
QUALITY AND DIGITISATION IN GOVERNMENT SERVICES

2013

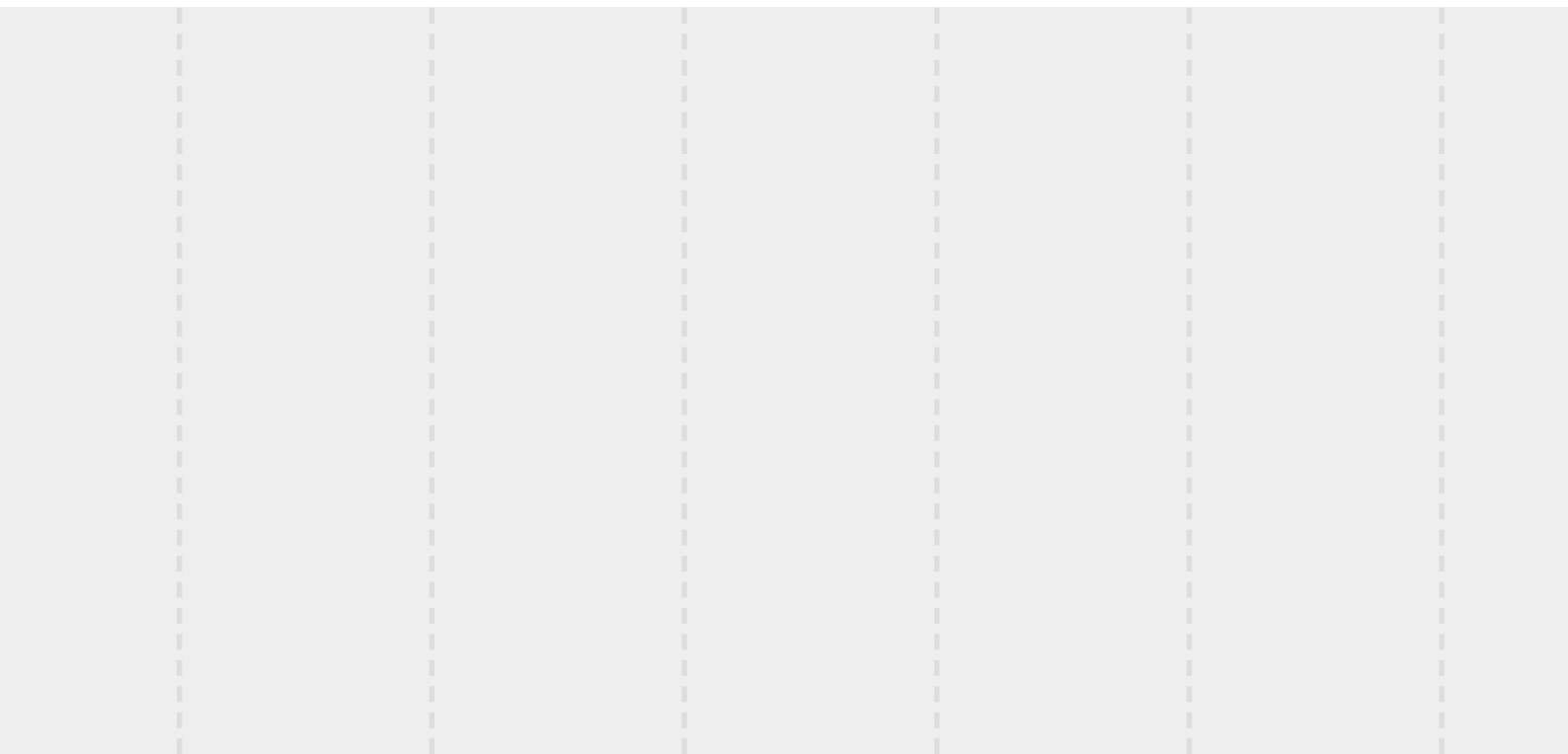
*National Ombudsman
of the Netherlands*

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PREFACE

Computers and the internet have brought about a sea-change in the way we live. Digitisation has a major impact on contacts between citizens and public bodies with the process advancing apace. Meanwhile, governmental services are in a state of transition.

During 2013 the Netherlands National ombudsman took a wide-ranging, in-depth look at government service provisions. Alongside his own investigations the ombudsman also commissioned the independent market research agency TNS NIPO to gauge the quality of these provisions. The resulting *Citizens go digital* survey made clear that personal contact is still highly valued – while some things cannot be fixed from behind the computer. Lastly, he asked for the opinions of Dutch civil servants who are in daily contact with the public.

Alex Brenninkmeijer, who was National ombudsman until 31 December 2013¹, used this work as the basis for a vision statement on the provision of digital services by government, on the occasion of the Annual Report for 2013. It now gives me great pleasure to present this in the first part of the summary. Although most of the insights and recommendations relate to the situation in the Netherlands I am sure that everyone will see their relevance. Indeed, providing services is the business of all public organizations worldwide. The same applies to the personal-versus-digital contact dilemma, and contemporary digital issues.

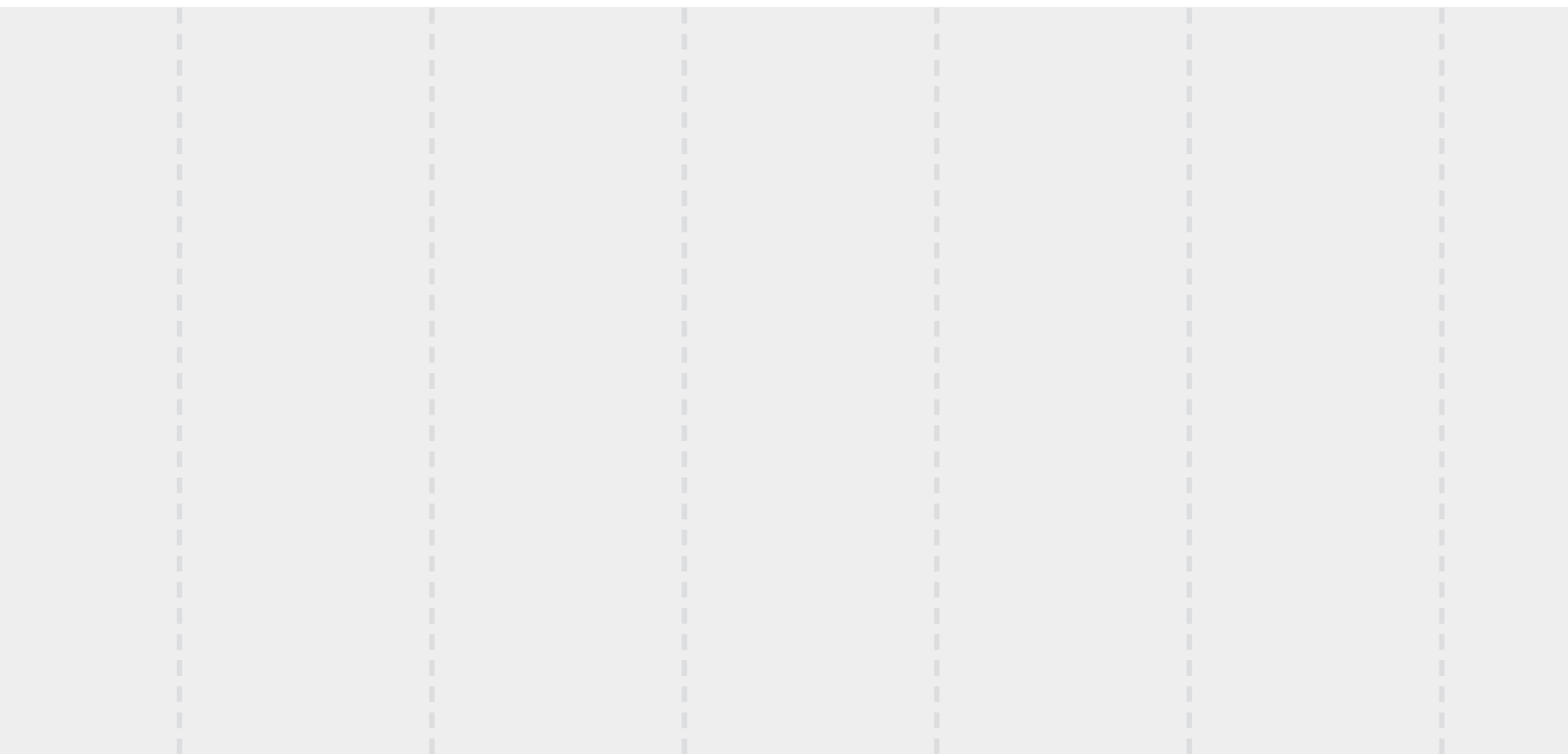
It also gives me pleasure to present the second part of a summary of the survey report by TNS NIPO. The conclusions and recommendations are well-worth reading and slot in neatly with an ombudsman's field of focus. Listening to people and matching service provisions to their needs is key.

It is important to take feedback and signals from citizens seriously, wherever in the world one may be. This demands an open, questioning and honest stance – enabling a firm grip on good service by government.

I trust that our vision in the 2013 Annual Report and the TNS NIPO report will be an inspiration for your work in and around the provision of government services, and in dealing with the challenges of the digital age.

Frank van Dooren
Interim National ombudsman

¹ Alex Brenninkmeijer was the National Ombudsman of the Netherlands from 2005 to 2013. He became a member of the European Court of Auditors on 1 January 2014.



QUALITY AND DIGITISATION IN GOVERNMENT SERVICES

Dr. A.F.M. Brenninkmeijer

I. INTRODUCTION

Quality in governmental service provisions has been high on the political agenda for some years – now the financial crisis has spurred change on two fronts. Firstly, a political decision has been taken to reinforce the digital provision of services, supposedly economizing on the traditional formula. Secondly, a number of ministries have dropped the good provision of services as a policy aim. Hence, the secretary general of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment has stated that a six-out-of-ten approval rating is good enough. This contrasts with the longstanding goal of the implementing body for national insurance schemes to deliver excellent service. Meanwhile, the Unemployment Benefit Organisation is moving strongly to increase digital service, so much so that, using the digital channel via the internet is virtually obligatory. Users who have difficulties with the digital channel may, possibly, be offered a place on a course to improve their digital skills. Other options to make contact have been minimized, whereby personal visits to the so-called Work Plaza are limited to a single afternoon per week.

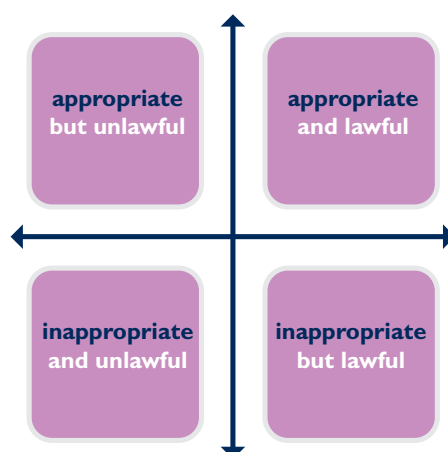
Partly with an eye to vital cuts the second coalition led by Premier Rutte decided on a higher level of government digitisation. The minister of the Interior's letter to parliament giving a vision on digital government in 2017 marked a very clear new step. The citizen's rating of (digital) government services is set out in two parts starting with an overview of the various developments around the ratings; these are visible due to a repeat survey in 2013 which I commissioned from the TNS NIPO market research bureau, covering 2008, 2009 and 2010. My survey entitled *Citizens go digital* also used a panel from a television programme, and a questionnaire. This yielded a final total of 48,000 completed questionnaires. The questionnaire on (digital) government services which I distributed among civil servants also produced a good response and insight. Secondly, the survey focused on those points raised from the perspective of the citizen which demand special attention and which are important for improvement around the further development of digital government. Good contacts with government are important for the citizen in arranging and organizing his/her affairs. Far from being a luxury this is key for the legitimacy and acceptance of government policy. Self-evidently, one needs to know what is meant by quality, and so, before outlining the quality of service provisions in 2013, I shall set out the framework within which the National ombudsman evaluates the quality of service provisions.

2. THE NATIONAL OMBUDSMAN'S ASSESSMENT FRAMEWORK

During my time as National ombudsman I initiated and produced 2,650 reports on my own initiative. Of these just over 111,000 were based on concrete complaints and 60 on own investigations. Meanwhile 836 of the reports included my recommendations which, in turn, formed the basis for annual reports with topics such as *supply chain management* (2009), *feedback and reflection* (2010), *trust in and by the citizen* (2011) and *complex government* (2012). The National ombudsman's assessment framework has been developed within these reports, over the past several years. In the terms of the General Administrative Law act this framework is formed by the standards of proper conduct,¹ which were drafted together with the municipal ombudsmen in 2012. The four categories of proper conduct are : clear & open, respectful, committed & solution oriented, and honest & trustworthy. Aspects covered by the honest & trustworthy category include: integrity, reliability, impartiality, reasonableness, good preparation and organization, and professionalism.²

The standards of proper conduct also provided the basis for the ombuds-model or quadrant.³ The principle of the model is that government must act both justly and adequately; in other words it can never merely hide behind the law or behind rules and regulations. Under this approach rather than being an extension of proper conduct is significant by itself alongside legitimacy.⁴ This proper conduct plays an important role in establishing meaningful links between government as a judicial/financial system and the environment inhabited by the citizen whereby – given their nature – there is a continuous tension between the two.⁵ For the day-to-day practice of the bureau of the National ombudsman the ombuds-model has been translated into the *direct approach*. This approach makes higher demands on the competencies of the bureau's staff as it involves talking directly on the phone with complainants about their problems and the ideal course of action. Previously complaints were submitted and considered in writing and usually dealt with in the same way.

Figure 1. The ombuds-model: proper conduct (vertical) versus legitimacy (horizontal)



The main reason for the tension between government and citizens is that government structures its processes in line with legislation, forms and procedures, whereas ordinary people with their day-to-day needs and requirements have to adapt in line with the requirements of the governmental system. Digital government is a clear illustration of this. The only way for people to approach government for a given service, such as benefits, is via the virtual reality of the web. Meanwhile, the social security number of the citizen automatically links him or her with a whole range of mutually communicating governmental systems. In a given, concrete situation it is the tension between government and citizen which makes meaningful contacts a must. In my role as National ombudsman I have described these contacts as a citizen/government interface comprising four elements: personal contact where necessary, taking people seriously, treating them with respect (proper conduct), and acting from a position of equality (participation) and trust.

This approach has been adopted by a large number of government organizations – a process encouraged by the the Ministry of the Interior project *Fair Tracks*, the informal pro-active approach model.⁶ Key here is that government must seek to efficiently implement policy on the one hand, while maintaining good contacts with citizens on the other. At first sight, in a period of financial cutbacks, *Fair Tracks* could appear a luxury and hence risk being scrapped. However, the National ombudsman takes a different view. Research shows that when citizens feel they have been treated properly there is a significant positive impact on their relation with government.⁷ Findings – including those in the context of *Fair Tracks* — show that people are more inclined to accept decisions when they feel they have been well treated. To put it in more technical terms: as experienced, procedural justice has a positive impact on acceptance of governmental conduct – even if the outcome is negative for the citizen.⁸ Proper treatment also appears to contribute to the legitimacy of the government service involved, for example, if a police officer follows the right and proper procedure in issuing a ticket most offenders will accept the penalty and feel that the officer is simply doing his/her duty.

Agreeable and meaningful communication also avoids or reduces a whole range of costly legal procedures including objections and appeals. To this end, particularly in a period of cutbacks and far-reaching policy shifts, it is important for citizens to feel that they have been properly treated. This is also the thinking behind the planned, municipality-level ‘kitchen-table talks’ around the issue of healthcare.⁹ A kitchen-table discussion based on the principles of personal contact, good and proper treatment, and taking people seriously, plus equality and trust will enable creative and dedicated solutions to meeting the healthcare requirement, in a way people judge as positive. This type of discussion has something in common with mediation sessions where effective mutual communication is key.

The Dutch ombuds-model has prompted renewal in the profession of ombudsman. During the year under review there were several exchanges around the Dutch approach, with counterparts abroad.

- A delegation from the Swedish ombudsman — the first ever institution of its kind — met with the National ombudsman in regard to reorientation around his task.
- The National ombudsman was invited to give a paper on *Fair Tracks* and the ombuds-model at Copenhagen University and the office of the Danish ombudsman.
- British MPs paid a working visit to the National ombudsman in the context of evaluating the performance of the UK Parliamentary ombudsman.

3. RATING FOR GOVERNMENT

In 2013 I commissioned the TNS NIPO market research institute to gauge the quality of service provided by government; this was a follow-up to previous research on the subject during 2008–2010.¹⁰ The outcome was reasonably positive with individual governmental organizations now scoring a 7.1. The chain of governmental organizations scored 6.8. Government as a whole posted 6.5, after several years without any positive development; this may well reflect the wide ranging parameters of "government as a whole".

The apparent improvement in the quality of service provided by individual organizations and in mutual cooperation by organizations is encouraging. In part this is probably due to initiatives such as *Fair Tracks* and calls from my side for proper conduct and good communication.

In the case of the various administrative bodies like the CBR (Central Office for Motor Vehicle Driver Testing) recent years have seen quality improve apace with a focus on proper conduct. The CBR had been subject to stricter monitoring following criticism by the lower house of the Dutch parliament; normalcy has now been restored aided by a serious focus on complaint procedures. Similarly, in the wake of criticism from the National ombudsman¹¹ and two subsequent reports^{12 13}, the Healthcare Inspectorate adopted a different – more appropriate – manner of dealing with patients and their relatives. The new head of the Health Inspectorate, has made a priority of taking patients and relatives who report problems around healthcare seriously. She takes the position that healthcare providers can learn from patients' first-hand experiences. This learning-stance ensures ongoing quality improvement by healthcare institutions. Complaints provide important signals and lessons – which makes their processing a vital aspect of quality healthcare. Self-evidently, the same applies to other sectors.

The Immigration and Naturalisation Service has also demonstrated that treating complaints seriously leads to enhanced implementation. In 2005 the National ombudsman received 1,240 complaints concerning the Immigration and Naturalisation Service. An improvement process was started up by the service itself in 2006. This included courses on proper conduct organized by the office of the National ombudsman'. I also shared my ideas on effective complaint processing with the relevant staff, namely: aim for informal solutions as soon as possible. The process yielded significant results and complaints about the Immigration and Naturalisation Service to the National ombudsman have dropped to less than one-sixth of the 2005 level and now stand at an average of 240 per year.

4. COMPLAINTS AND OBJECTIONS

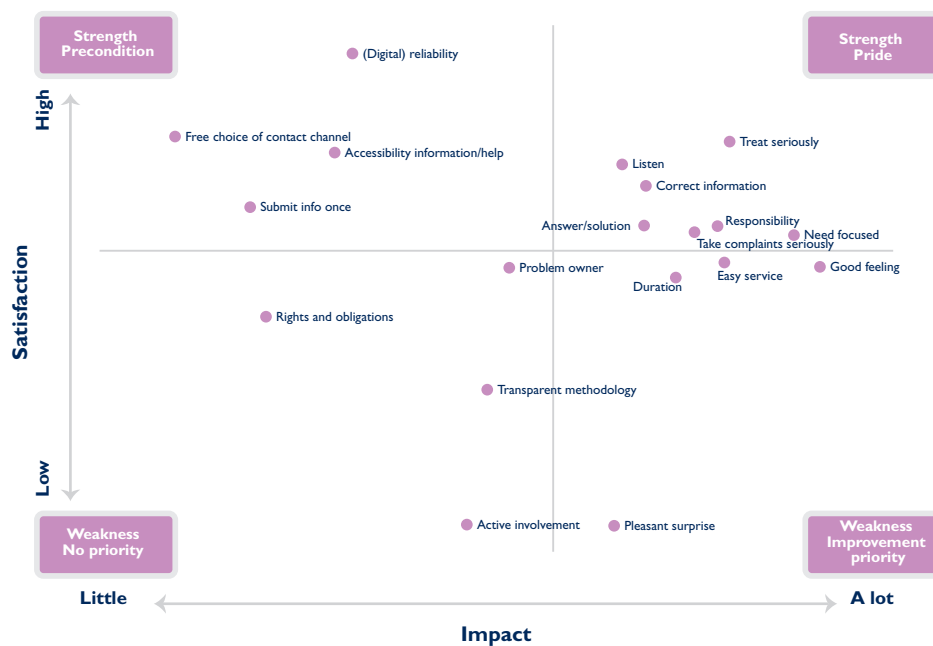
From the National ombudsman's viewpoint the very low, 5.1, score by government for submitting an objection, as noted in the TNS NIPO market research project, is highly significant. The 5.1 rating appears to conflict with a broadly held feeling in the media and political community, that people complain too soon and too often. In fact, most people do not look forward to a complaint or appeal procedure. Legal involvement mainly spurs feelings of frustration, uncertainty, anxiety etc., whereby many complaints are simply dropped. As National ombudsman I have learned that complainants appreciate the rapid solution to a problem more than – in the wake of a lengthy investigation – a report giving an opinion on proper conduct.¹⁴

The low rating for formal complaint and objection procedures prompted a change in methodology at the bureau of the National ombudsman. There has been a steady shift from the more traditional written processing of complaints based on files to dealing directly with citizens on the phone. The previously mentioned *Fair Tracks*, project is also based on a fresh approach to dealing with complaints. In the meantime a private member's bill was submitted to the Dutch parliament with the starting point: good communication with citizens to avoid procedures under the General Administrative Law Act. Unfortunately the bill codifies mediation too strongly and is overly forceful in imposing mediation; a better match with the principles of *Fair Tracks* would be helpful.

5. WHAT ARE THE POINTS FOR IMPROVEMENT?

The TNS NIPO research provides a valuable analysis of the relative ratings people give the various quality aspects – in some cases very important and in others less so. Invariably, when improvements are implemented, one has to ask whether or not this will improve ratings by the citizen.

Figure 2. Priority matrix quality standards 2013



The section above right in figure 2 shows the subjects which citizens regard as very important *and* which they award a high rating. Below left are subjects judged less important and which also have less impact on the way government is rated. Preconditions are shown left above, and non-priority items appear below right.

The high-value points (above right) cover subjects including treating matters seriously, listening, giving the correct information, and a governmental sense of responsibility for problem-solving. These all presuppose solid support for the principles as discussed in paragraph 2 in the context of the ombuds method, e.g. treating matters seriously, listening, giving the right information and obtaining answers or solutions for the problem.

Points for improvement (below right) include duration and 'pleasant surprises'. One example of the latter is a government service which is organized better than expected and is appreciated accordingly by the general public. This could well be a focus in the upcoming 'kitchen table' talks on healthcare at the municipal level.

But what do civil servants themselves think about the points for improvement? According to 87% of respondents citizens get good service but there are still two significant points for improvement: accessible forms and fewer rules.¹⁵ The latter matches with the conclusions of the annual report for 2012 focusing on *complex government*.

6. DIGITISATION OF GOVERNMENT

As evidenced in the annual report for 2012, digitisation is not often viewed as a problem as such. In fact, as shown in the recent surveys by TNS NIPO and my own *Citizens go digital* survey, the problem only arises when digital systems function sub-optimally. The two surveys also show strong growth in use of the 'digital contact channel'. Clearly, digitisation is gaining ground.

Across the board citizens strongly favour personal contact, as in over-the-counter or phone interfacing; indeed, there has been an increase on previous years. The phone is first choice for entrepreneurs, with letters scoring lowest – a view shared by ordinary citizens (39%) who also prefer the phone (66-62%). Contacts by e-mail (61%) and internet (52%) rank somewhere in the middle.

Speed of response is also important for citizens as a delay can spur uncertainty around rights and obligations. Over-the-counter or personal contacts yield a 59% same-day response, while 84% of issues are solved within a week. In 49% of cases phone contacts provide a same-day answer, with solutions booked the same week in 81% of cases. Same-day results are lower for internet (28%) and e-mail (13%), after two or three days results drop to 58% and 54% respectively. Response speeds matched with ratings for the various channels – and the shorter the response time the happier people are with services provided by government.

The TNS NIPO 2013 survey showed that digital contacts were involved in 52% of life-events – and citizens took a positive stance on this. Any negative rating around the digital channel related to lack of clarity or incomplete information, failure to respond and inability to pursue enquiries further. The positive picture for the digital channel is also evidenced by the generous majority that considers exclusively digital contact feasible for most life-events. Meanwhile, 63% of people who had digital contact believe that exclusive digital contact is (quite) feasible, with 19% calling it inconvenient but not impossible. People who had not had any digital contact posted slightly lower figures: 58% and 18% respectively. At the same time, people said that digital contact was less feasible in the areas of health & care, and work & income. The latter demands a particular focus given the key role of the Unemployment Benefit Organization and its forceful moves towards digital service.

Our own *Citizens go digital* survey yielded additional information on the provision of digital services. In principle, many people take a positive stance on digital services, an important factor being the free choice of using this channel versus its imposition. Despite the increasingly broad spread of internet in the Netherlands, e.g. online banking and shopping, a substantial group of people is being left behind. Levels of education are not the sole key factor here, indeed a certain category of more highly educated people also experience difficulties with exclusively digital communication. Meanwhile, people with a lower level of education are less likely to see the benefits of digital services (55%) compared to those with higher education (85%).

Any further expansion of digital government must provide sufficient space for personal contact and, if so desired, digital interaction. An important point for attention comes in the form of increasingly stringent sanctions around mistakes and inaccuracies in areas such as social security and taxation. Obviously it makes sense to deal with abuse, but the sanctions under the legal system are imposed so fast and severely that the outcome is often out of proportion. People make mistakes but this does not automatically entail fraud; indeed, most people are trustworthy and the overall number of abuse cases is limited.¹⁶

Meanwhile, there is a low level of confidence around security for a personal digital identity (Dutch initials DigiD). This is hardly surprising given the number of reports of hacking and other digital attacks on the system. It is a fact the original objective for DigiD was not pitched very high – it was to be a non-complex access point to government sites – without heavy security. In the meantime government sites with their portals are increasingly important for the digital registration of citizens' rights and obligations, while an increasing volume of data is being stockpiled behind DigiD. The Interior minister has since announced that work is underway with an electronic identity card program towards safer digital access to government.¹⁷

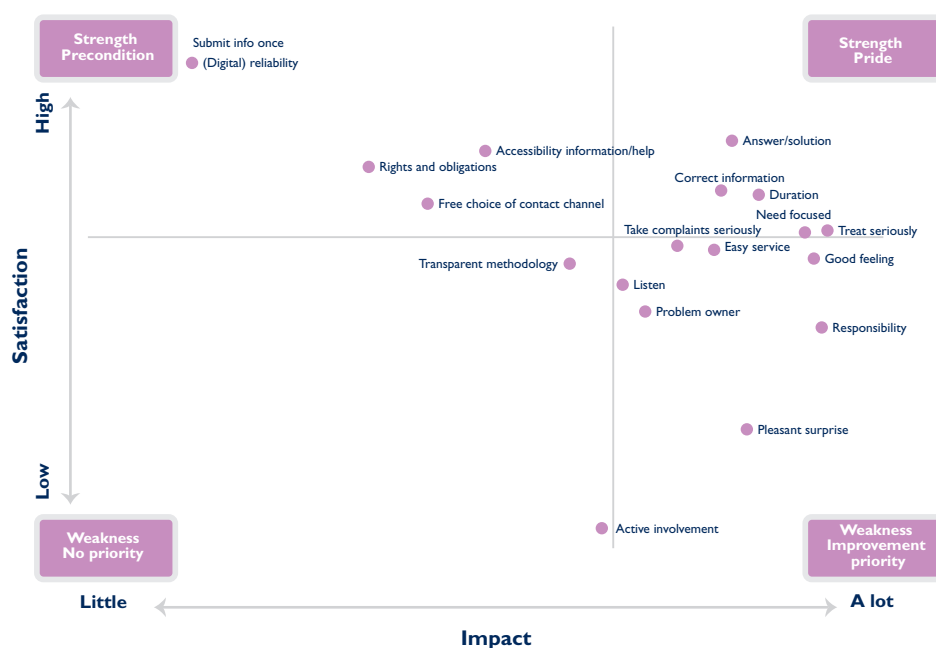
Where faults do occur in the system the citizen bears most of the risk and it is hard to find a body that is authorized and willing to put right incorrect data and to rectify wrong decision-making. And where one can make contact via a call centre the person one speaks too often has limited information and competence. Added to this, provision of service around life-events and/or the individual is spread across several administrative bodies so that citizens can easily land in a bureaucratic labyrinth.

Proper conduct plays a significant role in the use of digital channels: treating matters and complaints seriously, a focus on problem solving, and a reasonable duration. All-in-all, to a significant degree further digitisation of the government's service provision will match with the needs of the citizen. At the same time personal contact and potential for effective interaction are crucial. In 2013 the Minister of the Interior set out a vision on digital government in 2017, stating: 'There will always need to be alternatives for people lacking the opportunities or skills to digitally make contact with government.'¹⁸ Citizens must always be able to make personal contact with government.' Obviously, this contact can be face-to-face, by phone, webcam, or via social media like Facebook and Twitter. However, the *Citizens go digital* survey has shown that the sort of personal contact favoured by the minister is strongly discouraged by some bodies or, indeed, may no longer be possible.

7. WATCH POINTS

The TNS NIPO survey on the digital provision of services shows strong similarities with the interface developed at the bureau of the National ombudsman: personal contact, taking people seriously, respectful treatment, equality and trust.

Figure 3. Priority Matrix: strengths/weaknesses quality standards exclusively digital contact



The *Citizens go digital* report also yielded several watch points for further governmental digitisation.

Many citizens are positive about digital services and it is quite logical that governmental services meld with broader (internet) developments in society. At the same time there is cause for concern in the fact that cost-cutting makes government limit citizens' choice to the digital channel, leaving few if any alternatives for contact.

It has been shown that people are more cooperative – e.g. with digitisation — where they have freedom of choice. Coercion and pressure are counterproductive, persuasion by making digital communication more attractive is far more effective.

There are a number of important watch points around the development of digital services: maintaining the focus on the citizen, accessibility, potential for recovery, and security. Providers need to empathize with users – as is already routine in the commercial sector. In developing systems administrators need to look beyond legislation and regulation and ask themselves how they would like to be treated – sitting in front of their computer at home. Also important is the organization of feedback around digital government service and how citizens feel about it. The low rating scored by some governmental bodies needs to be examined.

Accessibility to government's digital service provision is also an important focal point. Not everyone has the skills and not everyone has the necessary equipment. Alongside average, easy- to-digitize situations, there are non-standard cases leading to complications where service is only available via websites and portals. A survey of parties helping people in day-to-day dealings with government, including lawyers, social counsellors, NGOs and legal aid providers show that 85% had problems with digital services by government. At the same time 65% of these professionals say that government does not do enough to ensure alternative provision of services for people for whom the digital channel is problematic. Meanwhile, 33% were neutral on the adequacy of government action, and only 4% said that government has done enough.²¹

Means of recovery must be available. Every system will have its faults, and with ongoing linkage of government systems the opportunity for these faults to spread and penetrate increases apace. To this end citizens need wider options than simply the right to inspect and to make corrections. A frequently asked question is: where (which government organization) do I need to go to access my data and how do I make an adequate correction? On top of this the problems and risks around faults are often clustered on the citizen. Government organizations need to be sufficiently alert to signals from citizens about possible faults, while being pro-active on problem solving and crafting temporary, customized (emergency) solutions.

Quite understandably public confidence in government's digital systems is under pressure. Weaknesses in security with DigiD must be minimized with the eID-system which has been announced. Citizens' confidence could be further reinforced by taking the following measures:

- Guarantee of free choice of channel. Ensure an easy, accessible and comprehensible channel so that citizens can – and will want to – use it. In practice this also means attraction rather than compulsion.
- Guarantee that people have effective options to ensure the safety of their administrative situation. Transparency and effective, low-threshold recovery options are essential. Citizens must be able to implement their rights rather than being sent from pillar to post.
- Guarantee that there will be no disproportionate sanctioning of mistakes. Pro-actively check whether there has been a mistake – particularly where the law imposes sanctions in the event of mistakes.
- Continually monitor in how far the service-offering matches with citizens' needs, and adjust working practices accordingly.

8. CONCLUSION

Positive news is that the TNS NIPO survey into the quality of government services shows an improvement on levels in 2008, 2009 and 2010. This is particularly encouraging as one can identify which measures have led to the improvements. These can be summarized as follows: in exercising statutory tasks treat the citizen decently and humanely. All too often proper conduct and the human factor are not sufficiently taken into account when developing new policy and shifts in implementation. In the meantime, however, many implementing organizations have taken on board the value of this approach. Not least because treating people properly can avoid a considerable volume of litigation.

In improving governmental services it is important both to take complaints seriously and to learn from them. A useful guideline here is the interface between government and citizen: personal contact, taking people seriously, and treating them with respect, as equals, on a basis of trust. These elements of the interface, leading to a good contact with government can also be found in the mediation approach. It also focuses on the interests of citizens in concrete situations. At the same time, it is not so that – as a matter of principle – these interests will weigh heaviest at the end of the day, but they will be listened to and taken seriously. An organization like the Healthcare Inspectorate can bear witness to the effect. Thanks to their newly adopted open and learning stance, and their willingness to adopt recommendations from the National ombudsman, the number of complaints I received was significantly down in 2013.

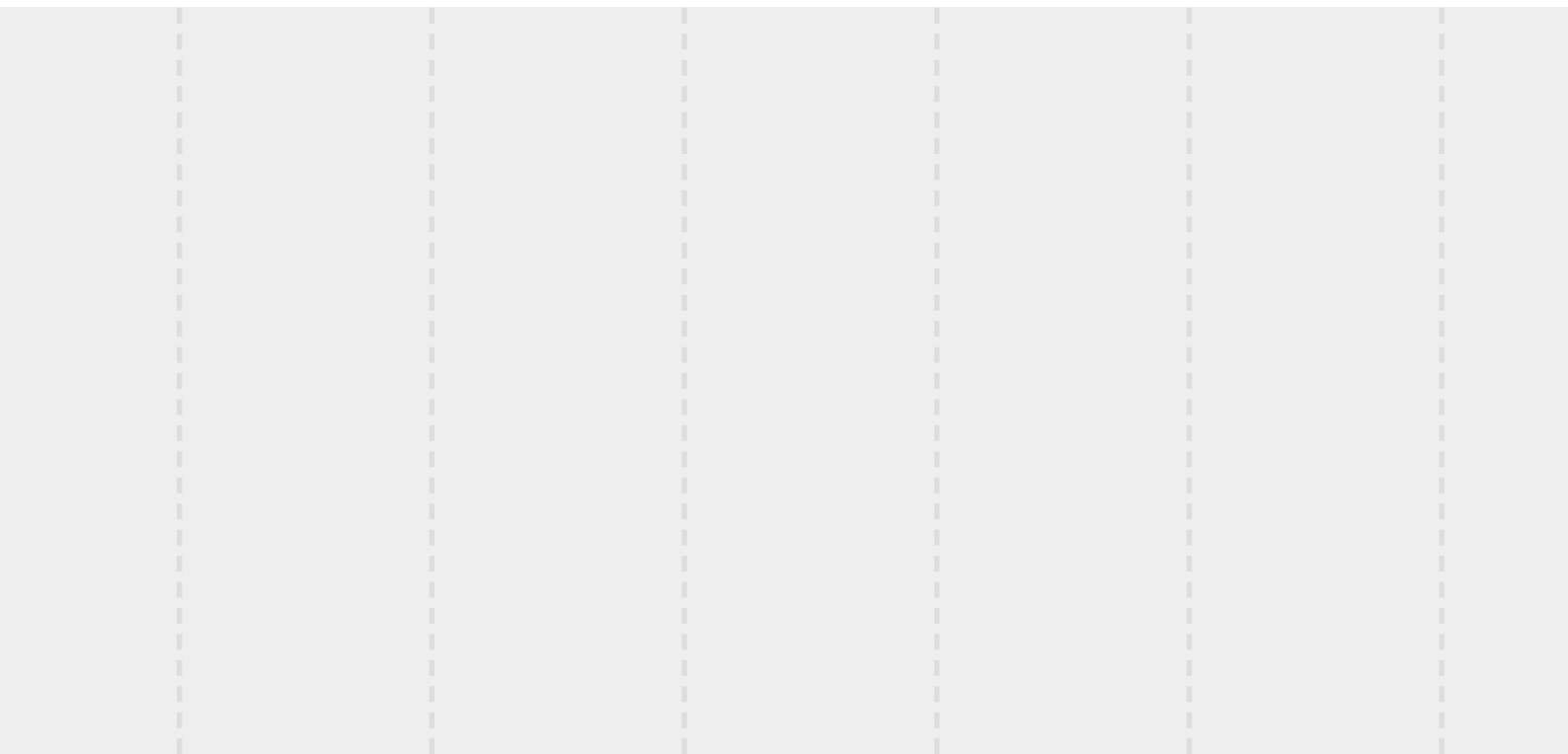
On the one hand good quality services can contribute to the reliable implementation of legislation and policy. In turn this can pre-empt mistakes at an early stage. On the other hand it can also contribute to acceptance of government decision-making, even where this impacts negatively on the citizen. There is a widely held misconception in public administration that people are only content when a decision goes their way. If people are taken seriously and treated with respect they will also be willing to take ‘no’ for an answer. Moreover, the meaningful provision of services reinforces the legitimacy of government and its representatives. It is often difficult for citizens to independently judge their entitlements –or vice-versa. Hence, their outlook is often based on how they and their interests are handled. But where government fulfils its role – as in granting or refusing a permit, granting or withdrawing a benefit payment, or imposing a fine – the citizen will respect it in this specific role.

Finally, there are good prospects ahead for the digitisation of government services, as long as certain criteria are met and as long as the focus is on the citizen.

In a nutshell, good (digital) government services are in government’s hands.

9. RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Do not be content with a six-out-of-ten for service quality. It is encouraging that the TNS NIPO survey shows some improvement. Treat the figure as an incentive to improve, year-on-year. Awareness of citizens' priorities is important here. A bi-annual check on service quality is recommended with the Ministry of the Interior taking the lead.
2. Treat signals and complaints from citizens as valuable feedback enabling government to identify and make-good mistakes with minimum delay. An open, honest and inquisitive stance is important. This also applies to critical remarks. A government seen to do its best, and which communicates on this honestly and maturely, will gain the support of the citizen and win approval. Preferably discuss complaints at the highest level of the organization. Let the manager of the given unit read the complaint and act on it.
3. Combat fraud, but offset the actual number of cases against the overall picture and put it in perspective. Ensure clear, non-complex rules; severe sanctions are only justified if the citizen is aware of what is allowed and what is not. Do not be too fast to judge without awareness of the context. People make mistakes and automatic sanctions may not be appropriate. Most people are trustworthy.
4. Involve citizens in a testing role around improvements to government services. Utilize their knowledge and experience and express appreciation for this. Communicate effectively with the testers about their contribution – explaining criteria for adoption of findings. Jointly evaluate success of measures taken and create a learning curve. As far as possible let testers organize themselves – only set boundary conditions for independence and impartiality.
5. Be aware that people are individuals who think and communicate differently; they should not be treated *en masse*. Some people are able and willing to arrange matters with government. Do not make it difficult for them. Other people who would like to, but cannot, deserve help along the way. And anyone who has the ability but lacks the will should be confronted with their behaviour and its consequences.
6. As far as possible, entice people into using the computer to communicate with governmental bodies – and provide help if this is a problem. Also, take into account that people who have difficulties here may, in fact, lack the ability. Provide alternatives for those who really cannot or will not.
7. Invest in and reward civil servants who are exceptional performers in (digital) contacts between government and citizen. Recognize cooperation and initiative. The 'pat on the shoulder' approach to this category of civil servant in Fair Tracks, the informal pro-active approach model, should be taken forward. Good and effective communication is a basic skill for governmental personnel. As such it should be actively shared. Experience shows that open and clear communication can avoid long, drawn-out litigation.
8. Government should develop in-depth knowledge of citizen/government contacts and deploy this to continually enhance contacts and to innovate. The topic for study comprises the hundreds-of -thousands of annual interactions between government and citizens. Above all, make use of the hands-on experience, insights, and passion of the people at the relevant government organization.

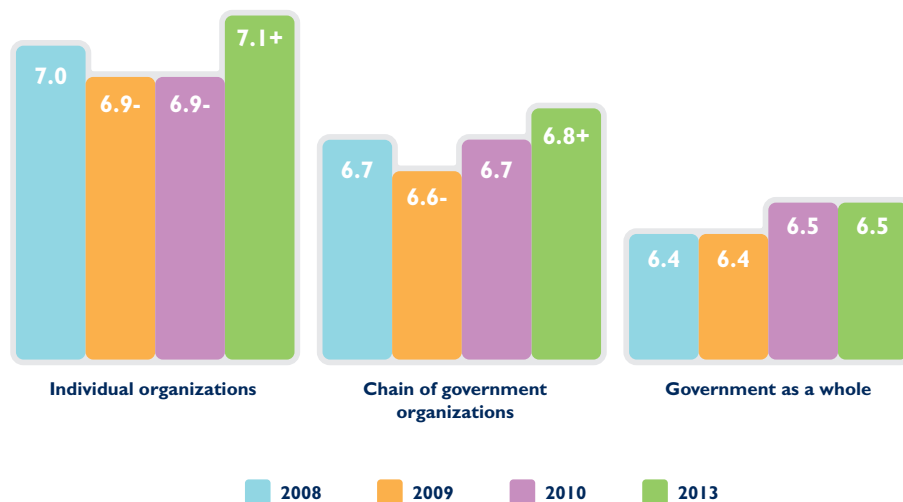


TNS NIPO SURVEY: CITIZENS GO DIGITAL SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS - 2013

Slight increase in average ratings for government service

On average citizens were slightly happier with services provided by the *chain of government organizations* around a life-event, compared with between three to four years ago. In 2013 the service provision was rated at 6.8. This represents a significant improvement on 2009 (6.6). Ratings for individual organizations were also up from 6.9 in 2010 to 7.1 in 2013.

Slight increase in ratings for government service



+ = significant increase 2013 compared with 2008/2009/2010 / - = significant decline 2008/2009/2010 versus 2013. Increased rating 'government as a whole' 2010 and 2013 is significant compared with 2009 and 2008

Source: TNS NIPO, 2013

A paradox: average marks for service provisions rise – but so does the proportion of ‘unsatisfactory’ ratings

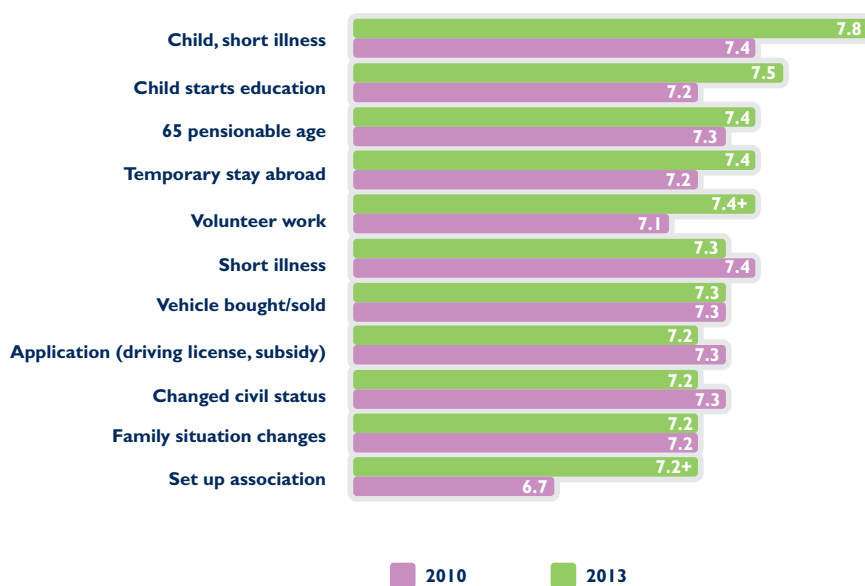
Although the *average* quality of government services is rising we see two contradictory trends. The number of people giving an 8, 9 or 10 has risen to 34% from 29% in 2008. Meanwhile numbers giving an *unsatisfactory* rating are also increasing (from 13% to 17%); this group was relatively frequently faced with life-events such as nuisance factors, unemployment, applying for benefits or, indeed, starting-up a new job, a major dip in income, a work-related handicap, immigration, or a complaint or objection involving a problem with government.

Despite the higher average score, in view of these life-events it makes sense to keep investing in service provisions. Failure to do this risks a split between the group that is well able to carry on and is well satisfied with the service it receives – and vice-versa. Moreover, the group giving unsatisfactory ratings is less well educated than the average.

High- and low-rated life-events

The 6.8 rating given to government service provisions – the *chain* as it’s called – gives an *average* picture of how people feel about this service across highly diverse service processes. At the same time, the range of life-events involved is also diverse . Most appreciated at present are services around a short illness, after starting school or training, reaching the current pensionable age of 65, acting as a volunteer, a temporary stay abroad, making an application – e.g. for a driving license, ID card or a subsidy – changes in the family situation (mainly births), setting up an association, and marriage or civil partnership.

Highest rated life-events (government service provided by the chain)



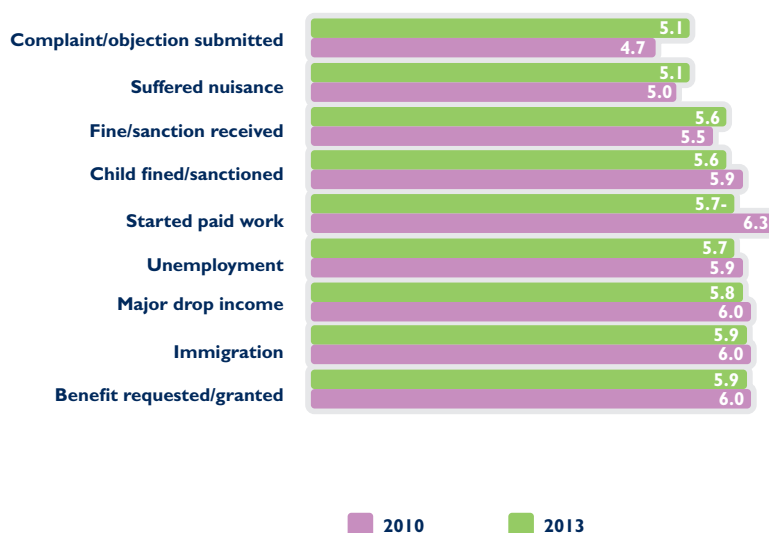
Source: TNS NIPO, 2013

Ratings for *volunteer work* and *setting up an association* are up on 2010. People are also happier about services around *emigration*, *long-term illness* and *a child with learning/behavioural difficulties* – although these categories are still not in the top eleven. In 2010 the top categories were still: *making a report* (about public spaces), which dropped from 7.0 to 6.2, and *a change in the rent situation*, which dropped from 7.1 to 6.8.

Low ratings go to services around making *a complaint or objection*, suffering from a *nuisance situation*, receiving *a fine*, *unemployment*, *starting or re-starting paid work*, *a major drop in income*, applying for *benefits* and *immigration*. New to the bottom nine events is *starting paid work* which showed a drop from 6.3 to 5.7. Indeed, *work & income* accounts for four out of nine low-scoring life-events.

Selling or buying a home also scores lower than in 2010.

Lowest rated life-events (government services by the chain)



- = significantly drop 2013 versus 2010

Source: TNS NIPO, 2013

The chain of government organizations: on average three organizations

Key to this survey is that it is *not* about the performance of a given member of staff or organization. The citizen seeking to solve his or her problems or obtain answers is dependent on a series of civil servants and multiple government organizations – the *chain*, as we call it. And this chain of government organizations is at the heart of this survey; it is about government as a whole. Ideally the dynamic group making up the chain acts jointly to eradicate problems and answer people's questions.

An average chain comprises three (3) government organizations. In 2010 the chain appeared to be getting slightly shorter (2010: 2.9; 2009: 3.1; 2008: 3.3). However the process did not continue into 2013, albeit the increase was also hardly significant. Averaging almost five organizations the longest chain is for *work & income*, followed by *business* whereby entrepreneurs are involved with almost four organizations. The categories *health & healthcare* (3.8) and *work & income* (3.6) show an increase in the number of service providing organizations.

Most contacts prompted by life-events are still with the municipality (39%), the general practitioner (24%), hospital (22%) or the tax department (21%). Hospital contacts are up on the last readings, but contacts with the tax department are down somewhat. At an unchanged 23% the citizen's most frequent first contact with a governmental organization still involves the municipality. General practitioners (11%) and the tax department (8%) are relatively often the first port-of-call – followed by hospitals, the employee insurance agency/UWV, and the police, all at 6%, followed by educational institutions or schools at 5%.

Higher ratings for individual organizations rather than as a group

Compared with individual organizations rating an average 7.1, the *chain* of government organizations now scores an average 6.8. Moreover, there has been an increase in the average rating for organizations from the 6.9% scored in 2010.

As in previous years *individual organizations* are seen to outperform the chain of government organizations, and will both rank as above average to good. This is often evidenced by surveys of their clients. However, taken as a group, citizens take a less positive view of these organizations. Hence, the whole is less than the sum of the parts.

Cooperation has improved but remains the key factor in success or failure

The 57% of citizens who were involved with two or more organizations rated cooperation between these bodies at 6.4 compared to 6.2 in 2010. Notwithstanding, this is a mediocre score.

As evidenced by further analysis, meaningful cooperation is the key factor behind good service from government – as expressed by a citizen who had nothing but praise for the way organizations worked together when a loved one died:

'The GP called an ambulance right away. And victim support really helped afterwards. It was a smooth operation and these organizations were very understanding – trying to make things as easy as possible for the people involved. They take a load off your shoulders.'

A sense of being dependent on government authority is also a success factor, or vice-versa

As in previous years just under half of all respondents (44%) said they felt dependent on the given government organization or organizations. The feeling is particularly strong for *doing business* and for *work & income* where it has increased.

Citizen's sense of *dependence* on government organizations has a strong – negative – impact on the rating for their services. Approval increases apace with a feeling that one is less dependent on government organizations, separately or together.

Human factors score highest with dissatisfied citizens

The survey took nineteen quality standards as objective criteria in determining approval levels for government services. Broadly these break down into ‘instrumental’ and ‘human’. Instrumental means the more practical/technical aspects of providing service, including information, digital security and duration, while human standards involve contacts between civil servants, service and care providers, and citizens.

Although approval ratings are generally good for instrumental quality standards they have less impact on the overall rating of government services. In contrast, human quality standards impact strongly, or more strongly, on approval ratings for government service – often in a positive sense. The human quality standards are mainly rooted in the National ombudsman’s own standards interpreted as ‘appropriate behaviour’, and in the Hostmanship philosophy. Where comparisons are feasible with previous results we see a slight improvement in this area. The *active involvement* and *taking complaints seriously* categories both scored better than in previous years.

Having said that, when things go wrong and citizens give a fail-rating, these are often the decisive factor (ranked by importance):

- active involvement (citizens actively involved in solving their problems);
- transparent methodology (keeping people involved);
- taking complaints seriously;
- serious approach when dealing with citizens;
- non-hassle services (not more difficult than necessary);
- pleasant surprises;
- demand-oriented (match with citizen’s needs).

It is striking that *duration*, which is a more instrumental aspect, is not an important weakness for dissatisfied citizens, but keeping people informed of *the course of service provided* – is (a human aspect). Similarly, in the opinion of this group *getting what I wanted* (the end result) is not a serious weakness. It does not rate a very low score, neither is there a very strong impact on the overall rating. This confirms the viewpoint that the citizen is not exclusively focused on winning; he/she can live with a ‘no’ as long as this is communicated in a decent and reasonable manner. There are two ‘instrumental aspects’ which are negatively decisive for citizens who now give an unsatisfactory rating, namely:

- I knew exactly where to go for information and help.
- My rights and obligations were made clear to me.

These are not important weaknesses for the average citizen – but they are for people who give an unsatisfactory rating. To a degree this is attributable to an on average lower level of education than people who are satisfied with the service provision. This matches with previous findings by the National ombudsman that the government/citizen relationship is increasingly tangled in a jungle of rules so that people no longer know where or how to exercise their rights.

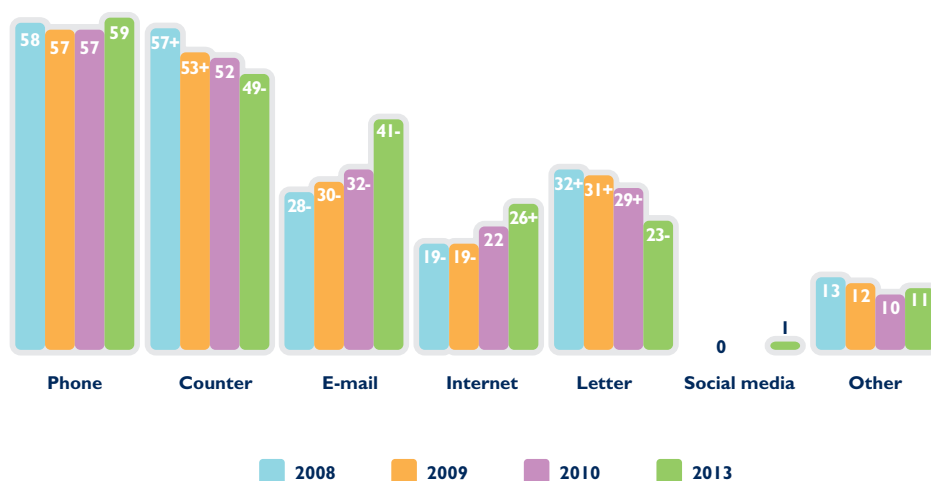
Contact channels: a shift from over-the-counter to online

In May 2013 the Minister of the Interior announced that government seeks to fully digitize contacts between government on one hand and citizens and the business community on the other, as from 2017. The agreement underlying the coalition government includes enhancing service by government – and transforming it by

as far as possible banishing paper from its contacts with citizens (e.g. forms and letters). According to the minister this will improve the quality of digital information and services from government. Hence, government stimulates digital communication between citizens and government while seeking – where feasible – to limit over-the-counter transactions. In 2010 we saw a modest increase in the use of digital channels while over-the-counter activities declined. This process continued apace in 2013.

Compared to 2008, 2009 and 2010, the year under review brought a clear increase in the frequency of citizen/government contacts via e-mail and internet. In contrast, over-the-counter and letter contacts were down. Telephone contacts were stable. At the same time, increased use of digital channels did not match with the decline in physical channels. In fact, people deployed more channels in their contacts with government – on average 2.1 compared with 2.0 in previous years.

Shift from over-the-counter to digital (which contact channel used?) as percentage



+ = significant increase 2008/2009/2010 versus 2013 / - = significantly lower in 2008/2009/2010 than in 2013

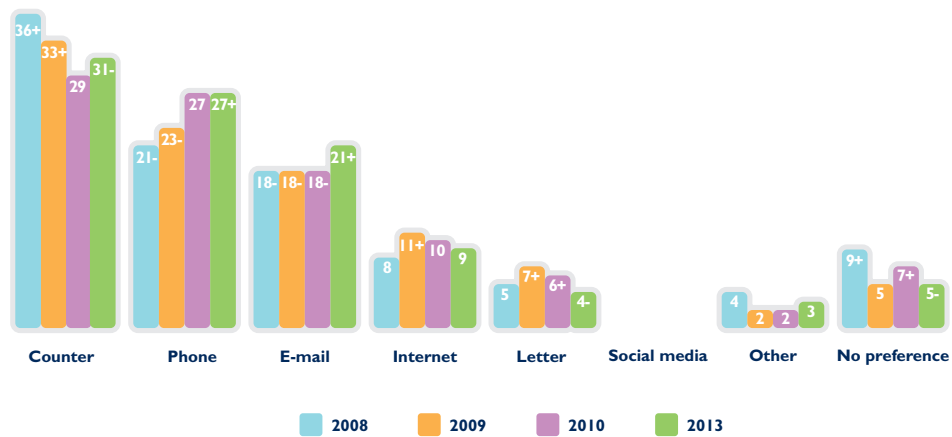
Source: TNS NIPO, 2013

Minimal increase in preference for digital contact channels

The increasing preference for the digital channel is less than suggested by growth in use. E-mail was slightly more popular (from 18% to 21%). The increased popularity of internet has leveled out and was actually slightly down on 2009.

Over-the-counter (31%) and telephone contacts (27%) are still the most popular. In 2010 preference for over-the-counter contacts was down on 2009 and 2008, but the decline has levelled out. Preference for the telephone is also levelling out. Communication by letter – which the minister was anxious to eradicate – is steadily losing popularity (currently 4%).

**Preference e-mail up slightly, no decline preference physical channels.
(As percentage)**



Source: TNS NIPO, 2013

Given that *use* of digital channels is increasing at a slower rate than the decline in use of physical channels, plus the barely noticeable increase in preference for digital channels, one can cautiously conclude that increased use of the digital channel is – partly – driven by changes in government's offering.

The as yet still non-optimal functioning of the digital channel could provide a partial explanation. People are taking a wait-and-see approach. Rather than citizens rejecting the digital channel as a means of communication – if they have to make a choice, they take the tried-and-trusted phone or counter service. This is not to say that the digital channel lacks potential.

The findings of two surveys demonstrate the opposite. Firstly, at 40% the phone may be first choice for citizens submitting a problem or question to government, but sending an e-mail or going personally to the counter both score 26%. Secondly, if – instead of merely asking about the preference, whereby respondents can only select a single channel – we ask about the agreeability and quality of the channel – the differences per channel are only small.

Contacts over-the-counter, by phone or by e-mail are the most *agreeable* for most people, with e-mail scoring equally with the phone. Letters and the internet are viewed as very much less agreeable. In terms of service *quality* the counter also scores best, closely followed by the phone and then – lagging slightly – by e-mail. People are more likely to be dissatisfied with the quality of service by internet and letter.

Meanwhile there is a clear link between the time government needs to respond to a question from a citizen, and the level of satisfaction. Generally, it takes a week for a response from over-the-counter, phone, internet and e-mail contacts. The first two are fastest with between three-quarters and two-thirds of respondents being satisfied. Response times via e-mail and internet give more cause for complaint with just over half of the respondents being satisfied, and one in five dissatisfied. In three-quarters of cases citizens have to wait a week or longer for a response – and only 40% are happy with this, with just over one-quarter dissatisfied.

Most experiences with digital service from government positive

Slightly more than half of all citizens who experienced a life-event (as presented in this survey) had also had contact with government via digital channels and were overwhelming (60%+) positive about the service. Just over a quarter had a negative experience and around one-tenth were neutral.

Frequently heard descriptions included: agreeable, good, fast, efficient, direct, easy, clear, transparent communication, ‘I can do it when it suits me’ or ‘the problem was solved properly’. A citizen who applied for care or appliances had this to say:

‘Really good. I could formulate my question at a time that suited me. And within 24 hours I got an answer or a confirmation of receipt – with an estimate of thru-time.’

Citizens who have had negative experience with digital services from government complain about less than clear or comprehensive communication, the lengthy wait for a substantive reply, the inability of either side to ask follow-up questions, and the fact that it is impersonal. Hence, with exception of the last point, criticism focuses mainly on implementation of services rather than the e-mail or internet medium.

A successful digital service offering by government demands interaction. At first sight citizens do not seem particularly opposed to digital contacts with government. The vast majority – between three-quarters and 82% – consider exclusively digital contact with government quite possible. Meanwhile, one-in-ten call it ‘hardly possible’ or even ‘impossible’. It comes as no surprise that this mainly centres on the categories healthcare/care (addiction, handicaps, illness) and work & income (work, unemployment, drop in income).

This benefits-recipient also started up as an entrepreneur last year:

‘It’s convenient to deal with a whole lot of things by e-mail and internet. But I also want personal contact with the people who make decisions affecting me – though not so much with the Tax department. The chamber of commerce offers excellent service with a personal coach and a whole range of courses via Start Smart. My contacts with the employee insurance agency/UWV is exclusively by computer – I guess that’s all about costs, but I still don’t like it. I’m still a human being – even if I am self-employed on benefits.’

Almost one-tenth of respondents *only* had contact via digital channels (e-mail, internet or social media). More so than where there is no digital contact these ‘digital clients’ believe that it is important for government organizations to pay attention to ‘human aspects’ including: taking matters seriously, giving a good feeling, taking responsibility, putting citizens’ needs first, and the active involvement of citizens in solving their problems. Indeed, it is these aspects that score lower with purely digital service than with non-digital service.

Strikingly, the more instrumental aspects such as only submitting information once, and digital reliability, are less important to people with exclusively digital contact.

Government portals: variable contribution to the quality of government services

In regard to a number of government portals such as DigiD respondents were asked about familiarity, the rating, and in how far they represent an improvement or deterioration of government service.

MijnOverheid.nl and *MijnToeslagen.nl* (respectively the personal website of national government and the tax department). Both sites scored a clear ‘better-than-average’ with around half those who are familiar with the portal calling it an improvement in government services. However, *MijnOverheid.nl* is still relatively unknown (22%) and only used by 12% of respondents. *MijnToeslagen.nl* is both better known (55%) and more widely used (36%).

DigiD

DigiD, the digital ID giving access to the government’s personal pages is familiar to almost everyone. While slightly below *MijnOverheid.nl* and *MijnToeslagen.nl*, on balance it scored well with just over four in ten citizens calling it an improvement in government services – compared to only 5% calling it a change for the worse.

Meanwhile, not all citizens are convinced that DigiD is absolutely safe. A quarter are very confident, almost half are confident to a degree, and just over a quarter lack any confidence whatsoever. However for the majority – 86% of all citizens – this does not represent a barrier to using DigiD. Only 7% state that: they will not use it – will probably not use it – will not use it in future – or will probably not use it in future. The 68% of people with little or no confidence in DigiD’s security also plan to go on using it, or to start using it.

Awareness, use and rating of government portals and DigiD

	Familiarity	Use (all)	Rating score	Is this an improvement in government service?	
				improvement	deterioration
	%	%	1-10	%	%
MijnOverheid.nl	22	12	7.0	48	3
MijnToeslagen.nl	55	36	7.0	52	4
DigiD	96	38	6.9	43	5
Werk.nl ²	65	32	5.1	21	30

² Only submitted to people who had life-events around work & income and entrepreneurship.

Werk.nl

(Werk.nl is the site of the Employee Insurance Agency. Services include job vacancies and benefit payments). While well known the werk.nl portal scores much lower. Awareness among people who had to deal with life-events in the fields of *work & income* and *entrepreneurship* has risen from 53% to 65% since 2010, with use rising from 26% to 32%. However, the rating declined from 6.0 to 5.1, with a larger section – 30% – saying that werk.nl represents a deterioration in government service, compared to 21% which regard it as an improvement. Dissatisfaction is not confined to technical malfunctions; job seekers also complain about out-of-date vacancies and limited potential for exchange/swaps (by jobseekers), while employers cite reluctant jobseekers.

Someone who had just started a job:

'Half the time this website doesn't work. You can't search properly for new jobs. The so-called tips you get don't match with what you filled in, and the design is awful.'

An entrepreneur who hired personnel:

'Candidates and prospects with mediocre CVs. People often apply for vacancies which absolutely do not match with their backgrounds. You often get the feeling that people apply for a job because they have to. In general, the contact-people at the government agency who deal with vacancies are not really aware of the needs of specific sectors.'

ANNOTATIONS

QUALITY AND DIGITISATION IN GOVERNMENT SERVICES

Please note that with the exception of parts of No. 4 none of the documentation referred to in these notes is available in English

1. Para 2 of article 9:36 states that: Where the ombudsman determines that conduct is inappropriate his report shall state which requirements of proper conduct have been breached.
2. www.nationaleombudsman-nieuws.nl/nieuwe-behoorlijkheidsnormen.
(New standards of proper conduct)
3. Ph. Langbroek, 'Ombudsmanwerk tussen overheid en burger' (the work of the ombudsman between government and citizen), *Ars Aequi* special, A multidisciplinary study of jurisprudence 2007, p. 910-920.
4. This approach has national and international support, see (e.g.) R.J.N. Schlossels, The hard core of proper conduct. Concerning legitimacy and the National Ombudsman, in: K. Groenendijk and others (ed.), *Issues that matter. Mensenrechten, minderheden en migranten* (human rights, minorities and migrants), Liber amicorum for prof. mr. R. Fernhout, Nijmegen: Wolf Legal Publishers 2013, and M. Remac, *Coordinating ombudsmen and the judiciary: A comparative view on the relations between ombudsmen and the judiciary in the Netherlands, the United Kingdom/England and the European Union*, dissertation Utrecht University 2014.
5. A.F.M. Brenninkmeijer, 'Kafka als icoon' (Kafka as icon), *Christen Democratische Verkenningen* 2010, No. 3.
6. See prettigcontactmetdeoverheid.nl.
7. See the various reports on Fair Tracks, the informal pro-active approach model part 1, 2 and 3. Part 4 will appear in early 2014; available at prettigcontactmetdeoverheid.nl and K. van den Bos, *Vertrouwen in de overheid*/Confidence in government, available at www.rijksoverheid.nl.
8. This is confirmed e.g. in research findings from the *Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau*/Netherlands Institute for Social Research. This shows that receiving a benefit (or not) does not result in strongly divergent ratings for the UWV/employee insurance agency, municipalities or SVB/Social Insurance Bank: E. Eggink, *Achtergrondrapport bij burgers over de kwaliteit van publieke diensten*/background report around citizens on the quality of public services. A review of 2002-2010, The Hague: SCP 2013, p. 81.

9. Underlying thinking for the 'kitchen table' discussions is to minimize citizens' health/ care needs being unilaterally determined by government.
10. TNS NIPO, *Onderzoek naar de kwaliteit van de overheidsdienstverlening*/ research into the quality of government service provisions, 2013.
11. The National Ombudsman, *De Inspectie voor de Gezondheidszorg: een papieren tijger*/the Healthcare Inspectorate: a paper tiger. Report 2009/250, *Baby Jelmer*, report 2011/357 en *Geen gehoor bij de IGZ* / no answer from the HI. *Signals around the Healthcare Inspectorate*/ *over de Inspectie voor de Gezondheidszorg*, report 2012/051 (with eight recommendations).
12. K. van der Steenhoven, *Doorpakken! Organisatieonderzoek naar de Inspectie voor de Gezondheidszorg*/ Organizational Study of the Healthcare Inspectorate, 2012.
13. W. Sorgdrager, *Van incident naar effectief toezicht. Onderzoek naar de afhandeling van dossiers over meldingen door de Inspectie voor de Gezondheidszorg*/ From incident to effective supervision. Study into processing of report dossiers at the Healthcare Inspectorate, 2012.
14. A.F.M. Brenninkmeijer, *Werken aan behoorlijkheid: de Nationale ombudsman in zijn context*/Towards proper conduct: the National Ombudsman in his context. The Hague: Boom Juridische uitgevers 2007.
15. This figure is confirmed (for civil affairs) from the side of the citizens, See E. Eggink, *Achtergrondrapport bij burgers over de kwaliteit van publieke diensten. Een terugblik op 2002-2010* / background report around citizens on the quality of public services. A review of 2002-2010, The Hague: SCP 2013, p. 71.
16. A.F.M. Brenninkmeijer, 'Belastingdienst in evenwicht met de burger' / The Tax Department in equilibrium with the citizen, *Weekblad voor Fiscaal recht* 2013, p. 578-586.
17. Available at www.rijksoverheid.nl.
18. Parliamentary Papers 112012/13, 26 643, No. 280, p. 5.
19. See E. Eggink, *Achtergrondrapport bij burgers over de kwaliteit van publieke diensten. Een terugblik op 2002-2010* / background report around citizens on the quality of public services. A review of 2002-2010, The Hague: SCP 2013, p. 81.
20. *Site Werk.n1 blijft zorgenkindje* / still a cause for concern', *Binnenlands Bestuur*, 23 August 2013.
21. *Mijn onbegrijpelijke overhead* / My incomprehensible government *Annual report National ombudsman 2012*.
22. *De burger bediend in 2013* / Serving the citizen in 2000, Work and Income Inspectorate, Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment, The Hague 2013.

During 2013 the Netherlands National ombudsman took a wide-ranging, in-depth look at government service provisions. Alongside his own investigations the ombudsman also commissioned the independent market research agency TNS NIPO to gauge the quality of these provisions. Alex Brenninkmeijer, who was National ombudsman until 31 December 2013, used this work as the basis for a vision statement on the provision of (digital) services by government, on the occasion of the Annual Report for 2013. Although most of the insights and recommendations relate to the situation in the Netherlands I am sure that everyone will see their relevance. Indeed, providing services is the business of all public organizations worldwide. The same applies to the personal-versus-digital contact dilemma, and contemporary digital issues.

The National Ombudsman in the Netherlands

The institution of National Ombudsman is established in order to give individuals an opportunity to place complaints about the practices of government before an independent and expert body. The mechanism works alongside existing provision, such as Parliament, the courts, and internal complaints procedures. Applying to the Ombudsman may result in steps being taken in particular cases (perhaps contrary to the authority's original intention), and, in a broader context, help to restore public confidence in government. In view of this role vis-à-vis the individual, the National Ombudsman Act deliberately elects to make a single person, the National Ombudsman, represent the institution in the eyes of the outside world, as a counterbalance to an often faceless bureaucracy.

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