with a view to mapping and tackling children's rights problems.



The position of refugees in the Caribbean Netherlands

The National Ombudsman will provide an overview of the situation of refugees in the Caribbean Netherlands. A significant section of this group is made up of refugees who come to Bonaire from Venezuela. Their numbers and living conditions are unclear, and little is known about their access to essential resources and official procedures. The Ombudsman maintains contact with his counterparts in the Caribbean region regarding the refugee problems in the Caribbean Netherlands.

The handling of ethnic profiling complaints

In 2020, the National Ombudsman launched an investigation into how the various levels of government deal with complaints about ethnic profiling. It is important that citizens who believe they have been subject to ethnic profiling are heard and that their complaints are dealt with properly.

This investigation was prompted by interviews with government agencies with an investigative role in identifying, acknowledging and dealing with complaints about ethnic profiling. Information was also gathered from organisations actively involved in combating ethnic profiling, such as Amnesty International and Controle Alt Delete. The focus is on how such complaints are handled and what citizens consider to be important in that respect. A citizens' hotline has been opened and members of the public and civil servants have been interviewed.

The findings of this investigation will lead to a clear framework for dealing with complaints about ethnic profiling.





2 Participation and Influence

The National Ombudsman believes it vital for the government to give citizens the opportunity to influence decisions and developments that affect them directly. Citizens want to be well informed about decisions that impact their lives and impinge on their own interests. This enables them to weigh up whether they want to have a say and influence the government's choices. For children, this right is explicitly stated in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. It enables them to express their opinion and adapt to these decisions and their consequences without being taken unawares. The Ombudsman for Children therefore regards this as a crucial theme.

Within this framework, the National Ombudsman has established a particular focus on participation and influence in the immediate living environment. This year, both ombudsmen plan to widen this scope to take in participation and influence on other issues. In the public debate, there have been repeated calls for young people to be offered a chance to become more actively involved in policies and measures. Civic participation challenges the government to find new ways to enable citizens to put their interests, knowledge and experience to good use and participate as effectively as possible.

A citizens' perspective on decentralisation

Over the past fifteen years, several areas of responsibility that traditionally lay with central government have been decentralised. These range from housing and natural resources to youth care and social security benefits. In 2020, evaluations of this shift were carried out by various organisations, and the results are not always favourable. Decentralisation is often expected to bring greater customisation for citizens and differentiation in local policy. After all, municipalities are closer to the ordinary citizen than central government and better able to reflect their interests. In practice, however, this is not always the case.

An effective response to local wishes and problems cannot be achieved without active input and influence from residents, in both formulating and implementing policy. In 2021, the National Ombudsman will look to the future and specifically examine decentralisation from a citizens' perspective: when transferring responsibilities, how can the government ensure that citizens can influence policy and implementation on the one hand, and retain control over their own situation on the other hand?

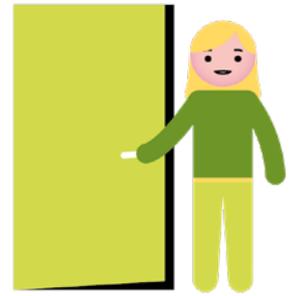
In doing so, special attention will be paid to the outsourcing of public duties to private parties as a result of decentralisation, most notably in the provision of resources on the basis of the Education Participation Act, youth services, home help and supported living. The Ombudsman's investigation will centre on the local authority's overall management of a situation where direct responsibility for certain tasks is no longer legally defined. In other words, where can citizens turn if they want to have a say or make a complaint about private organisations that carry out public duties?

The best decision for the child (toolkit application Art. 3 UNCRC)

It is the responsibility of the Ombudsman for Children to promote compliance with children's rights in the Netherlands. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child is a touchstone in fulfilling this task. Article 3 of this Convention concerns the best interests of the child: it obliges adults to put the best decision for the child first. In this multi-year project, professionals and policymakers are offered support in taking decisions in line with the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The Ombudsman for Children has drawn up a handbook for this purpose.

This handbook was launched on 19 November 2019, along with a number of pilot projects in various youth care organisations. These pilots will be rolled out further in 2021, having been delayed in 2020 by the restrictive measures to combat the spread of Covid-19. The results that emerge from these pilots will subsequently be used to improve and update the handbook. The Ombudsman for Children will also bring the handbook to the attention of everyone who makes decisions that affect a child's future.





3 Access to Public Services

In recent years, the National Ombudsman and the Ombudsman for Children have focused strongly on access to care and support. Decentralisation, fragmented legislation and the outsourcing of tasks to private parties play a major role in this respect. Laws and regulations offer all kinds of provisions that work well for a considerable proportion of citizens, but not for all. This is because some people's situation is more complex, as evidenced by the Ombudsman for Children's investigation into inclusive education, or because they are less self-reliant, as revealed by the National Ombudsman's report on safeguarding standards in the care sector. These more vulnerable groups are in danger of social exclusion. For their sake, it remains especially important to identify bottlenecks and suggest possible solutions. One important example is the extent to which people make sufficient use of public services to which they are entitled.

The Covid crisis has made it clear that more could in fact be done to help certain groups, such as providing temporary shelter for homeless people. Other groups, however, struggled to access services (fewer activities through Education Participation and youth services, for example, or the interruption of physical education). Given that the Covid crisis is far from over, it is still possible that new measures will further restrict access to public services. Equally, the economic consequences of the crisis may also affect the availability and accessibility of public services.

Underutilisation of public services

For many citizens, government rules and regulations remain prohibitively complex, as evidenced by a whole range of complaints, signals and investigations. As a result, citizens may not make use of all the services to which they are entitled. The key question is whether public authorities are doing enough to ensure that vulnerable citizens in particular make use of the services available. To what extent is the government proactive in providing access to services? In 2021, the National Ombudsman will investigate the use of public services, zooming in on services for the elderly, such as the provision of supplementary income.



How do older people know whether they are entitled to make use of a service, and does this affect the number of applications and the level of provision? Through this investigation, the Ombudsman will identify best practices and points for improvement, for example as regards information and services that are provided by several different public bodies (chain services).

Supporting former URM's on the path to independence

In 2019, the National Ombudsman and the Ombudsman for Children jointly explored problems affecting young people when they reach the age of eighteen. Their findings sparked an investigation into the position of unaccompanied refugee minors (URMs) with asylum status, who are allowed to stay in the Netherlands after they turn eighteen. For this vulnerable group in particular, the transition from under to over eighteen has major implications: they go from all-encompassing support to being left to fend for themselves. The investigation will focus on what this group can reasonably expect from the Dutch government. We will mainly talk to the URM's themselves and with municipalities, which are responsible for these young adults from the age of eighteen.

Support for informal caregivers

In recent years, the National Ombudsman has drawn attention to problems accessing care and support, in addition to the quality and cost of these services. Among the most salient points to emerge is the seemingly increasing burden on informal caregivers. This is due in part to the fact that the elderly live at home until an older age and to municipal cutbacks, which leave more tasks, such as home help and supported living, to informal care. This burden has been added to by the Covid crisis, during which many aspects of care have been scaled back.

All informal caregivers report that their care task impacts on their personal life, their opportunities for education or employment, their finances and the opportunity to rest from time to time. The National Ombudsman's report entitled *Blijvende zorg* (Continuing Care) called on the government to devote special attention to supporting persons who are particularly vulnerable and to their informal caregivers. The Ombudsman for Children also noted in a previous report *Hoor je mij wel?* (Can you hear me?) that young informal caregivers lack the support to keep informal care bearable.

Informal caregivers have an important role to play and also want to spend time with their loved ones. They can only continue to do so if they receive sufficient support. In 2021, the National Ombudsman will talk with informal caregivers, interest groups, the academic world and the government with the aim of critically examining developments surrounding the support for informal carers and to call for practical improvements.

Lessons from the Covid crisis

The Dutch government has demonstrated its courage and creativity during the Covid crisis by introducing a wide range of emergency measures. It was also quick to adapt whenever it became clear that citizens were falling through the cracks or found themselves in trouble. Although the National Ombudsman has received complaints about the government's accessibility, changes to services and a lack of clarity regarding crisis measures, more has turned out to be possible than initially thought. Throughout the crisis, the public sector has been working fast, looking across borders and thinking out of the box to deliver customised solutions, ensure effective cooperation and apply rules flexibly.

In 2021, we want to look at what the government did right in serving citizens during the Covid crisis. What seemingly impossible tasks suddenly turned out to be possible under pressure? For example, the homeless people who were given a room and a more peaceful setting in which they could start to get their lives back together. Entrepreneurs who have felt the support of rapid access to financial compensation schemes. In this investigation, we will look at how to build on those positive experiences – even outside times of crisis. What was needed at various government levels to achieve accessible and responsible public resources in the form of finance, professional scope and other structures?



Follow-up on MijnOverheid

In 2017, the National Ombudsman investigated the effectiveness of MijnOverheid, the government's online public service portal. This investigation revealed problems with options for citizens who prefer non-digital communication, for citizens who do want to communicate digitally but find the system too complicated, and for professionals and relatives who want to make digital arrangements on behalf of vulnerable people. In a document setting out a vision for digitisation, the Ombudsman identified four basic principles for the digitisation of government; take responsibility, be accessible, be solution-oriented and be user-friendly.



The Ombudsman continues to receive signals about digital accessibility on a regular basis. In 2021 he therefore plans to compile an overview of the improvements the government has made to MijnOverheid and DigiD since 2017, while detailing the problems which still exist.

Investigation into emergency care for veterans

In recent years, the Ombudsman for Veterans has received complaints from veterans and their families about the response to veterans who are in urgent need of help. Although the Veterans Helpdesk is available 24/7 and covers social work and coordination of care, in practice there is an absence of emergency care. The Helpdesk does not see this as part of its remit. Emergency care includes responding to veterans who have suicidal tendencies or severe PTSD, such as aggression (including domestic violence) or a freeze response. In some situations,

these problems can result in eviction or a domestic exclusion order (e.g. a temporary domestic exclusion to allow for a cooling-off period). The Salvation Army and the Kessler Foundation take in people with nowhere to stay, but this type of shelter is not suitable for a veteran whose mental health has been severely damaged. In practice, regional veterans' drop-by centres sometimes help out and take care of a veteran in need. Although this help is well intentioned, it goes beyond their remit and they therefore lack the necessary knowledge and resources. The same applies to the sheltered housing for veterans in Eelde; while they are equipped for long stays and offer supported living, they cannot offer help in a mental health crisis.

This investigation centres on emergency care, essential care and ensuring that both are accessible. Can the current care system accommodate veterans in need of emergency help? The framework for this investigation is the special duty of care that the government has towards veterans and their families under the Veterans Act of 2014.



Review of investigation into reintegration in the Ministry of Defence

In 2018, the Ombudsman for Veterans carried out an investigation into the reintegration of staff at the Ministry of Defence. The Ministry offers severely injured veterans support in the form of intensive programmes and training. If these reintegration programmes exceed two years, the UWV imposes an extension that obliges the Ministry of Defence to continue to pay the veteran's salary. In recent years both the National Ombudsman and the Ombudsman for Veterans have received, and continue to receive, dozens of complaints about the lack of attention and guidance in the event of absenteeism due to illness. When these soldiers and veterans fall ill, they often feel as if they are left to their own devices. This has a major impact on their personal lives. In April 2018, the Ombudsman therefore launched an investigation into these complaints and signals. In addition to talks with both bodies, a round table discussion was organised in July 2018 with the relevant experts and public officials. The investigation found that lack of knowledge, delayed transfer of responsibilities and inaccurate registration are the biggest problems with the reintegration process at the Ministry of Defence. The Ministry responded by saying it was its duty to implement the processes initiated with a view to achieving improvements in expertise, support and management throughout the reintegration chain. In addition, the Ombudsman for Veterans proposed that the Ministry of Defence and the UWV should jointly look at how customisation can be achieved within the relevant legislation (Veterans Act and the Eligibility for Permanent Incapacity Benefit (Restrictions) Act).

A review of this investigation will follow in 2021 to determine whether the intended improvements in expertise, support and management have actually been achieved.

Complaint handling by Certified Institutions in youth care

For some time, the Ombudsman for Children and the National Ombudsman have been receiving complaints about how complaints are dealt with by Certified Institutions in youth care. An in-depth analysis will therefore take place in 2021 with a view to improving the handling of complaints within these institutions.





4 Poverty

Almost half a million Dutch households still live in poverty, including families with underage children. Sole entrepreneurs and households with a non-Western migration background are at particular risk of poverty, and poverty often persists for a long time among these groups. In the event of a crisis, they are especially vulnerable to losing their source of income. As a result, the Covid crisis has hit these groups extra hard, with a sharp increase expected in the number of people facing problematic debts and the likelihood of further poverty in the years ahead. This also means that still more children will grow up in poverty. Even the extensive state aid programmes currently in place cannot guarantee the financial survival of a many self-employed people and sole entrepreneurs as this crisis continues and deepens. Many are not in a position to reduce expenditure and do not have financial reserves to fall back on. Municipalities can therefore expect a huge number of applications for support from people with financial problems and problematic debts. For the National Ombudsman, acting as local ombudsman for almost 300 Dutch municipalities, and for the Ombudsman for Children, it is important to find out how municipalities deal with these problems. For example, how generous are municipalities in granting the self-employed access to municipal debt assistance? And how are the interests of children growing up in poverty taken into account?

Poverty is also a major problem in the Caribbean Netherlands. The thematic investigation into poverty-related problems in the Caribbean Netherlands, launched in 2019, will continue in 2021. Now that the region has been so badly hit by the Covid crisis, this is more relevant than ever. The National Ombudsman continues to call the government to account by insisting that citizens have the right to a minimum income. The Ombudsman challenges government agencies and other public bodies to come up with creative solutions to combat poverty, using instruments including interventions, reports and constructive discussions with the professional field.

Poverty among single parents and their children in the Caribbean Netherlands

Poverty is a major problem in the Caribbean Netherlands. With the aim of ensuring that this topic becomes a long-term political priority, the National Ombudsman published a study into the distressing situation of the elderly in 2019. In 2020, the National Ombudsman and the Ombudsman for Children conducted a joint investigation that focused on the situation of young adults. The third study in this series will focus on single parents and their children. In 2021, the National Ombudsman and the Ombudsman for Children will also publish a joint vision for tackling poverty in the Caribbean Netherlands.

Concern about minimum incomes

The Ombudsman notes that approximately one million Dutch citizens have to live on an income that puts them on or only slightly above the poverty line. Most of this group live in long-term poverty and struggle to keep their heads above water financially. They are not limited to people on social security benefits but also include people in low-paid jobs and sole entrepreneurs whose earnings are low. For years, many in this group have seen their disposable income decline to the point where they can barely make ends meet. The Covid crisis is threatening to widen this financially vulnerable group; young people, sole entrepreneurs and workers on flexible contracts are most at risk. For some, the economic impact of the pandemic could be the final blow that will leave them financially stranded for years to come.



The problems of these financially vulnerable individuals are compounded by their dependence on complex forms of government support. They frequently fall foul of the rules and conditions that apply to social benefits. The slightest error or failure to comply with their obligation to provide accurate information can have dire financial consequences. Fines and repayment requirements can leave them with problematic debts or further aggravate their existing debt problems. Often these citizens no longer know what to do or who to turn to with their problems.



The Ombudsman wants to ensure that the problems these minimum income households experience in their dealings with the government are put firmly on the agenda. What problems do these citizens face? To what extent are they supported by the government? And where do the potential solutions to this persistent problem lie? Last but not least, the Ombudsman wants to examine how he himself can help these citizens more effectively.

Sole entrepreneurs and debt relief

An investigation by the Ombudsman discovered that municipalities had wrongfully been refusing debt relief to self-employed persons, despite having been obliged to do so since 2012. On this basis, the Ombudsman therefore made a number of recommendations to the municipalities. Subsequently, the State Secretary for Social Affairs and Employment also pointed out on several occasions that entrepreneurs need help. Self-employed entrepreneurs are expected to encounter more severe financial difficulties due to the Covid crisis. With this in mind, the Ombudsman is keen to find out whether and to what extent municipalities have rectified the situation with regard to debt relief and whether sole entrepreneurs are now being given access. Reason enough to re-examine access to municipal debt relief.





5 Liveability

Changes to the environment where citizens live and work are bound to have a major impact on them. Legislation geared towards this aspect of life is due to come into force on 1 January 2022, in the form of the Environment and Planning Act. In 2020, the National Ombudsman highlighted the citizens' perspective in this legislation with the aim of ensuring that citizens with questions or complaints do not end up being sent from pillar to post. And in 2021, various activities have been scheduled to ensure that the public authorities do not lose sight of the citizens' perspective.



In addition, the National Ombudsman will provide the government with points of reference for issues relating to the energy transition. The liveability of the people of Groningen, both adults and children, remains a point of attention for the Ombudsman. They have borne the brunt of the negative consequences of gas extraction and need government assistance in the form of energetic and appropriate solutions. The same applies to the residents of other parts of the Netherlands, such as South Limburg, where the effects of coal mining are still being felt. The Ombudsman for Children is also involved in this theme, because children attach great importance to a healthy and safe living environment, as demonstrated by their involvement in climate demonstrations.

Environment and Planning Act

The Environment and Planning Act is expected to enter into force in 2022. The aim of the Act is to make environment and planning legislation simpler and more accessible to citizens. The hope is that it will replace the current range of disparate laws and regulations and lead to shorter procedures. While these are noble principles, they also require considerable input from citizens: dealing with the Digital System for the Environment and Planning Act, for example, or setting up or taking part in a participation process.

The National Ombudsman's focus on the Environment and Planning Act dates back to the preparatory phases in 2019. A series of regional meetings were organised with over forty municipalities, environmental services and water authorities. Together with these government agencies, the Ombudsman identified a number of points of attention for the government to keep in mind, with a view to ensuring solid safeguards for citizens. Among other things, these require the government to specify a minimum level of service. How will it keep its information accessible and comprehensible? What needs to change in the way that public authorities are organised and how can they work together to implement the law properly? And how does the government plan to support citizens who will be expected to organise their own participation process when they apply for a permit?

In 2020, the National Ombudsman held further regional meetings with various municipalities, environmental services and water authorities. One of the aims was to ascertain the current state of preparation. Were the previously formulated points of attention still relevant? Had new ones been added?

In 2021, the Ombudsman will continue to emphasise a focus on the points for attention and to explore them in greater depth.

Energy transition

The energy transition is a complex and comprehensive process. One that is sure to bring far-reaching changes for the government, for businesses and for the citizens of the Netherlands. Here, too, the government must ensure that it does not lose sight of the citizens' perspective in its preparations and services. What can citizens expect from the government? Businesses are sure to play an important role, with energy companies and wind farms as two of the most



obvious examples. What is the role of government when citizens find themselves unable to reach an understanding in their dealings with private parties? Where can they turn to have a say or to lodge a complaint? How does the government ensure that a gap does not open up between citizens who can and cannot participate?

It is important to remember that for many citizens the energy transition is still a remote and abstract concept. How can the government ensure that households are fully informed on such matters and in a position to make adequate preparations, for example by knowing where to apply for which subsidies? The National Ombudsman examined these and other issues in the course of 2020.

In 2021, the National Ombudsman will hold further discussions on the transition with members of the public, the government and other stakeholders, with a view to providing the government with points of reference explicitly formulated from the citizens' perspective.



The impact of gas extraction in Groningen

The large-scale extraction of natural gas in the northern province of Groningen has led to subsidence and earthquakes. Local residents continue to suffer the consequences. Homes have been damaged and the structural safety of some buildings is now cause for concern. These developments are having a serious impact on the liveability in the gas extraction area. In recent years, the National Ombudsman has paid several visits to the earthquake zone and has called for attention to be paid to the citizens' perspective, social cohesion and the importance of restoring public confidence.

A number of steps have now been taken and the government has accepted responsibility for the compensation and reinforcement operation. Nevertheless, many residents are still living with uncertainty as regards compensation for damage, if and when their home will be eligible for reinforcement, and the extent to which they will have a say in the process. Decisions are also a long time coming. The impact on many residents, including children, is immense and an ongoing cause for concern in the eyes of the National Ombudsman and the Ombudsman for Children. The National Ombudsman will visit the area again in 2021 and hold discussions with residents and other stakeholders about the extent of the progress being made and issues that remain unresolved. In the meantime, he will continue to hold the government accountable where necessary. The handling of individual complaints will continue unabated.

Infrastructure in the Caribbean Netherlands

The Ombudsman regularly receives signals and complaints about inadequate facilities from the residents of the three islands of the Caribbean Netherlands. The condition of the roads on all of the islands is poor, internet access is not available in all parts of the islands and some households are still living without electricity. Until recently, the water supply on Sint Eustatius was problematic, and although provisional measures have now been taken to alleviate the situation, no structural solution has yet been found. Nor is there any public transport on the islands. Dutch central government provides various types of subsidies to the public bodies in the Caribbean Netherlands in order to improve the islands' infrastructure. The Ombudsman plans to investigate why these subsidies have not resulted in the desired standard of infrastructural provisions.



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