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# PERSONAL... OR NOT? DIGITAL... OR NOT?

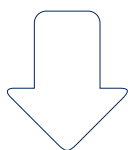
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# 2013

*Summary of the 2013  
Annual Report of the  
National Ombudsman  
of the Netherlands*



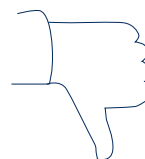
**38,033**



**-4%**



**90%**



**79%**



**172**

# PERSONAL... OR NOT? DIGITAL... OR NOT?

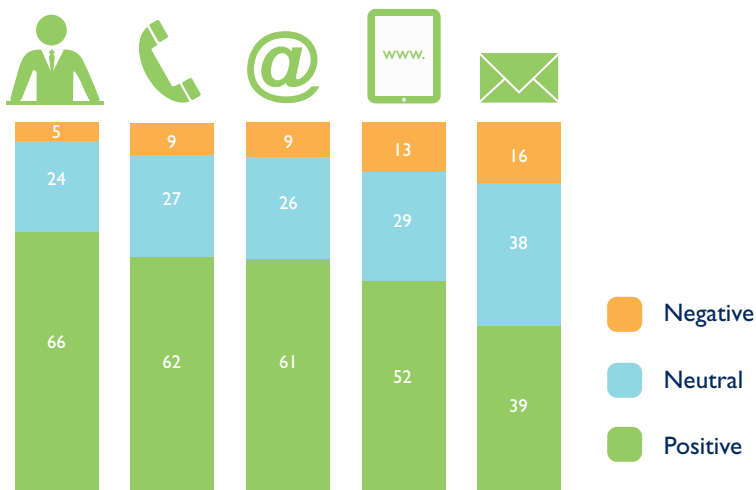
## Why this theme?

- Digitisation, budgetary cuts and decentralisation are changing the way government services are provided.
- The National Ombudsman is keen to promote good practice in this respect.
- It is important that authorities should provide services that address the real needs of citizens. They should invest in things that people value in their interactions with government.

## Recommendations to government

- Aim for real excellence in service delivery.
- Learn from citizens' complaints and signals. Work to make things better.
- Tackle fraud but don't distrust all citizens. Make sure that rules are clear and not too complicated for people to understand. Distinguish between simple mistakes and fraud.
- Use citizens to test improvements in service delivery.
- Be aware that some citizens find it hard to manage their affairs with government. Help them.
- Encourage citizens to interact with government via the computer and offer help when problems arise. Don't insist or pressure them. Offer alternatives.
- Invest in officials who perform outstandingly well at digital or personal interaction with citizens and reward them.
- Develop a sound knowledge of citizen-government interfaces, work constantly to improve them and be innovative.

## How do citizens prefer to communicate?



Citizens prefer to see someone face to face when they can't manage things for themselves. Authorities should provide pleasant, easy ways to communicate with them. (Source: TNS Nipo, 2013)

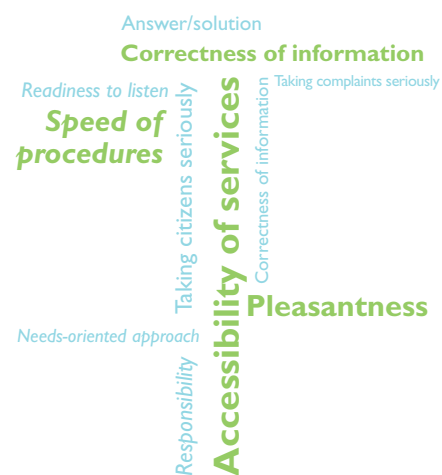
## Risk

For some people, digitisation is a barrier. The gap between satisfied and dissatisfied sections of the public is growing wider.

## Digital government: how do citizens feel about it?

- Computers and the internet can make it easier for citizens to interact with government. The public welcomes the steady improvement in computer-based government services.
- Authorities can improve digital interaction with citizens by:
  - Making built-in allowance for citizen error
  - Providing good, up-to-date information on websites
  - Enabling citizens to track the progress of their cases
  - Responding quickly to citizens' questions and signals
  - Providing opportunities for personal contact
  - Actively helping to find solutions when citizens encounter errors in digital systems
  - Investing in the security and reliability of digital systems
  - Learning from complaints and making smart improvements
  - Dealing individually with situations for which systems fail to cater
  - Taking the citizen's point of view actively into account when designing citizen-government interfaces

## Public satisfaction



- Areas seen as fairly satisfactory
- Areas with room for improvement

## How to build public confidence

- Don't punish people for simple mistakes. A mistake is not necessarily fraud.
- Provide good-quality service this strengthens citizens trust in their government.
- Constantly check whether service delivery methods meet citizens' needs and change them if necessary.
- Ensure that communication channels are easily accessible and comprehensible. Take account of the varying needs of different groups of citizens in society.
- Guarantee an effective means for citizens to ensure the security of their personal details. Protect individual privacy.

On 1 January 2014, Frank van Dooren took over the work of Alex Brenninkmeijer and became acting National Ombudsman. He will occupy that position until Parliament appoints a new National Ombudsman. Brenninkmeijer has been appointed as member of the European Court of Auditors.

# STATISTICAL OVERVIEW

## Methods of contact

People can contact the National Ombudsman in several different ways:

2013



orally (by telephone or visiting his office)



digitally (electronic complaints form, e-mail or social media)



by post (letter, fax or printed form)

## Respectful

Sheila contacts the National Ombudsman about a problem with a bailiff. If she pays the sum demanded by the bailiff, she won't have enough to live on. But the bailiff simply says that Sheila 'should take legal action'. Following intervention by the National Ombudsman, the bailiff agrees to make a compromise proposal. Sheila accepts it. The compromise is agreed and the case can be closed.



### Main issues in 2013

- Digital government
- Recommendations on Government Information (Public Access) Act
- Debts to government
- Medical care for foreigners
- Acceptable use of force by police officers
- Violations of protected earnings levels by sheriff's officers

## Number of complaints

Many citizens would prefer a quick, oral method of complaints handling and resolution. The National Ombudsman has tailored his complaints handling and registration procedures accordingly. This is why this annual report gives the figures for complaints in a new way. The total number of complaints was down 4% compared with 2012.

2012



26,257



7,946



5,512

39,715

2013



25,574



7,909



4,550

38,033

## Complaints about government

2012



75%

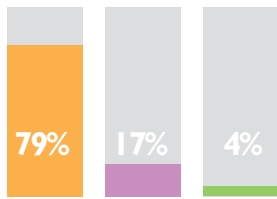
2013



74%

The National Ombudsman can only deal with complaints about government. People with questions or complaints about other matters are helped to find their way to the right body for them.

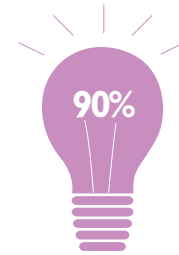
## Decisions in reports



- Partly/fully justified 79%
- Unjustified 17%
- No decision 4%

## Recommendations in reports

2013



The National Ombudsman made a recommendation or recommendations in 75 reports. 90% of them were implemented.

### Developments in 2013

- The Veterans Ombudsman started work on complaints from ex-military personnel
- The National Ombudsman praised four public officials in the context of the Ministry of the Interior's 'PCMO' project on improving government/citizen relations
- Alex Brenninkmeijer stepped down as National Ombudsman

## Method of complaints handling

2012      2013

Method	2012	2013
Resolution via intervention	3,409	3,142
Mediation	35	36
Investigation with report	209	227
Investigation with letter	189	164
Discontinued/resolved	282	566
<b>Total</b>	<b>4,124</b>	<b>4,135</b>

## Open and clear

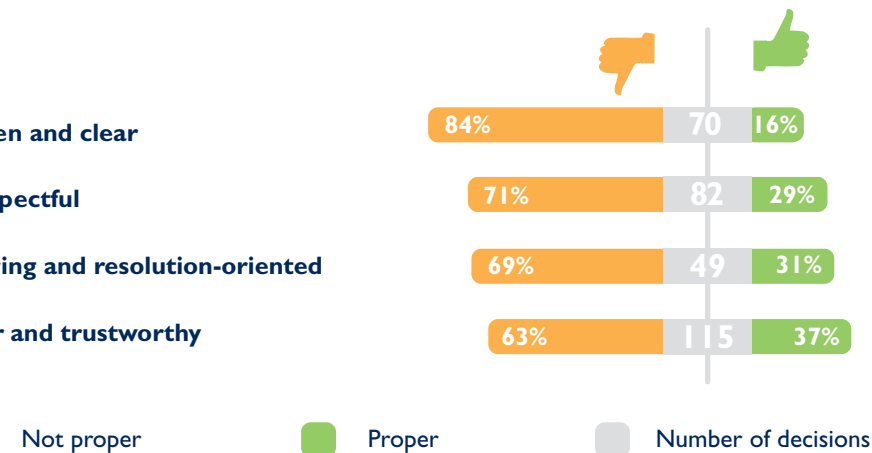
John has been caught drink driving and now has an alcohol ignition interlock on his car. He has to blow into the device every time he wants to start the car but at least it means he can keep his licence. He is happy that with this device he can keep his driver's license since he has to drive a lot for his work. One day, he tests positive and the car won't start. John is astonished, because he honestly hasn't drunk a drop. He can only think that the device is being affected by his windscreen wiper fluid which contains alcohol. He tests his hypothesis and is amazed to find he is right. John tells the Central Office for Motor Vehicle Driver Testing who is the monitoring institution for this device but they don't believe him. So John complains to



the National Ombudsman. An experiment conducted in the presence of John, and an officer from the Motor Vehicle Office and the supplier of the device proves he's telling the truth. The Ombudsman feels that authorities should check whether the results of breath tests may have been influenced by circumstances beyond the citizen's control.

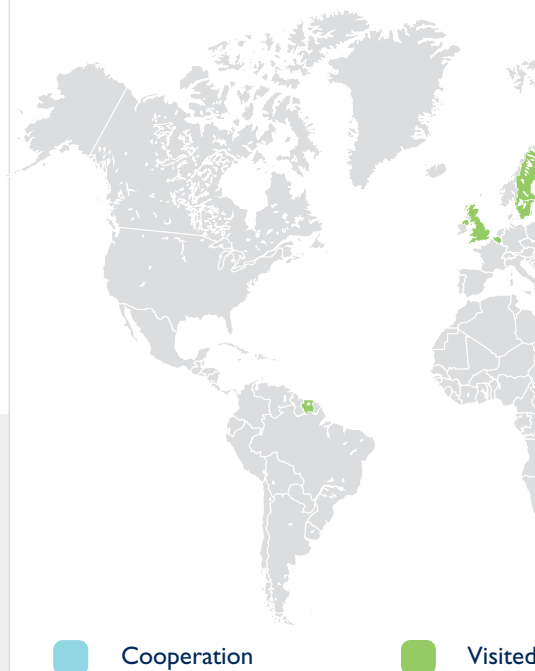
## Subject of complaints

per government is open and clear, respectful, caring and resolution-oriented, fair and trustworthy. The decisions in National Ombudsman reports are based on proper conduct criteria derived from these core values.



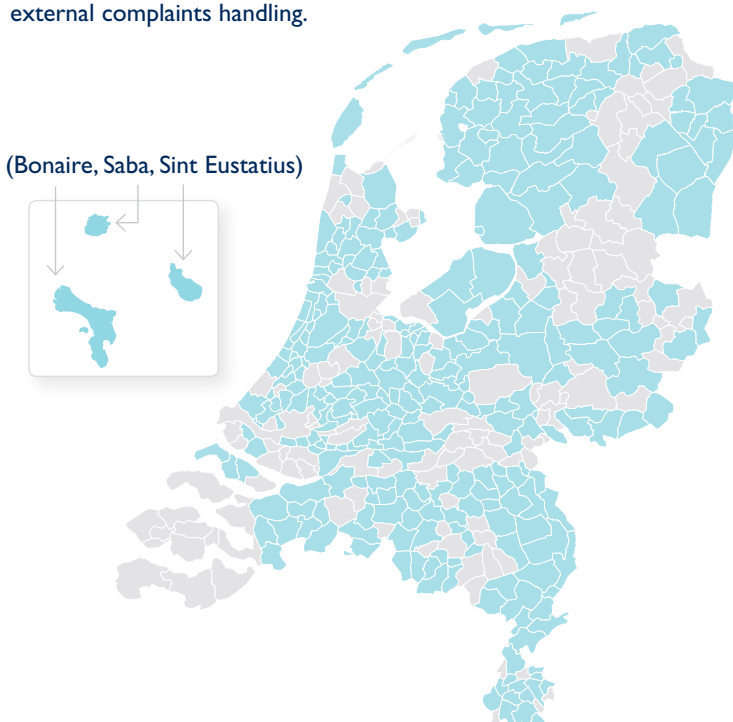
Not proper Proper Number of decisions

## The Dutch National Ombudsman as a player in an international context



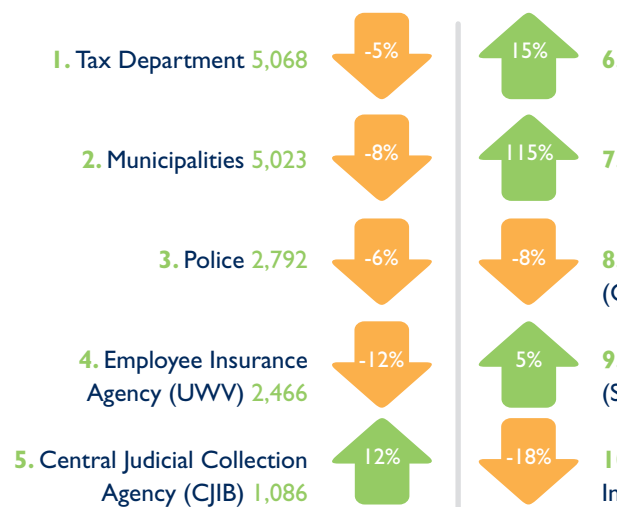
## Municipalities that use the National Ombudsman

Each municipality has the right to choose whether to use the services of the National Ombudsman or to make its own arrangements for external complaints handling.



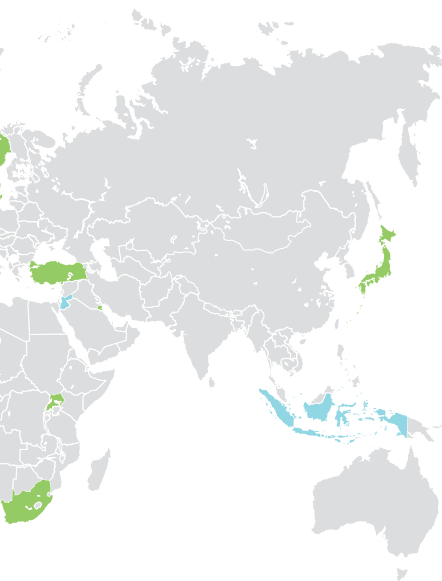
298 municipalities (a total of 408) within the jurisdiction of the National Ombudsman

## Top ten complaints



Additional information on figures for individual authorities can be found in the annual letters to those bodies. See (in Dutch only): [www.jaarverslag.nl](http://www.jaarverslag.nl)

## Ombudsman as a national network



by delegations from

## Caring and resolution-oriented

William and Marjory are an elderly married couple in receive a state pension. They receive a letter from the Social Insurance Bank that pays out this pension, telling them to supply any information relevant to their right to the state pension and the associated



partner allowance. The letter says "You need not supply details of any income enjoyed by your partner or of your state pension, because we already have that information". Accordingly, William and Marjory see no need to mention Marjory's incapacity benefit. Sometime later, however, the Social Insurance Bank writes to them demanding repayment of the partner allowance and imposing a 100% fine for failing to report the incapacity benefit. Fortunately, following intervention by the National Ombudsman, the fine is waived and the wording of the standard letter is changed.

Youth Care Agencies 991

Bailiff officers 765

Motor Vehicle Driver Testing (CBR) 640

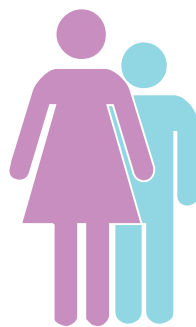
Social Insurance Bank (SVB) 607

Exceptional Medical Insurance (CAK) 567

found in the National Ombudsman's [jaarboek](http://nationaleombudsman.nl/jaarbrieven)

## Staff numbers

2013



172 members of staff

125 women

47 men

## Key statistics for 2013

- 38,033 complaints: 25,574 oral and 12,459 written
- Most complaints about the Tax Department
- 76% of complaints accepted for investigation resolved via intervention
- 79% of complainants found to be at least partly in the right
- Most decisions concerned lack of government fairness and trustworthiness
- 227 reports, 75 reports contained recommendations

## Fair and trustworthy

The police arrive to conduct a house search of a neighbour's flat and Bart goes round to see what's going on. Apparently the neighbour has gone abroad, taking his small daughter with him. The police want to question Bart as a witness concerning the child's disappearance but Bart has left his identity card at home and is unwilling to cooperate. The police give him no opportunity to go and fetch his identity card. He is arrested for failing to carry it on him and taken to the police



station. There, he is questioned, not about the minor offence of failing to carry his identity card, but as a witness in the case of the missing child. The National Ombudsman feels that the police exceeded their powers in this respect. He can understand that the police go to all possible lengths in the case of a missing minor but feels that they should not have abused their powers in order to force a witness to make a statement.

The full 2013 Annual Report of the National Ombudsman of the Netherlands is published on [www.jaarverslag.nationaleombudsman.nl](http://www.jaarverslag.nationaleombudsman.nl). Visit that website to find or download the Ombudsman's Report to the House of Representatives, his views on the main theme of the report, statistics, annual letters to individual authorities and a timeline showing the main events of 2013 (all in Dutch only).

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The names in the real-life cases have been changed for privacy reasons.