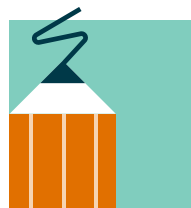


SPECIAL 2023

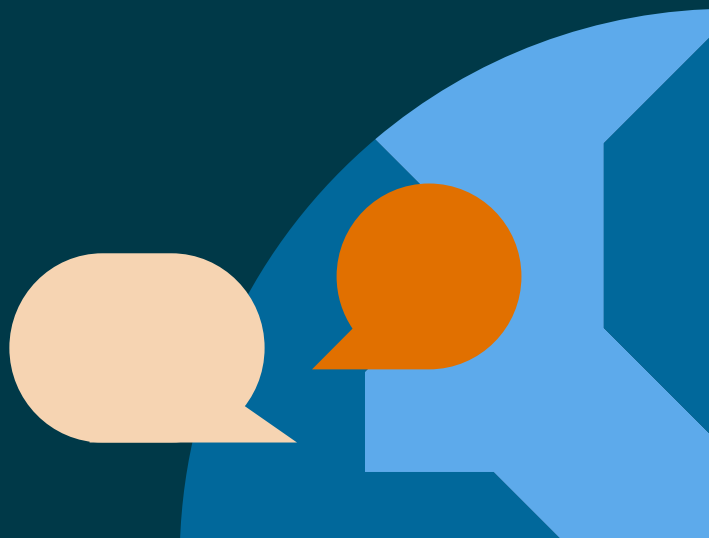
# Inspiration from abroad



**Staat  
van de  
Uitvoering**

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# Foreword & Summary

Six months ago, we presented the first State of our public service delivery 2022; we have now published this Special about our public services and put them in an international perspective. We want to inspire with practical examples from other countries that build on the proposals from the previous State.

From an international perspective, we can see that our public services are doing quite well. For example, in policy effectiveness and our international competitive position. At the same time there are plenty of comments to be made. The Dutch social security scandal is no exception, something Norway and Australia also had to deal with. The result: serious suffering for citizens due to the combination of (institutionalised) mistrust, far-reaching digitisation, and ignoring signs from citizens and/or their representatives.

The Netherlands scores well in creating conditions for digital services; but despite this, not enough attention is paid to the actual effect of policy on citizens. We involve our citizens much less in the development of digital services compared to other countries.

And we tend to compartmentalise between implementation and policy more than other countries.

Moreover, it seems that far too often we fall into the trap of thinking that we know what citizens and entrepreneurs need on the basis of our policy and implementation knowledge. When it comes to actually putting our citizens and entrepreneurs first, we can learn a lot from others. The principle of 1 government, 1 counter has been discussed for a long time, and we are taking initiatives here and there. Other countries hold up a mirror to us: we still have serious steps to take in this area.

Other countries go further than we do in creating the necessary preconditions to put citizens first. For example, in terms of information management and data exchange without endangering privacy.

This is also applicable to proactively offering services that, based on known data, the citizens or business owners are entitled to.





## EXAMPLE NEW ZEALAND & ESTONIA

Leaders of the *one-stop-shop* process. 1 digital counter where you get referrals based on life events. Citizens do not need to know how the government works. They simply provide their data once (once only).



## EXAMPLE AUSTRIA

*Reducing complexity:* a Business Portal has been developed to simplify the complicated subsidy landscape for entrepreneurs. Based on the data already available about the company, artificial intelligence highlights which schemes an entrepreneur is eligible for.



## EXAMPLE BELGIUM & PORTUGAL

*Proactive service:* automatic allowances via the Flemish Groeipakket (*Growth Package*), automatic allocation of the energy allowance in Portugal. Made possible by the right information management. Data sharing while retaining privacy.



## EXAMPLE NEW ZEALAND

Simplify the tax system in ten years, focus more on the needs of citizens and entrepreneurs, and replace IT systems on that basis.

*The examples with a golden edge refer to proposals made in the State of our public service delivery 2022; they focus deeply on citizens and entrepreneurs, and also provide inspiration with their method of realisation.*

Submitting an application is then no longer required. There is also further progress in offering low-threshold counters to help people who do not want or cannot arrange their government affairs digitally. This foreword highlights some examples (see boxes) which will be described in more detail later on.

In the State of our public service delivery 2022, we expressed our concerns about how future-proof our public services are. We have to make a fundamental change in the way we think about our public services and how we organise them. We can learn a lot from other countries in this regard. Much more is possible when it comes to really listening to what our citizens and entrepreneurs want or need. And with regard to (digital) services, we need more state direction and less lack of commitment: we must move beyond the experimentation phase.

We invite you to read this Special so you can get some inspiration. Our proposal to you, the reader, is to join us in translating good examples from other countries into the Dutch context and putting them into practice. As politicians, policymakers and public service deliverers, we can only achieve a change in mindset and organising from the perspective of citizens and entrepreneurs by talking and doing. Our colleagues in other countries can inspire us and show us that it can and does work.

### **The Steering committee of the State of our public service delivery**

*Abdeluheb Choho (chair),  
Harmen Harmsma, Marjolijn Sonnema,  
Diana Starmans, Maarten Prinsen,  
Ric de Rooij en Peter Teesink*

**Adviesbureau Haagse Beek** investigated the good practice examples in this Special. A detailed description of the examples is available online, as are the corresponding webinars.



### **VOORBEELD BELGIUM**

*Taking the needs of the citizen as a starting point. "Huis voor het Kind" (child services centre) in Flanders: for those who do not want or cannot do this digitally, there is a walk-in centre (no appointment necessary) where you will be helped with all the services associated with children: allowances, health, education, etc.*



### **VOORBEELD DENMARK**

*Long-term and consistent implementation: 1 digital counter, 1 digitisation strategy, 1 digitisation organisation for the central government.*



### **VOORBEELD FIFTY COUNTRIES**

*Putting the citizen at the centre Poverty Stoplight: helping households with (poverty) problems. Please note: the family makes the plan and takes control, not the organisations with their own tasks and goals.*



### **VOORBEELD COSTA RICA**

*Fundamental rethinking: doubling the forest area in 40 years by offering the right subsidy incentives for farmers. 70 percent financed from an additional tax on fossil fuels. There is still enough agricultural land left over.*

# About this Special

*Reduce the complexity of laws and regulations:* that is the core message of the State of our public service delivery 2022. The analysis of the Implementation Status Reports from a large number of individual public service providers, substantiated by various studies, showed that complexity was by far the biggest bottleneck for citizens, entrepreneurs and public service agencies.

In addition, many proposals in the State of our public service delivery 2022 are largely related to complexity (such as: involve implementation in policymaking from the start, jointly develop a long-term vision on implementation, improve accountability and management of policy implementation, and increase data exchange) and are now really underway. Policy is still too often made in (ministerial) silos, and consideration for the social problem is often still not the starting point for policy development.

In the first State of our public service delivery from 2022, there was only limited room to include inspiring examples that could be used to improve Dutch performance practice. That is why, in this Special, particular attention is paid to these examples. A broad inventory has been drawn up of good practice examples that have been reviewed in recent years<sup>1</sup>. This mainly concerns examples that contribute to reducing complexity and examples of (digital) services in which the citizen is central. Practices from other countries cannot simply be applied to the Dutch situation.

To conclude the series of webinars organised as part of this Special, [a session](#)<sup>2</sup> was held with representatives from Dutch politics, the policy world, implementation and clients to reflect on the question about whether this translation to the Netherlands would be possible and if so, how.

Read the piece Vincent Homburg wrote to put Estonia's often cited exemplary role into perspective: [Digital services in Estonia](#).<sup>3</sup>



Dutch public performance is compared to that in other countries through international research. We also discuss how the State of our public service delivery 2022 was received and the activities that build on its proposals. We have purposefully referred to the State you are currently reading as a *Special*. It cannot be compared to the first edition, which

contains an in-depth analysis of the bottlenecks in the Dutch implementation; it is a *thematic edition*. We will also be exploring a number of themes in greater depth in 2024. Then, for the State of our public service delivery 2025, we will once again provide a broad update of the first 2022 edition.



## INSPIRATIE UIT HET BUITENLAND

### Koplopers op het gebied van de digitale loketfunctie

A tendency in various countries is to offer residents a digital counter function. The digital counter offers one “point of entry” for residents. Behind the scenes, various government agencies work together. Such a counter is also referred to as a “one-stop-shop”. What can we learn about the design of such counters abroad?

The eight countries examined are New Zealand, Estonia, Germany, Portugal, Canada, Denmark, Belgium and Norway.

The general principle in these countries is that citizens do not need to understand how the government works. The design is based on life events and themes that arise from the needs of residents.

- For example, we can see in **New Zealand** that the service is organised around 42 different life events. For example, the birth of a child, graduating from school, or starting driving lessons. Parents can find all information about their children on the SmartStart website. Based on the age of your child, you will gain insight into what must be arranged (childcare and school, for example) and what you need to pay attention to when raising your child (for example, dealing with different types of behaviour and nutrition tips).
- In **Estonia** you can easily navigate to the right government services for each life event. Are you starting your own business? Are you getting married or moving house? You can easily see the forms you need to fill in or the things you need to arrange for each event.

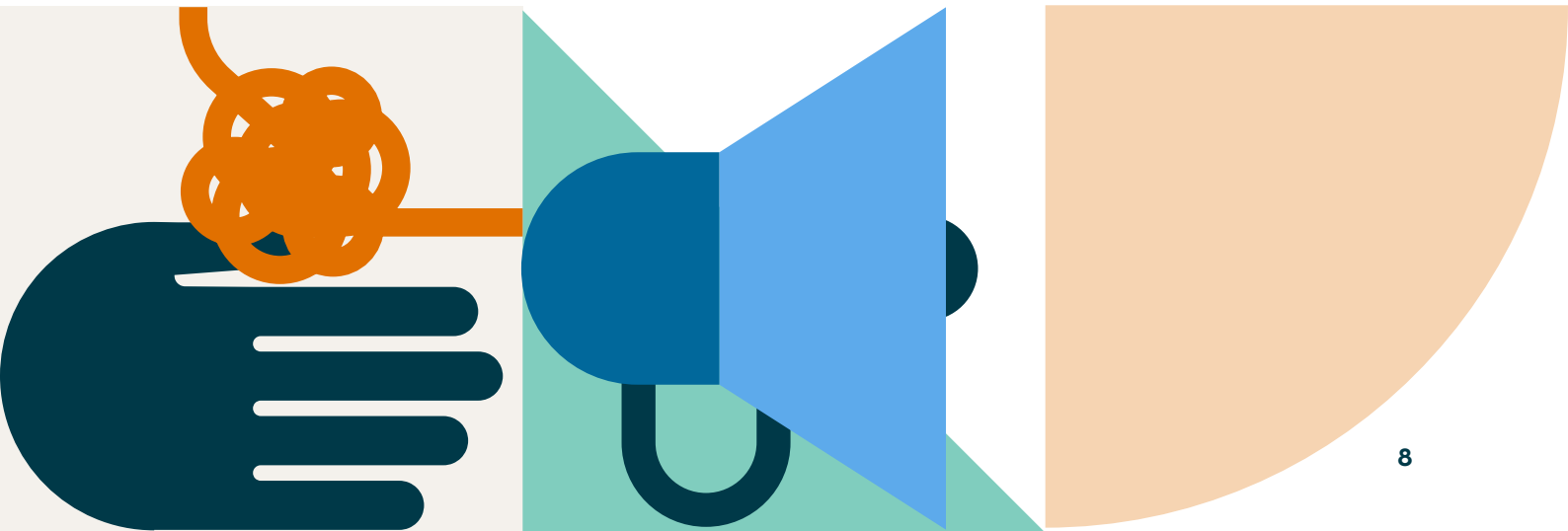
*Bron: Haagse Beek*

# Reception of the State of our public service delivery 2022

The first State of our public service delivery was widely supported and well received. Since publication, the Steering Committee and project team have given presentations, organised learning meetings, held talks and conducted interviews. The State was discussed in the permanent [House Representatives Committee for Interior<sup>4</sup>](#), a plenary parliamentary debate will follow, and a government response is being prepared. The State is frequently quoted in policy documents, advice and research reports.

The responses show that people largely recognise the five proposals. However, these bottlenecks are not easily solved. The advice that was regularly heard was to keep these points on the agenda in the coming years.

The problem of complexity and the need to be involved in policy development from the outset is very clear. See, for example, [the annual report from the Netherlands Chamber of Commerce<sup>5</sup>](#) and [the Implementation Status Report of the Dutch Emissions Authority<sup>6</sup>](#). Much attention is also being paid to simplifying income support measures. The CPB (Netherlands Bureau for Economic Policy Analysis) has made calculations and the parties involved are discussing this with each other (Ministry of Finance, Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment, knowledge institutes).





There are several collaborating parties that are taking steps in the area of data exchange: the Ministry of Justice and Security, the Interbestuurlijke Datastrategie (*Inter-administrative Data Strategy*) and the government commissioner for information management. The Integral Assessment Framework has been further developed into the Policy Compass, and work is underway on its implementation. The application of this could help to make more integrated and less compartmentalised policy. We are monitoring this development.

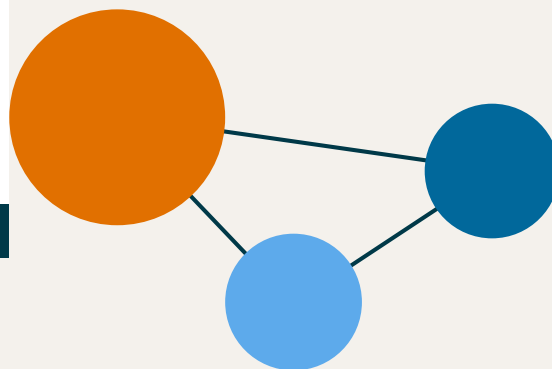
Public service agencies are strengthening their responsiveness. They are more open to the messages they receive from citizens and businesses, and they try to bring these messages out into the open so something can be done with them. This is apparent, for example, from the feedback management learning path of the State of our public service delivery. The Tax Administration has also made [great strides in making better use of customer messages.](#)<sup>7</sup>

The same applies to the Dienst Uitvoering Subsidie aan Instellingen (*Subsidy Implementation Service for Institutions*).

It is still too early in the year to paint a picture of the Status of public service providers in 2023, but the theme is alive. Virtually all public service providers were represented at a learning meeting about producing an Implementation Status Report. Public service agencies that need help from politicians and policymakers to overcome bottlenecks have included the bottlenecks more explicitly in a number of recent Implementation Status Reports. But service providers are also showing that they sometimes find the explicit reporting of bottlenecks uncomfortable, and that is why not always all bottlenecks are mentioned.

At the same time, there is also a certain disappointment. Public service providers have stated that they can discuss identified bottlenecks with politicians and policymakers, but only to a very limited extent. A number of large public service agencies are succeeding, but the prevailing impression is that they are not getting enough support. We heard several times that despite a red implementation test, policy is still being enforced. This contributes to the feeling that the system is not changing enough.





## INSPIRATIE FROM ABROAD



### Reducing complexity for entrepreneurs in Austria

The Netherlands Enterprise Agency (RVO) has to deal with a complex subsidy landscape in the Netherlands. The organisation offers some insight into this in their RVO Implementation Status Report 2022. Austria also has this complexity, but has devised an innovative solution: the Austrian Business Service Portal ([usp.gv.at](https://usp.gv.at)) is intended as a 1-stop government shop for companies. The portal provides information about starting a business, taxes, legal obligations, while transactions are also possible. By making it a 1-stop shop, the administrative burden for entrepreneurs is reduced.

The portal uses artificial intelligence to help companies search very effectively for subsidies for which they are eligible. Based on all the information about the company the government already has, companies then receive a clear selection of subsidy schemes in the portal for which they are eligible. In the past, people had to go through a complex and sometimes deviating set of subsidy rules from various subsidy providers by themselves in order to determine whether they were eligible.

*Source: State of our public service delivery*

## INSPIRATION FROM ABROAD



### **New Zealand has replaced the tax authority systems and put the user first**

Over a period of more than ten years, New Zealand has changed the design of the tax system, while digitising and greatly simplifying the collection of taxes. The programme started in 2012 with a broad participation process. Users of the systems, financial institutions and employers were asked what they needed and what needed to be adjusted.

Broad commitment was sought from the start. Including from parliament; of both the government and the opposition. The starting points were that changes were going to be fundamental, that the service cannot undergo any further major changes at the same time, and that multi-year financing was necessary. The latter was to prevent the process from coming to a halt halfway through, or suddenly going in a completely different direction. An important difference with the Netherlands is that the New Zealand tax authorities encompass both policy and implementation.

They started with a “green paper”, in which the guiding principle was defined as the target group must be central. Processes had to be adapted to meet the target group’s needs, even if this meant the organisation needed to change radically. And it happened: from a compartmentalised organisation, the New Zealand tax authority has changed into an organisation with fewer layers of management, and which is structured around the target groups. The organisation has always changed in small steps with room for new technology.

The starting point has always been: make it easier for the customer, simpler, and with a focus on better compliance with laws and regulations. Every change was extensively tested before it was implemented.

Systems ran parallel, sometimes for up to five years. Questions via the helpdesk served as feedback. The adjustments saw the questions becoming less and less about matters that could be answered automatically.

*Source: Haagse Beek*

# International comparative study: The Netherlands is doing well

Recent EIPA research<sup>8</sup> shows that the Dutch public administration generally performs well to very well in the field of good governance.

This concept has been operationalised very broadly, following the example of the World Bank. It includes levels of citizen participation, government accountability, political stability, and the absence of violence. This also includes the effectiveness of the policy (such as quality of services, quality and independence of the civil service), the ability of the government to formulate and implement sensible policy, the degree of legal certainty, and the fight against corruption. The Netherlands (see Figure 1) has one of the highest scores, only falling behind Luxembourg and Switzerland in Western Europe. Our country has values that are only slightly lower than those of the northern (Scandinavian) countries.

## **Confidence in the government is low; but it is higher in the Netherlands than elsewhere**

The [OECD Trust Survey](#)<sup>9</sup> shows that the Dutch population belongs to the group with the greatest confidence in the government. On average, only 40 percent of the citizens in the participating countries trust the national government. The Netherlands is clearly doing better than average at 50 percent. Mind you, this still means the other half of the population in the Netherlands is either neutral (15 percent) or has no confidence in the national government (35 percent).

The same picture applies to confidence in public services and the question of whether executive organisations embrace innovative ideas if they can improve public services: the OECD average is about 40 percent, the Netherlands scores clearly above average with 50 percent.



## More Dutch scores

Other sources confirm the good performance of the Dutch public administration. Both the [United Nations](#)<sup>10</sup> and the [EU](#)<sup>11</sup> recently investigated the quality of e-government. Both studies show that the Netherlands is one of the forerunners: a high level of innovative digital services combined with a high level of use.

The World Economic Forum's most recent *Global Competitiveness Report (2019)*<sup>12</sup> shows that, of 141 countries, the Netherlands scores on average fourth place in terms of competitiveness. The government plays an important role in creating the conditions for competitiveness, for example in terms of the stability and reliability of the government, the rules on starting a business, and the extent to which the government is future-oriented.

This overview of international comparative studies into the performance of public administration can be expanded much further, but the message remains mostly the same: the Dutch government is doing well on average compared to governments in other countries.

## Explanatory analyses

The EIPA study not only draws up rankings. Explanations for the performance or non-performance of governments are also sought. One of the relationships that can be derived from the analysis of the data from the 35 countries is that the *effectiveness (efficiency) of the government goes hand in hand with a higher participation of citizens and better*

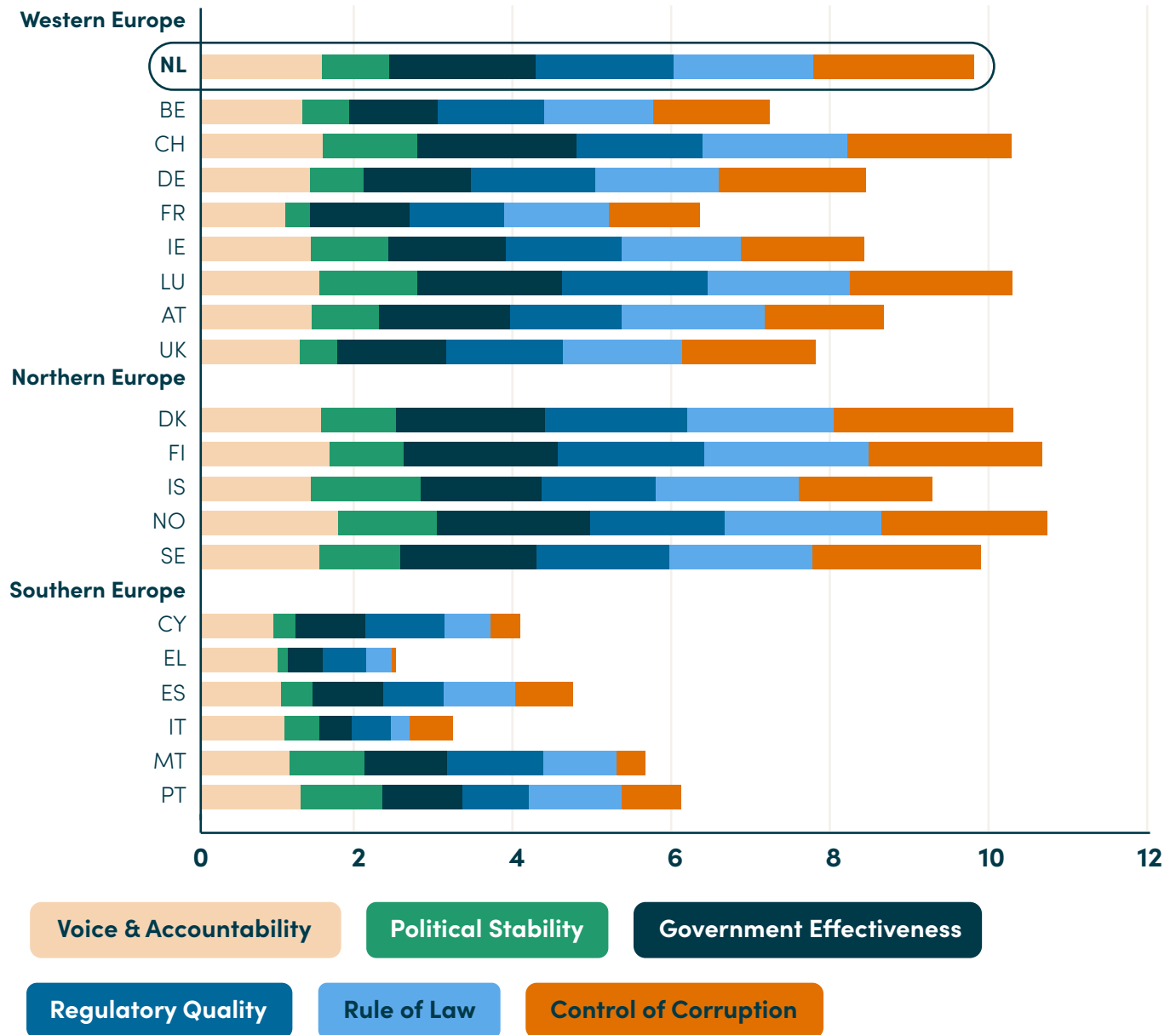
*accountability by the government. In countries where democratic institutions are healthier and the press is freer, governments perform better.* The following explanatory analysis shows that citizens' confidence in the government is greater where the government is more effective.

A number of interesting correlations are found, with better performance of public administration occurring on average more often if the countries have:

- a greater distance between political administrators and the civil service. This concerns, among other things, the lack of political appointments of civil servants;
- a greater degree of diversity in policy advice. This means that advice not only comes from the civil service, but also from science and civil society organisations;
- a greater focus on the social interest instead of legal certainty (compliance with laws and regulations).

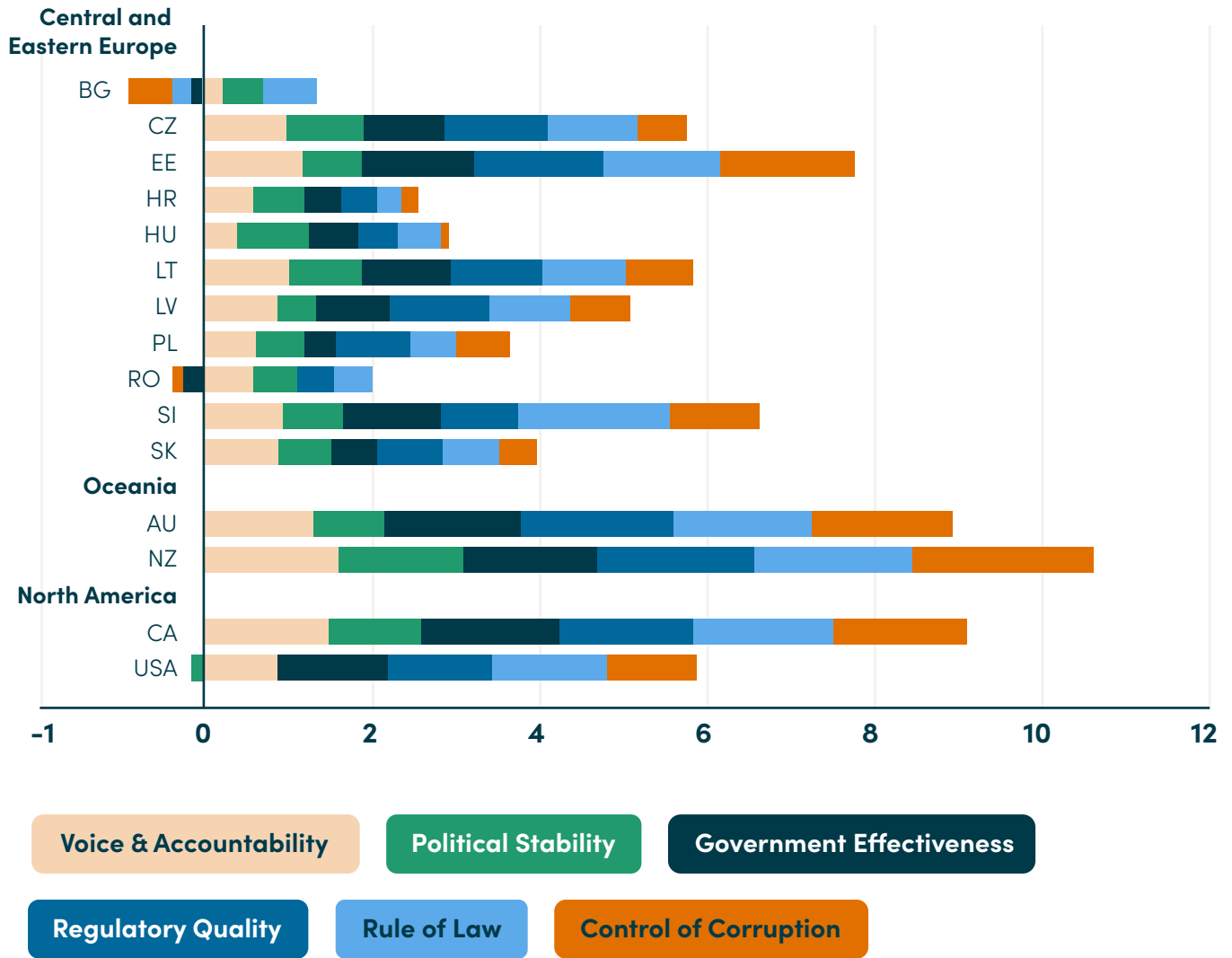
# Figure 1: Good Governance Indicators for 35 countries (1/2)

Source: EIPA (2022) / World Bank



# Figure 1: Good Governance Indicators for 35 countries (2/2)

Source: EIPA (2022) / World Bank

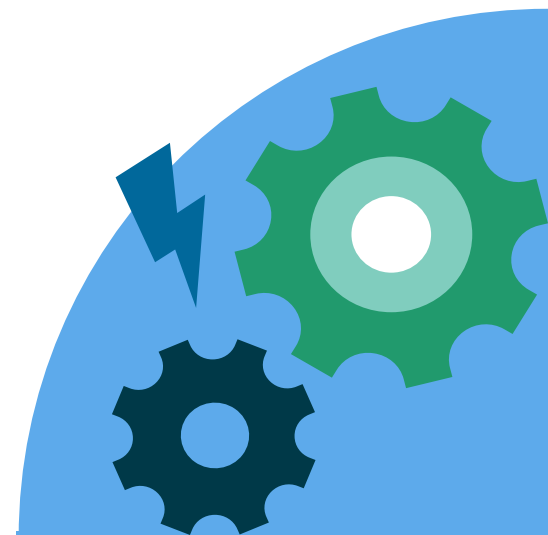


# But: a good average grade hides the work to be done

In the State of our public service delivery 2022, much attention was paid to the fact that there is a specific group of citizens who are not satisfied with the government. Dutch citizens are on average positive about the services provided, but 14 percent of the respondents are negative about the government services. This group of dissatisfied people – who on average are less educated, earn a [lower income](#)<sup>13</sup> and come into contact with the government more often – has also increased in size in recent years.

A good grade or a top position in a ranking does not mean everything is okay. In Australia and Norway, social security scandals similar to the Dutch allowances affair (which saw many families denied allowances they were entitled to) occurred at about the same [time](#)<sup>14</sup> (see also the text box). And it is of note that these three countries are among the absolute leaders in terms of services and digitisation. An important common element is that the problems were based on institutionalised mistrust of social security users. Politicians wanted to take strong action against abuse of social security. In addition, the automated handling of decisions played an important role in the cause of the problems. There was insufficient room in the sanctions policy for civil servants to make their own assessments (the human dimension). The complexity of the income support system is also cited as a [cause](#).<sup>15</sup>

The affairs dragged on until finally they continued much longer than necessary: there were more than enough internal and external signals that the policy was unlawful and had disproportionately far-reaching consequences for the citizens involved. Both the politicians and the upper levels of the civil service only really understood this when court rulings forced them to face the problems properly.







To illustrate

## Socialezekerheidsschandalen in Nederland, Australië en Noorwegen

Norway and Australia both suffered similar social security scandals. Please note: The Netherlands, Australia and Norway are among the countries that score best on the World Bank's indicators for good governance: government effectiveness, regulatory quality, participation and accountability. The World Justice Project lists a rule of law index ranking based on four principles: accountability, fair laws, open government, and accessible and impartial dispute resolution. Both the Netherlands and Norway are in the top 5 and score exceptionally high on each of these principles. The same goes for Australia, which ranks ninth.

For the purposes of this Special, it is assumed that the Dutch allowances scandal is understood. For an extensive case description of the Norwegian and Australian cases, please refer to the analysis carried out by ICTU in the context of the State of our public service delivery; a very brief overview is outlined here.

The Norwegian case is much more limited in scope than the Dutch and Australian cases, but the consequences for the citizens involved were very serious.

It has been established that the Norwegian government wrongly refused citizens' sickness benefits because they were temporarily abroad. A total of 1,100 people were forced to repay benefits they had received, and to which they were actually entitled. In addition, 86 people were wrongly convicted of benefit fraud, even resulting in imprisonment and exile from Norway.

In the Australian Robodebt scandal, "overpayments" of social security benefits were also wrongly reclaimed. Data from social security payments were linked to data from tax returns. The aim was to identify discrepancies between the two. Up until 2015, a government official performed a check before a refund was claimed. After that, no additional investigation was carried out. In addition, the burden of proof shifted, meaning the individual citizen had to prove his/her innocence. A few years later it turned out that the approach of the Australian government was unlawful. The debts had to be recalculated manually for 500,000 individual cases. In 2020, a group settlement worth 1.2 billion Australian dollars (750 million Euros) was reached.

## And there is also room for improvement in other areas

Research by the World Justice Project shows that the Dutch rule of law scores highly internationally ([Rule of Law Index](#)).<sup>16</sup> The Netherlands is in fifth place, after Denmark, Norway, Finland and Sweden. This is of course a good score, but the Netherlands is not doing so well in certain areas. In particular this applies to the effectiveness of criminal investigations, the fight against crime, and the extent to which people resort to violence to redress personal grievances. The Netherlands does not score in the top 10 in this area, but in the global sub-top. If we look specifically at the effectiveness of the criminal investigation, the Netherlands scores 55 out of a possible 100 points, which puts it in 28th place internationally.



# Government services: the downside

In the State of our public service delivery 2022, we found that many citizens and businesses are satisfied with the efficiency and convenience of digital government services. But we also pointed out a group with lower language and digital skills for whom this general satisfaction does not apply. The people in this group state that they have a greater need for personal contact with the government. In the strategy for digitisation and public services, it is therefore of decisive importance to think carefully about how you organise services for both groups of citizens and entrepreneurs.

## **The Netherlands: users are less involved**

[The Rathenau Institute recently carried out an analysis<sup>17</sup>](#) into what exactly is measured in international comparative studies of digital public services. It appears that the focus is often on the conditions for digital public services, such as connectivity and digital skills. The Netherlands ranks in the European top 5.

The Digital Government Index measures whether the government has developed a strategy, policy, guidelines and standards to use digital resources responsibly. The position of the Netherlands in this index is not very good: 21st out of 33 countries surveyed. According to the Rathenau Institute, this is because *the Dutch government does not involve its users as much in the development of digital public services compared to other countries*. Moreover, it has been found that none of the available international rankings look at the substantive quality and implementation of digital services. The consequences for citizens are not considered, while safety and transparency are only measured to a very limited extent. This sheds a slightly different light on the conclusions that can be drawn from the rankings. See the text box regarding safety and accessibility of websites of Dutch public service agencies.

Government services that are developed without sufficient user involvement are, of course, less aligned with the needs and wishes of citizens and entrepreneurs and the problems they encounter. The State of our public service delivery 2022 found that service concepts are too often based on assumptions rather than the established wishes and needs of the customer.

Customer service, for example, is often set up with the system in mind – providing answers in a process-oriented way and providing information within the legally applicable deadlines – rather than with the target audience’s perspective in mind.



To illustrate  
**Safety<sup>18</sup> and accessibility<sup>19</sup> of websites for public service agencies**

De [Monitor Open Standaarden \(Open Standards Monitor\)](#) focuses on the demand for open standards in tenders, applications for government-wide facilities and other uses. The 2022 edition shows that both the tenders and existing facilities pay a great deal of attention to the mandatory open standards for security, but that not all central government organisations have their affairs in order yet.

Dashboard DigiToegankelijk (*DigiAccessibility Dashboard*) keeps track of the extent to which

websites of Dutch government organisations meet the accessibility requirements. These are requirements that ensure everyone can use websites and applications. An [ICTU inventory](#) shows that of the 257 websites and apps of the 38 public service providers, only 3 percent fully meet the accessibility requirements. A large group (55 percent) partially comply, but in 38 percent of the cases only the first steps have been taken to make them accessible. In 10 percent of cases, the site does not meet the requirements.<sup>20</sup>

## INSPIRATION FROM ABROAD



### **Automatic allocation of allowances and personal contact with parents goes hand in hand in Flanders**

Extensive digitisation in Flanders (almost 7 million inhabitants) means allowances for children are granted automatically. Therefore, applying for the allowances is unnecessary. This ensures those parents who find it difficult to submit an allowance application, or those who do not know that they can submit such an application, now also receive the allowances. This method makes more time available for personal contact with parents who have questions caused by a change in their personal situation. There are 200 “Huizen van het Kind” where parents can drop in without an appointment and ask questions about childcare, health care, parenting support, leisure activities and other questions related to their children. Additional support from the Agentschap Uitbetaling Groeipakket (*Growth Package Payment Agency*) is also available in 76 Huizen van het Kind, particularly in so-called vulnerable regions.

In the other Huizen van het Kind, agency employees work in the back office to support local reception staff.

The result of this automatic granting of allowances, combined with a telephone service in which almost all telephone calls are answered within ten seconds, is that 99.5 percent of the target group is served. Of the remaining 0.5 percent, the majority are looked after via personal meetings in the Huizen van het Kind. Here they are provided with information, their administrative questions are answered, and they get help filling in forms. The Huizen van het Kind are also open outside normal office hours.

*Bron: Haagse Beek*

## INSPIRATION FROM ABROAD



### **In Estonia and New Zealand, you can get what you need from the government in just a few clicks. How did they manage this?**

In New Zealand, (prospective) parents can find all government services concerning their child via the SmartStart website, where they can also arrange their affairs. 99 percent of parents register their newborn child here.

95 percent make use of the option to also apply for a financial allowance (Best Start) and an IRD number (equivalent to the BSN number in the Netherlands). The SmartStart website then offers parenting tips for each year of the child's life, stating the necessary government services such as arranging childcare or choosing a school.

In Estonia, 99 percent of government services are accessible to residents digitally through one central website. How did these countries manage to do this?

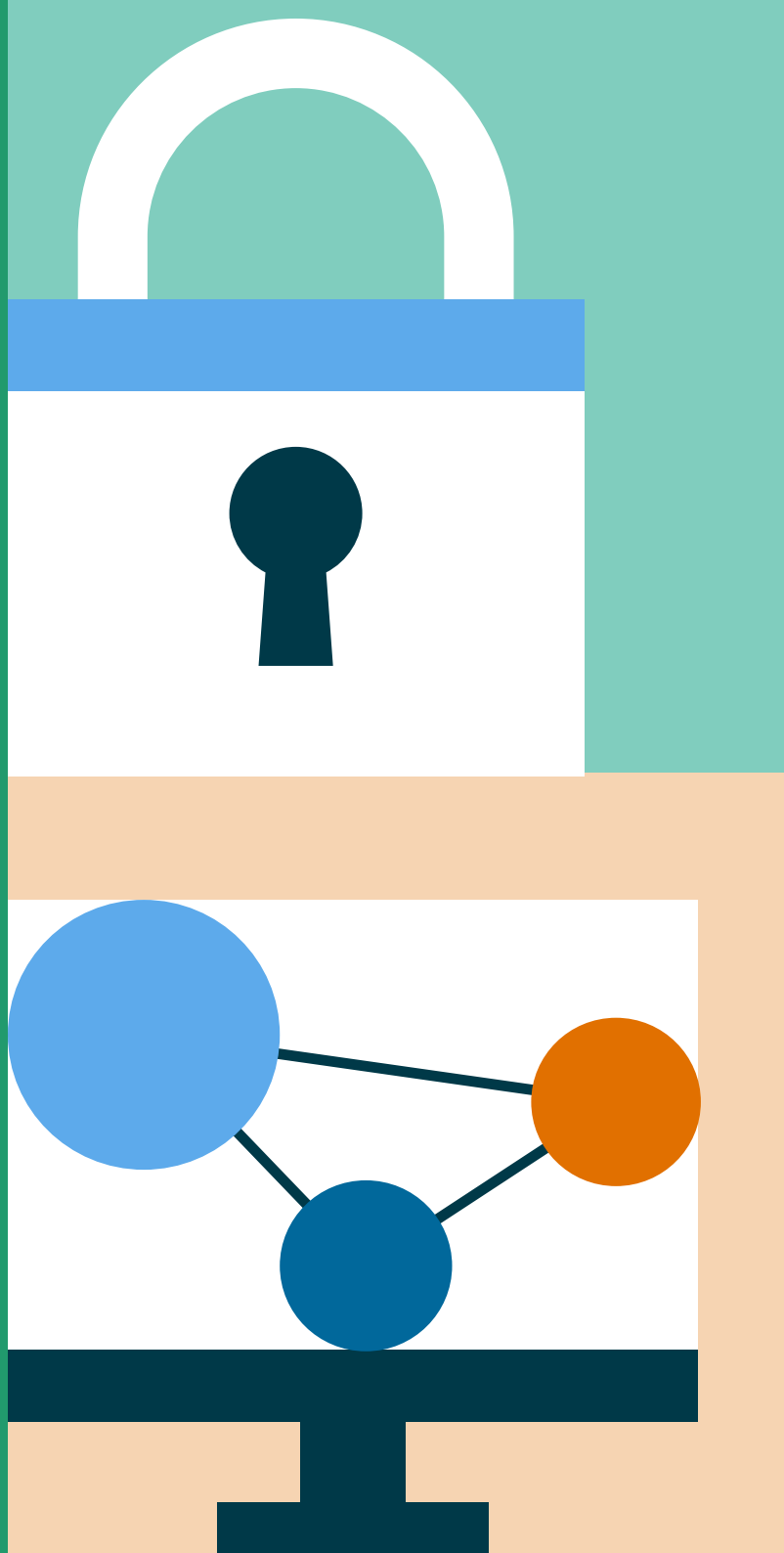
Both countries have fully embraced national digital working and have been very ambitious with their approach. In 2015, New Zealand stated that 80 percent of government services must be offered digitally before 2020. When Estonia became independent after the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, there was a clear vision of digitisation as an opportunity to achieve results with limited financial resources.

The focus of both countries is the target group. New Zealand even sent officials to the streets to speak to parents about the issues they encounter when dealing with the government. In Estonia, the working method is much more comprehensive because they did not try to reach one target group, but all residents. But here too, the resident and his/her life events are constantly being processed. As a result, both countries have managed to gain the trust of their residents. This is particularly interesting in Estonia because of a lingering suspicion towards the government following the past connection to the Soviet Union. Openness plays an important role: in Estonia, every action is registered in the blockchain. The country also uses a digital identity (eID) as the main access point for interaction with the government (and part of the business community) and the possibility for residents to view data, or to refuse access to certain information.

Both New Zealand and Estonia work with a specific development strategy: first set up the process based on the minimum need, and then expand further where opportunities are seen and where new needs arise. In doing so, both countries have centrally organised the control of the process in which work is done towards an end goal with respect for the autonomy of government organisations.

For the Netherlands, central coordination from the Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations, good co-operation between the involved parties based on the wishes of the target group, and daring to start with first releases are interesting points of note.

*Bron: Haagse Beek*



## INSPIRATION FROM ABROAD



### **In more than 50 countries, families lift themselves out of poverty through their own “life map”**

Fundación Paraguaya has developed a method to combat poverty that is used in more than fifty countries, including the US and several European countries. Families do a self-assessment because poverty is not simply a case of a lack of money. Self-confidence, appreciation, a safe living environment, education and health are factors that must be taken into account. Using the self-assessment, families can create their own life map with a focus on moving their way out of poverty. The essence of the method is to ask people if they need help instead of deciding for them. Are residents “inhabitants” or “citizens”? In the latter case, they own the changes and can play a role in them. Poverty can happen to anyone, but it also manifests itself in different ways for everyone. Control based on the confidence that people want to get out of poverty is important.

In the Netherlands it is different. “Don’t do anything crazy, don’t lose your job.” That is the advice given to people in debt restructuring. Because if you have paid 90% and it goes wrong, even if the cause is beyond you, then you have to start all over again. There must be an overview of debts, and everyone must be treated individually. “We help people through the system,” says Jan Achterbergh, debt counsellor in the Amsterdam Noord neighbourhood team. “But it takes 1.5 years. During that time, we ask people to put their lives on hold.” “I was constantly reminded of my duties,” said Marjorie Malbons who was in debt and now has a foundation that focuses on people in poverty. “It never occurred to me that I also had rights.” “Notice or demand letters come in without asking if the receiving people can even read them.” And about the implementing organisations: “In the Netherlands they are all islands that must be connected.”

*Bron: Haagse Beek*



## Decreased confidence

In the second quarter of 2023, a number of studies became available detailing how Dutch and EU citizens view their government, including the [Eurobarometer](#)<sup>21</sup> en [studies by SCP and CBS](#). (SCP: Netherlands institute for Social Research, CBS: Statistics Netherlands).<sup>22</sup>

The Eurobarometer confirms that confidence in the government is low, but that Dutch citizens have more confidence in the government than citizens of other countries.

However, when asked about the most urgent reforms needed, Dutch citizens state much more often than the European average that this should concern support for families, housing and social security (53 percent in the Netherlands, 35 percent on average, only the Czech Republic scores higher than the Netherlands at 57 percent).

The SCP report states that in the past 70 to 80 percent of the Dutch population was satisfied with how well their democracy was working. However, this has fallen since the spring of 2021, and only 62 percent were satisfied with the functioning of democracy in the spring of 2022. This is comparable to 2004, when satisfaction with democracy and confidence in politics fell

temporarily in the aftermath of Fortuyn's rise to power. The recent decline in the share of people satisfied with democracy has not occurred in most other EU countries. This means, firstly, that the Netherlands has dropped from the top of satisfied EU countries to the sub-top and, secondly, that the cause of this decline must be sought in the Netherlands itself. The dissatisfaction turns out to be mainly about politics; they think politicians should listen better, learn from their mistakes, and be more honest.

Figure 2 shows the most important issues for Dutch citizens: the positive opinion is that the government plays a central role in their lives, while the negative opinion is that there is insufficient accountability and transparency. The latter concerns, for example, a clear explanation of what public funds are spent on, as well as insight into what data the government collects about citizens and entrepreneurs, for which organisation, and what they do with it.



## Figure 2: Opinion of citizens about their own government (1/2)

Source: Flash Eurobarometer 526 – Understanding Europeans' views on reform needs

Which of the following best describes the public administration in [COUNTRY]? Up to three answers allowed.

	EU27	NL	BE	BG	CZ	DK	DE	EE	IE	EL	ES	FR	HR	IT
Complex and burdensome	48	29	48	58	45	40	56	20	25	39	48	60	37	53
Slow in providing services	47	28	43	35	40	28	47	22	29	55	55	55	59	56
Lacks transparency	29	33	31	24	33	24	23	25	35	41	36	19	35	28
Not close to the citizens	29	32	34	25	32	20	25	28	32	42	31	23	28	37
Plays a central role in people's lives	26	33	32	16	23	40	26	30	35	19	26	33	9	19
Under-skilled	22	22	20	22	18	16	14	40	20	36	17	28	29	29
Close to the citizens	15	23	18	11	19	18	16	21	22	9	12	8	8	12
Attractive employer	14	19	18	7	13	12	26	17	20	5	19	6	8	9
Fast and effective	9	20	9	5	7	11	13	23	18	4	5	3	2	4
None of these (spontaneous answer)	1	3	1	3	1	3	1	2	2	0	1	1	1	1
Don't know (spontaneous answer)	1	1	1	1	1	3	1	1	1	0	1	1	2	0

 Most frequently mentioned response

## Figure 2: Opinion of citizens about their own government (2/2)

Source: Flash Eurobarometer 526 – Understanding Europeans' views on reform needs

Which of the following best describes the public administration in [COUNTRY]?

Up to three answers allowed.

	CY	LV	LT	LU	HU	MT	AT	PL	PT	RO	SI	SK	FI	SE
Complex and burdensome	37	30	39	19	47	19	32	46	37	34	38	50	43	21
Slow in providing services	67	27	25	25	29	35	42	39	56	45	46	57	40	38
Lacks transparency	32	33	28	15	34	37	26	45	25	35	19	28	21	22
Not close to the citizens	38	38	24	18	24	18	25	30	20	37	17	28	23	20
Plays a central role in people's lives	23	26	12	30	28	31	29	18	23	25	18	24	49	56
Under-skilled	38	27	20	17	10	19	17	33	22	26	19	22	6	12
Close to the citizens	10	10	15	22	23	42	24	19	14	24	27	17	20	29
Attractive employer	24	9	9	17	7	15	16	8	3	11	17	11	9	19
Fast and effective	5	5	16	32	16	25	17	8	13	10	14	5	9	11
None of these (spontaneous answer)	0	1	2	2	1	1	2	1	3	1	2	1	1	1
Don't know (spontaneous answer)	0	2	3	9	3	3	3	1	2	1	1	0	1	4

 Most frequently mentioned response

# An international perspective of the Netherlands: leader and laggard

If we compare the insights gained so far from the good examples in this Special, where do the Dutch public services actually stand?

Dutch implementation is going well compared to other countries. However, a closer look at our international position shows that we are not doing so well in specific areas. The most striking element concerning digital services is that users of the services in the Netherlands are less involved in the development. And there is a need for more transparency from the government.

If we examine the good examples from other countries, we can see in a number of cases that both digital and non-digital services are based on the principle that citizens and entrepreneurs do not need to know or understand how the government is formed. In New Zealand for example, this has been reversed: all government services relating to a child in his/her first years of life have been brought together in 1 digital counter that citizens can visit. Depending on the precise needs of the citizen, he/she is forwarded to a service provider to submit an application or report.

This happens without the user noticing that he/she has already been referred to the back office of the affiliated government organisation.

For citizens who cannot or do not want to communicate digitally with the government, the Huis van het Kind in Flanders is the physical counterpart of the single digital counter. In the Huis van het Kind, parents can drop in without an appointment and get help for all matters concerning the child and parenthood: help with allowances, upbringing, schooling and care. In the Netherlands we do not have a comparable digital or physical counter; in most cases business is done with individual government organisations.



Flanders offers a guiding light in several respects. To enable integrated (digital) services, all the parties involved must be connected to the same platform so they can request the data of citizens and entrepreneurs if it is already available from the government. In Estonia there is even a law that actually prohibits the re-requesting of information if it is already known to the government: the only-once principle. Other good examples from Flanders (again) and Portugal show that the transfer of citizens' data from one government organisation to another can be arranged very well, even when it comes to privacy. Please note: these countries are bound by the same European privacy directive (GDPR) as the Netherlands. The Netherlands Court of Audit concluded in a recent [report](#) that the Dutch parliament should pay more attention to this when preparing legislation, and that public service agencies should ensure they have sufficient knowledge of this in-house.<sup>23</sup>

As soon as the one-stop shop is available and the underlying information management is in order, including data exchange, it becomes possible to proactively provide services. In that case, the initiative for applying for public services no longer lies with the citizen. By making smart use of the available data, collaborating government organisations can determine whether citizens and entrepreneurs have a right to, or possibly a need for, a certain public service. In some cases, this service – for example, a financial allowance – is made available to the citizen in question without any further action being necessary, in other cases the citizen's attention is merely drawn to the specific service. Actual examples of proactive services are allowances in Flanders and energy allowances in Portugal.

## INSPIRATION FROM ABROAD



### **In Flanders and Portugal, European privacy rules do not impede helping the people as much as possible**

In Flanders, data about individuals is combined by the government to automatically ensure they get an allowance. This means approximately 180,000 additional children are reached. This mainly concerns people who have difficulty with the application procedure and who are insufficiently familiar with government systems.

The Vlaams Agentschap Uitbetaling Groeipakket (VUTG) receives data from more than ten other organisations for this purpose. This includes personal information from the Rijksregister, income data from the Tax Administration and data about registration and attendance at school or childcare from the Flanders Ministry of Education and Training. Using this data, a basic amount is paid out every month for each child, automatically supplemented with one or more of the 8 allowances (school bonus, social allowance, support allowance, childcare allowance, toddler allowance, school allowance, orphan allowance, foster care allowance) to which the child is entitled.

The initial requirement is a decree (law) stating that it is possible to collect data. This is in line with the public interest as described in Article 6 of the GDPR, which makes it possible for residents' information to be used. In Flanders, protocols specifically explain which information organisations can collect and for what purpose. The Crossroads Bank (national) and the (regional) data sharing platform MAGDA provide VUTG information from other organisations, but only insofar as the information is relevant for the performance of the task. The Flemish Supervisory Commission for the Processing of Personal Data fulfilled an important role in advance by providing advice about the use and exchange of data.

In Portugal, the same method is used as in Flanders. There, a discount is automatically applied to people's energy bills if the available data shows they are entitled to it. In accordance with European legislation, the Portuguese Administrative Modernization Agency (AMA) has developed a method for data sharing between various government services. As a result, four times as many families have been identified as being entitled to this energy discount. More information about this case can be found online.

*Bron: Haagse Beek*

The most important proposal in the State of our public service delivery 2022 is to reduce the complexity of legislation and regulations. By offering a 1-stop shop for citizens and entrepreneurs (whether or not digitally), the complexity will automatically disappear from the view of users to a greater or lesser extent. The subsidy portal for entrepreneurs in Austria is a good example of how the use of available data and (responsible) artificial intelligence helps entrepreneurs find the subsidies to which they may be entitled. In order to make the policy feasible for public service providers as well, the simplification of legislation and regulations remains necessarily a high priority.

The question all this raises is: why does the Netherlands lag behind other countries in this respect? There has long been talk in the Netherlands too of 1 government, 1 counter, only-once, task-based working, putting the citizen first and so on. A lot of hard work is being done to achieve this in many areas, in all kinds of organisations, and by all kinds of people. At the [municipalities](#)<sup>24</sup> and from [Werk aan Uitvoering](#) (a public service improvement programme),<sup>25</sup> there are many initiatives underway to put more focus on the citizen.

The joint vision on services includes intentions about design based on the needs of citizens and task-based working. But based on both the international comparative study and the practical examples shown, we have the impression that the Netherlands is insufficiently able to systematically focus on the wishes and needs of citizens. The 1-stop idea has practically never become reality in the Netherlands, despite there being plans and experiments. In practice, we still mainly work from the logic of our own organisation, the laws and the rules. Compared to other countries we have a clear backlog to make up for.

At [rijksoverheid.nl](#)<sup>26</sup> and [overheid.nl](#)<sup>27</sup> there is a referral service for life events. One great functionality of this is that a step-by-step plan is generated via a number of questions. This service is not prominently visible anywhere though; neither on the sites themselves nor in the communication about them. In addition, the user must look up his/her own municipality in another application ([the Register van Overheidsorganisaties](#),<sup>28</sup> *Registry of Government Organisation*). This is information that could be immediately available when using DigiD.



## INSPIRATION FROM ABROAD

### Denmark shows the importance of a long-term strategy

Borger.dk is the personalised counter for the entire Danish government. Any Dane can go to Borger.dk and gain access and make corrections to personal data, applications and awards of (among other things) subsidies and permits, as well as pension and civil matters. Boundaries between governments and sectors are invisible on Borger.dk. The portal thus offers an excellent overview and ease of use. Residents of Denmark do not have to log in separately to dozens of portals; they can simply go to one counter for all communication with, and to gain services from, the government. The user is central to the design of the counter. The services at Borger.dk are grouped around life events such as “moving house”, “having a child” and “retirement”. In addition, the Danish version of DigiD (MitiD) is not limited to digital government services, it also used to gain access to many Danish companies and banks.

In the same way, Danes can go to the digital health portal, Sundhed.dk, for all their medical information. With an ageing population and a growing shortage of healthcare personnel, the Danish government is using e-health as one of the solutions to keep healthcare affordable and accessible to everyone.

Denmark is a global leader in digitisation and public digital services. The Danes have succeeded in this through a long-term digital strategy. Since 2001, a new long-term digitisation vision is published every four years. National, regional and local governments work together on it. The business community is also

becoming increasingly involved as well. The important principles are that everyone must be able to benefit from digitisation, that everyone must be able to participate, and that data use and digital solutions must be ethically responsible and transparent. This digital strategy is therefore an important compass for joint public investments.

Another success factor for public digital services in Denmark is that the implementation of digitisation is centrally assigned to one organisation. This so-called “Digitaliseringsstyrelsen” works closely with other governments. In the Netherlands, decentralisation and consensus are important for the pace and direction of digitisation in the public sector; however, in Denmark work is done according to transparent central control and clear frameworks. The Danish approach shows that consistent, cohesive and long-term policy contributes to services that are easily accessible and well-arranged for residents.

*Bron: Haagse Beek*

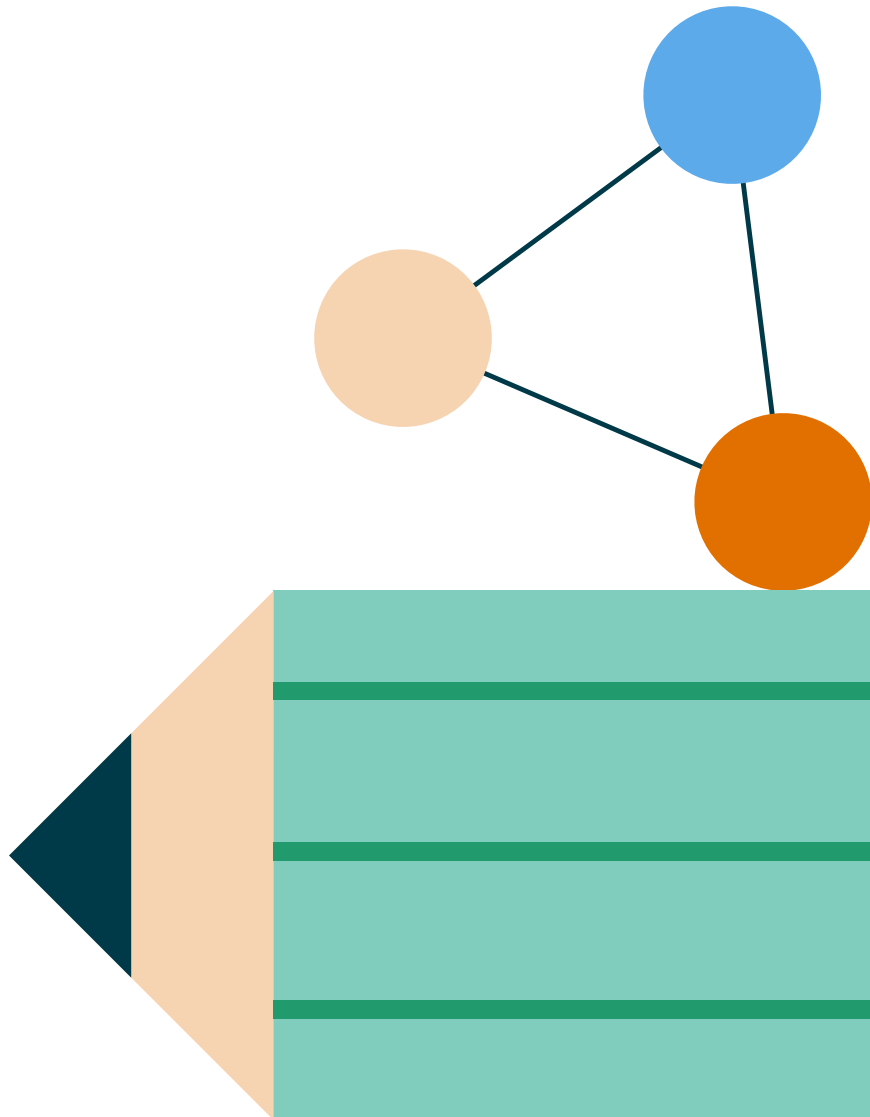


We don't have to travel far to find inspiration for this. We can rely on our neighbours in Flanders and Denmark. Denmark has a digitisation strategy that has been implemented consistently for decades, with the main principle being that the government must be accessible to citizens and entrepreneurs via a 1-stop counter, and with 1 central digitisation organisation for government that is in close contact with local authorities.

The Dutch strategy regarding public services and digitisation is much more non-committal. In the Netherlands, as in other countries, all kinds of central facilities for a digital government are offered (generic basic infrastructure, electronic identities, etc.), but the choice of whether to use these is often left to public service providers in the Netherlands.

Government Commissioner for Information Management Arre Zuurmond described this in 2021 as follows: "Important parts of the I-policy are fragmented, and there is little persistence in terms of investment. There is no government-wide, politically/administratively driven information society agenda."<sup>29</sup>

In addition to this, it is important to point out the importance of transparency and Estonia's exemplary role in this. In Estonia, citizens and entrepreneurs can see at any time what data the government has, who has access to it, and who has viewed, changed or supplemented it. This makes it much easier to repair errors in the stored information.





To illustrate  
**Tips from ChatGPT**

According to ChatGPT, this is the approach that leads to good government practices in member states of the European Union:

**1. Thinking and designing from the user's point of view**

Public services designed according to the needs and preferences of citizens and businesses, through experimentation, prototyping and co-creation, involving stakeholders in the design.

**2. Open data**

Governments share data with businesses, researchers and citizens, promote transparency and accountability, and support innovation and entrepreneurship.

**3. Digital services**

There is an increasing emphasis on digital public services, increasing the quality and accessibility of public services, and facilitating effective communication between citizens and authorities.

**4. Collaborative management**

Collaboration between the public, private and community sectors is promoted to address social and environmental challenges, including corruption, waste management and urban development.

**5. Impact assessment**

Rigorous impact assessments are used to evaluate initiatives, promote evidence-based policy making, and ensure accountability and quality.

**6. Capacity building**

The emphasis is on building the knowledge and skills of public service providers to leverage innovation and manage change.

# Points of departure for improvements

A number of recent studies commissioned by the State of our public service delivery offer possible explanations for the more systemic problems occurring in Dutch public services and prior policymaking. And they also offer starting points for improvements.

## External orientation must be improved

The Netherlands Scientific Council for Government Policy (WRR) has a project called The Expert Government. As part of this project, Paul 't Hart investigated what could be learnt from 74 successful foreign experiences.<sup>30</sup>

He points out that government organisations – with a great deal of substantive expertise and operational know-how in-house – are successful if they do not fall into the trap of thinking they know what is best for citizens and businesses.

In most cases, more responsive and inclusive strategies turn out to be more successful, with more attention being paid to the knowledge of others and the insights of citizens and businesses.

This is in line with the previously cited conclusions from the EIPA study that diversity in advice goes hand in hand with better public performance. The initial findings of research by Caelesta Braun<sup>31</sup> show that the Dutch national government mainly adopts a closed approach to co-operation between civil servants and external parties. The exchange of ideas often takes place by invitation and is not generally accessible. An important driving force of the national government is the desire to create support: people are therefore not simply focused on knowledge and making expertise available. The preliminary conclusion of the author is therefore that there is sub-optimal co-operation with social partners.



## Coordination could be better

Thomas Schillemans et al<sup>32</sup> conducted research in a number of European countries into different styles of accountability and control over remote public service agencies. In the Netherlands, this involved the relationship of national agencies and public service agencies with the ministries. A remarkable conclusion about the Dutch situation is that accountability takes place between the implementing body and a single department much more often than elsewhere. In these cases, the department is actually the owner of the implementing body and is referred to as the mother department. According to the authors of the study, this is the direct result of the specific relationship in the Netherlands between ministers and ministries: there is limited mutual coordination.

Frits van der Meer and Caspar van den Berg<sup>33</sup> also investigated the management of public service agencies by central governments in various European countries.

They mainly focused on the reforms that have taken place in recent decades. This study shows that the lack of integrality (compartmentalisation) of policy has been an important driver for reforms in the relationship between policy and implementation since the 1960s. They add that, while the emancipation of implementation was often the aim (a key point with the introduction of New Public Management in the late 1980s), not much has actually changed in the hierarchical relationship between departments and public service agencies. And this is despite all reform attempts to create equality. The dominance lay and still lies with the politically supported client, the ministries. This problem occurred in all the countries studied.



The authors also concluded that the performance of Dutch policy implementation can certainly not be called bad by international standards. This has already been demonstrated in this Special. Nevertheless, Van der Meer and Van den Berg argue that the Dutch policy implementation system suffers from overdue maintenance and needs more attention from a financial and administrative point of view. In a sense, the system is still living on the quality of the past, and that the quality is subject to erosion.

Finally, both international comparative research and good practice examples from other countries show that it is crucial for successful public services to take the living environment of citizens and entrepreneurs as a starting point and to be open to knowledge and expertise from outside the government system. In the relatively compartmentalised Dutch government landscape, this requires a change in thinking and organisation in order to make up for the backlog. To achieve this change, a joint initiative by politicians, policymakers and public service providers is essential. The good examples from other countries can form the inspiration for this.

Practice in other countries demonstrates that you can start on a small scale and implement improvements step by step. In New Zealand, the single digital counter for children has been developed in this way. A subsidy aid for entrepreneurs inspired by Austria can also be set up in the Netherlands. Other inspiring examples – the Flemish Groeipakket and the physical Huis van het Kind – require more preparation time. But why not start by listing the steps required to realise Dutch variants of them?

By analogy with New Zealand, a decade must be set aside to reform the Dutch system of taxes and allowances, including the underlying IT systems. Sometimes complexity and impracticability cannot be solved by simplifying what already exists, sometimes it is necessary to go back to the drawing board and do things fundamentally differently. That was also the conclusion of representatives from the Dutch practise during the [closing discussion](#)<sup>34</sup> about examples from abroad. We can break the pattern, together.

# Overview of practical examples from other countries



**ESTONIA & NEW ZEALAND**  
Leaders in digital counter functionality



**AUSTRIA**  
Reducing complexity for entrepreneurs in Austria



**NEW ZEALAND**  
New Zealand has replaced their tax authority systems to put the user first



**IRELAND**  
In Ireland, the inspectorate and the education field are mutually exclusive



**DENMARK**  
Denmark shows the importance of a long-term strategy



**ESTONIA & NEW ZEALAND**  
In Estonia and New Zealand, you can get what you need from the government in just a few clicks. How did they manage this?



**FIFTY COUNTRIES**  
In more than 50 countries, families lift themselves out of poverty through their own “life map”



**BELGIUM & PORTUGAL**  
In Flanders and Portugal, European privacy rules are no obstacle to offering people the best help possible over an extended period of time



**BELGIUM**  
Automatic allocation of allowances and personal contact with parents go hand in hand in Flanders



**COSTA RICA**  
Agriculture and biodiversity go hand in hand in Costa Rica



## PRACTICAL EXAMPLES ONLINE

**Practical examples can be found online at**

[haagsebeek.nl/innovatinggovernment](https://haagsebeek.nl/innovatinggovernment)

## CLOSING THOUGHTS

**What can the Netherlands learn from abroad about the good examples and their applicability in the Netherlands.**

[haagsebeek.nl/innovating-government/  
innovating-government-wat-leert-nederland-van-het-buitenland](https://haagsebeek.nl/innovating-government/innovating-government-wat-leert-nederland-van-het-buitenland)

# Register of footnotes

- 1 Haagse Beek, [haagsebeek.nl/innovating-government](https://haagsebeek.nl/innovating-government) (2023).
- 2 [haagsebeek.nl/innovating-government/innovating-government-wat-leert-nederland-van-het-buitenland](https://haagsebeek.nl/innovating-government/innovating-government-wat-leert-nederland-van-het-buitenland)
- 3 Vincent Homburg, Digital services in Estonia: a small and a big story, University of Tartu (June 2023) (*In Dutch*).  
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- 4 [staatvandeuitvoering.nl/nieuwsbericht/gesprek-met-tweede-kamer/](https://staatvandeuitvoering.nl/nieuwsbericht/gesprek-met-tweede-kamer/)
- 5 [kvk.nl/over-kvk/jaarverslag-2022/](https://kvk.nl/over-kvk/jaarverslag-2022/)
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- 7 [staatvandeuitvoering.nl/nieuwsbericht/belastingdienst-toont-daadkracht-in-stand-van-de-uitvoering/](https://staatvandeuitvoering.nl/nieuwsbericht/belastingdienst-toont-daadkracht-in-stand-van-de-uitvoering/)
- 8 The European Institute of Public Administration (EIPA), in collaboration with the Ministerie van BZK, is carrying out a multi-year research programme in which a broad spectrum of public performance in 35 countries is compared. It is an update of previous benchmark studies commissioned by the Ministry and concerns performance in the period 2007 to 2022. A sub-study will be published in 2023, which will also discuss the performance of public administration: Christoph Klika, Miranda Lovell-Prescod and Paolo Giovanetti, (2023) “Public Sector Performance Programme 2022 Sub-Study: an International Benchmarking study”, February 2023.
- 9 OECD, Trust Survey 2022, Building Trust to Reinforce Democracy (2022).  
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- 10 UN E-Government Survey 2022. Report without annexes.pdf (un.org) (2022).  
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- 11 eGovernment Benchmark 2022 | Shaping Europe’s digital future (europa.eu)  
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- 12 WEF: The Global Competitiveness Report (2019).
- 13 Additional analysis of the results of the OECD Trust survey by Paul Dekker, carried out recently for this Special, confirms this picture of variations in trust in government depending on income and, in particular, the level of education of respondents. Incidentally, the Netherlands is not unique in this regard. This relationship between income/education and trust in the government is the same in almost all the countries studied. Source: Research note from Paul Dekker: Social Differences in attitudes towards the government, Tilburg University, (April 2023) (*In Dutch*).  
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- 16 World Justice Project, The 2022 WJP Rule of Law Index, (2022). [worldjusticeproject.org/rule-of-law-index](https://worldjusticeproject.org/rule-of-law-index)
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- 18 Forum for Standardisation, Monitoring Open Standards 2022, The Hague, (November 2022) *(In Dutch)*.  
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- 19 [staatvandeuitvoering.nl/nieuwsbericht/factsheet-digitoegankelijkheid/](https://staatvandeuitvoering.nl/nieuwsbericht/factsheet-digitoegankelijkheid/)
- 20 The percentages relate to websites for which the accessibility statement is known. Information on accessibility is missing for some of the organisations.
- 21 EU, Flash Barometer 526, Understanding Europeans' views on reform needs, (May 2023).  
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## Colophon

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