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# THE CITIZEN'S PERSPECTIVE: ANOTHER MINDSET

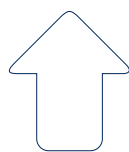
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# 2015

*Summary of the 2015  
Annual Report of the  
National Ombudsman  
of the Netherlands*



38,147



+4.9%



82%



71%



170

*“We exist to look at how things can be done differently and better, with a sharper eye for the citizen's perspective.”*

*“In our work we see where things have gone wrong or where it may go wrong between citizens and the government.”*

## Diagnosis 2015

On the one hand, the government says citizens are getting greater scope to arrange their own affairs as part of the participatory society. On the other, the government is restricting this scope by imposing all kinds of requirements and rules, plus heavy penalties when rules are not followed. This is completely contradictory and in practice it causes problems.

## Learning government

Society is incredibly complex, so the government's work is as well. Mistakes inevitably occur. But when something goes wrong, it is up to the government to try to put it right. Ultimately, it's about a learning government.

## An eye for the citizen's perspective

One way of seeing the citizen's perspective is by reaching out, by meeting people and speaking to them. We see this as a precondition for being able to do our work properly.

*“Most of the complaints we receive arose because the government forgot about citizen's perspective.”*

# OUR WORK IN FIGURES

*What do we stand for as the National Ombudsman?*

People can contact the National Ombudsman in various ways.



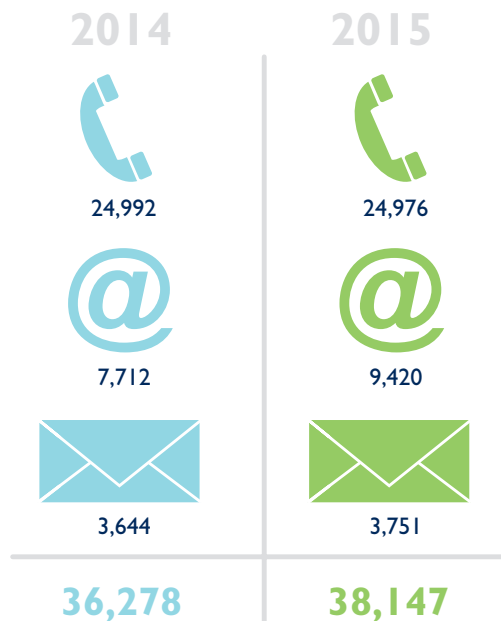
## Mission and vision

We believe the citizen's perspective must be assured in everything the government does:

- By helping citizens (or pointing them in the right direction) when things go wrong between them and the government. We guide citizens to the right government desk. We assist them by providing advice and tools, enabling them to resolve problems on their own. And we conduct investigations effectively. (reactively)
- By challenging authorities to look differently at services, processes and innovations. With our team of specialists, we examine everything the government does. We consider ways of doing things differently and better. We have a sharper eye for the citizen's perspective, and we urge authorities to do the same and improve their practices. (proactively)

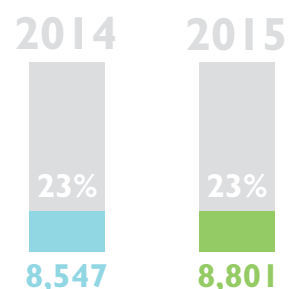
## Number of complaints

Many citizens would like their complaints to be resolved swiftly on the phone. The National Ombudsman has geared its handling of complaints to this wish. Compared with 2014, the total number of complaints increased by 5% in 2015.



## Referral

The National Ombudsman is empowered to deal with complaints about government authorities. We help people with questions or complaints in other fields as well as possible to get to the right authority.



## Alert

The National Ombudsman is an alert, motivated organisation fit for today. We have professionals who understand the citizen's feelings towards and expectations of government in modern times. They are professionals whose ideals enable them to challenge government. They act whenever the citizen's perspective receives insufficient attention. They do not allow themselves to be deterred, but get things moving.

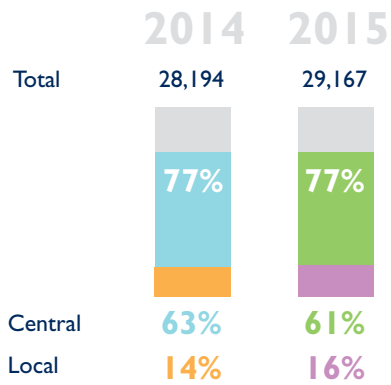
*What do we stand for as the National Ombudsman?*

## Key figures 2015

- Number of requests: 38,147
- 5% increase
- 176 reports issued
- 33 recommendations made

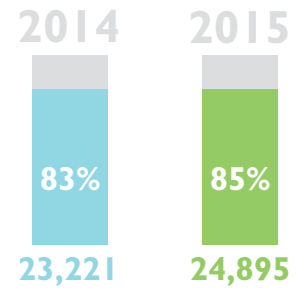
## Central government and local authorities

More than three-quarters of requests concern government in one form or another. The majority are related to central government.



## Advising and informing

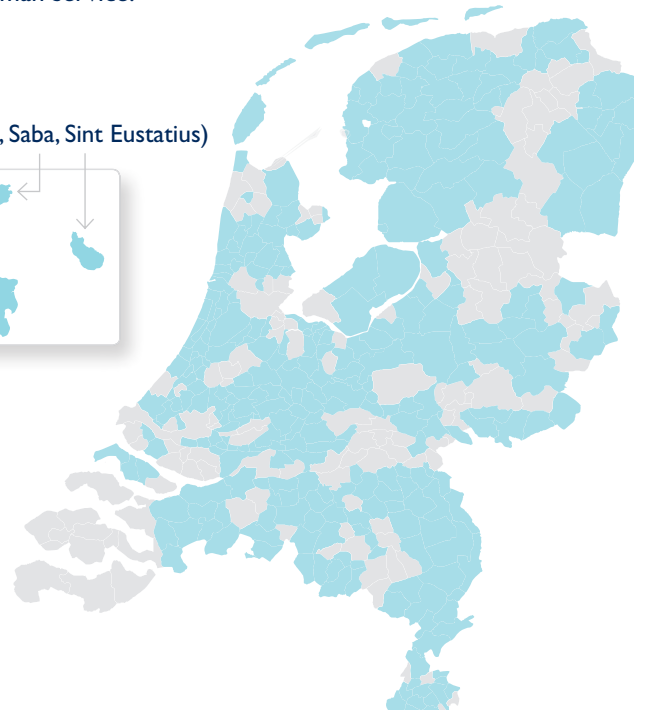
The Ombudsman acts in an advisory and informing capacity in approximately 85% of the requests concerning the government. In many cases, this is enough because people then know the right authority to approach.



## For which municipalities does the National Ombudsman work?

Municipalities can choose to affiliate with the National Ombudsman for the external complaint handling or to establish their own ombudsman service.

(Bonaire, Saba, Sint Eustatius)



280 municipalities use the National Ombudsman.

*What do we stand for as the National Ombudsman?*

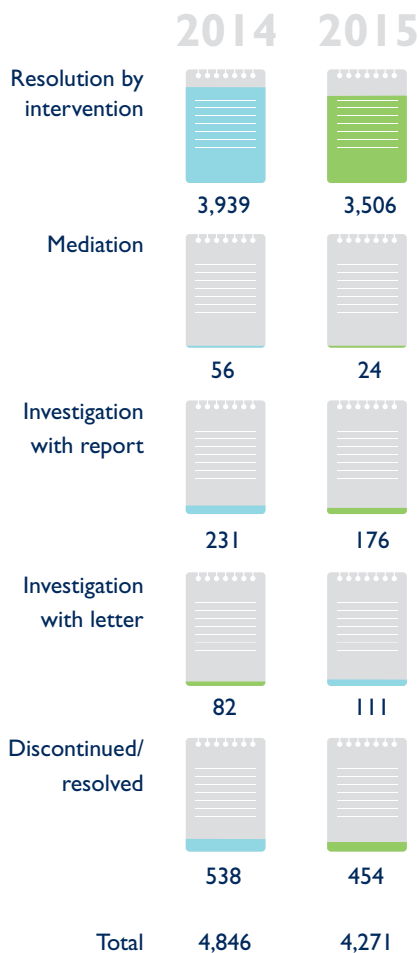
### Committed

The National Ombudsman is an organisation closely involved in relationships between the citizen and government. So we are committed to flagging and receiving potential conflicts between citizens and the authorities. The National Ombudsman devotes maximum attention to the citizen's perspective. People who come to the Ombudsman get personal attention. We hear and treat their problems attentively.

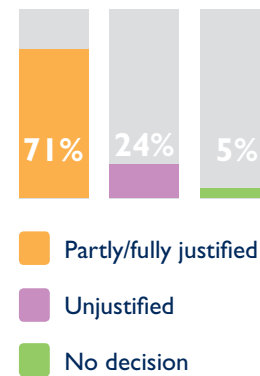
## Investigations launched on our initiative

Before launching an investigation on our own initiative, we often perform a fact-finding mission. Not every fact-finding mission results in an investigation. We carried out 32 fact-finding missions in 2015. Of these, eight resulted in an investigation. In total, 19 investigations that we started were completed. In 11 of those cases we wrote a public report, while seven were completed by writing a letter to the relevant minister or the House of Representatives and one was completed by holding a conference.

## How are complaints handled?



## Decisions in reports



### What do we stand for as the National Ombudsman?

#### Inventive

The National Ombudsman challenges authorities to look differently at the services they provide. Our 170 professionals raise matters for discussion and together with the authorities look for innovative, creative solutions and improvements. They do not allow themselves to be obstructed or deterred, but persevere in searching for new ways of making improvements.

#### Accessible

The National Ombudsman is accessible and approachable. Anybody who has a conflict with the authorities can and may come to us. The National Ombudsman team stands ready to help members of the public to solve their problems or to point them in the right direction. The National Ombudsman communicates comprehensibly.

## Report highlights

**Hostage to the system (2015/160):** People unable to pay fines because they were short of money were wrongly deprived of their freedom, or subjected to 'coercive detention'. The State Secretary recognised the matters that the National Ombudsman said required attention and will pursue measures at the front desk, in the process of collecting fines.

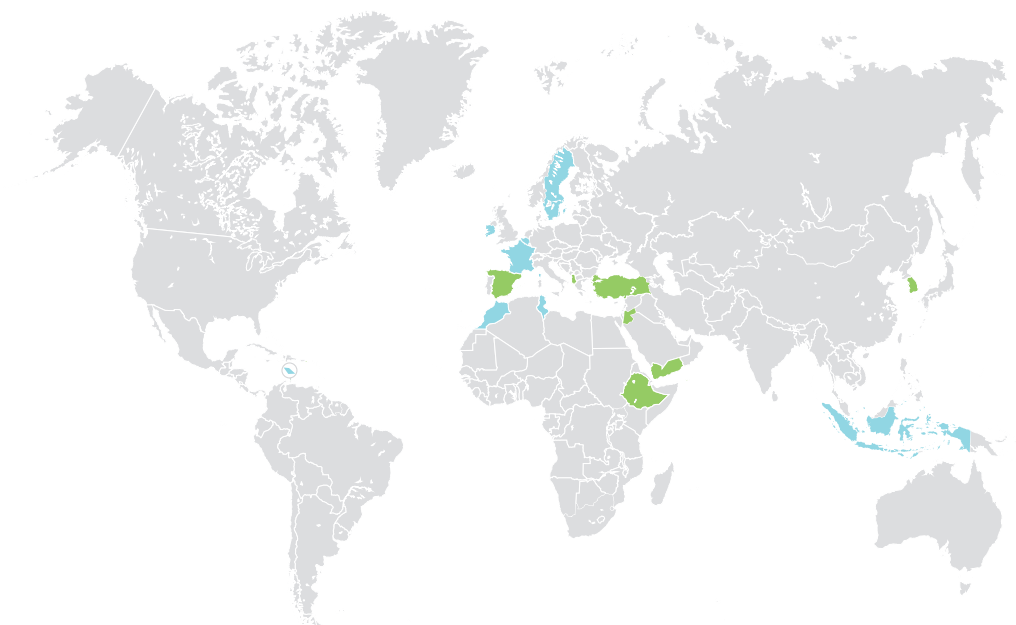
**Drawing down patient fund-holding money and the (non-)learning government (2015/123):** The government needs to learn from major implementation problems, like those that occurred on introduction of the right to draw down money from patient fund-holding accounts. The interests of vulnerable citizens and care providers were disregarded on introduction of the system, just as happened earlier on introduction of the single bank account number at the Tax and Customs Administration.

**Roadside bomb veterans (2015/134):** Hardly any dedicated assistance was provided to three Afghanistan veterans injured in a roadside bomb attack. As the ombudsman for veterans, we believe the Minister of Defence erred in her special duty of care to these veterans.

**Safety first – role of the police in access rights (2015/096):** The National Ombudsman and the Ombudsman for Children advocate clarity of the role of the police when child access arrangements after a divorce are not respected. Their investigation revealed that expectations of the role of the police varied. The ombudsman sees a role for the police notably when the safety of children and/or other persons is at stake.

**And then we heard nothing ... (2015/143):** The National Ombudsman is of the opinion that the Bonaire Public Body ('OLB') fell short in communicating with members of the public. The Ombudsman deals in his report with five different complaints. He noted that it took a long time for OLB to respond, or that matters did not start to move until he became involved. OLB recognised the Ombudsman's signal and is working hard to bring about better working practices.

## The National Ombudsman as a player in an international network



Working visits and projects

Visits of delegations to the Netherlands

## Your National Ombudsman reaching out

The National Ombudsman and his staff visit the regions to assist members of the public with their problems with the authorities.

Parties we visited in 2015 included:

- Resto VanHarte Utrecht
- Amersfoort Food Bank
- Amsterdam Veterans' House
- Gooi and Vecht Region ombudsman service
- Enschede Social Services Desk
- Leiden asylum seekers centre
- Hacking Habitat
- Utrecht Ombudscafé

## Civil servants at work

In their day-to-day work civil servants are the face of the government. They are in direct contact with members of the public. They possess considerable knowledge and experience of the people with whom they have contacts and know the citizen's perspective. Their knowledge and experience will not be used effectively until they are able to pass on their know-how to policymakers and, where necessary, are allowed room to deviate from rules, policy and legislation laid down by The Hague or the municipality.

## Trending cases

### Debts

Large debts can cause an accumulation of problems that involve various government organisations. A substantial proportion of households with problematic debts struggle on unaided. The authorities concerned need to gear their service provisioning to this group of citizens.

### Asylum seekers

In 2015 the government had to arrange all kinds of reception facilities for refugees and their children who had come to the Netherlands. At the same time, the government must respond to concerns among some members of the public about the nearby establishment of a large centre for asylum seekers. The National Ombudsman had to contend with both aspects in the year under review.

### Digitisation

Digitisation is a fact of life and millions of people – including our office – benefit from the convenience of digital communication. The National Ombudsman is not against digitisation. But the authorities must also cater for people who are unable or unwilling to use a computer. It is another example of keeping an eye on the citizen's perspective.

### Devolution

Central government has chosen to devolve to municipalities a number of major tasks (health care, youth and work & income). We organised a conference in 2015 to talk to all complaint handlers at municipalities about the public's perspective in their towns and to strengthen the way complaints are treated locally.

*“There are 170 of us working for 17 million citizens. So even though we would wish to do so, we cannot put right everything that goes wrong between the citizen and the government.”*

You will find the complete annual report of the National Ombudsman on our website at [www.nationaleombudsman.nl](http://www.nationaleombudsman.nl). The website also contains our report to the House of Representatives, figures and a timeline with highlights from 2015.

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