



Government of the Netherlands

# National Action Plan on Human Rights 2020 Summary



## Colophon

The National Action Plan on Human Rights is a publication of the Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations.

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Protecting and promoting human rights requires ongoing effort. Through this National Action Plan on Human Rights the government therefore aims to boost human rights in the Netherlands. The standard of human rights protection is high in the Netherlands, but we need to constantly work to maintain and, where necessary, improve that standard.

In consultation with various civil society organisations the government chose to focus this plan on one key theme: universal access to public services. This ties in with the objective, set out in the coalition agreement, to make the Netherlands as a strong country even better for everyone, including people who feel that government is no longer there for them. A key principle at the heart of this new Action Plan is that human rights are applicable to every human being. To this end, the various public services designed to fulfil these human rights should be accessible to all the people for whom they are intended. Examples include financial support schemes in the area of healthcare and housing, student grants, debt counselling and employment services for people who have lost their jobs.

Human rights have a bearing on practically all aspects of government action. To ensure these rights for individual members of the public, the government has incorporated them into policy, rules and procedures. The second part of this Action Plan provides an overview of the existing system and current policy regarding human rights, describes the national and international background and offers an insight into the role of a wide range of stakeholders and supervisory bodies.



## Inclusion: a society that embraces all people

To enable everyone to participate in society, the government tries to keep the threshold to public services as low as possible in practice. To this end, it strives to make services easy for people to find, so that everyone knows where they can get support and assistance. Furthermore, the government works on more uniform communication, which also requires providing members of the public with a single point of contact.

### **Accessible points of contact**

Everyone has the right of access to information and it is up to the government to ensure this is possible. The more complex a public service is, the greater the investment required for effective information and communication. In addition, information must be updated regularly to take account of new developments and requirements. A number of the actions described in this plan aim to improve and increase the number of locations where people can get information about topics like Digital Government.

### **People with disabilities**

To make our society more inclusive, government and a great many civil society organisations are working jointly to implement the UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities. The Association of Netherlands Municipalities (VNG), for instance, aims for 75% of municipalities to have achieved or work on the development of a local inclusion agenda by 2021. Current policy on special education will be reviewed in the first half of 2020. Every child is entitled to the best possible conditions for development, also if that requires giving the child extra support.

### **Digital inclusion**

Society is quickly becoming more digital. Online access is becoming the norm for more and more public services. This raises concerns about digital inclusion, because these services must still be accessible for people with limited digital skills, for example when people are functionally illiterate. A duty of care to support people in their dealings with the government will be added to the General Administrative Law Act (AWB). Sometimes people need to appoint someone to act on their behalf in order to gain access to services. The government wants this to be possible by issuing a digital authorisation.

### **Access to the housing market**

Lack of housing and difficulty accessing the housing market can be barriers to an inclusive society. The government is working to safeguard affordable rental housing and improve its distribution. To tackle the discrepancy between household income and rent paid ('scheefwonen'), it will allow income-related rent increases. And in 2020 the current income ceiling for rent benefit will be abolished, so that people with higher incomes may also be eligible for this benefit. The government will also introduce a differentiated income ceiling to determine eligibility for social housing based on household type. Finally, various measures will be taken to combat housing discrimination.

### **Homeless people**

The number of homeless people in the Netherlands has increased in recent years. The government acknowledges that this is a major human rights issue and is working with stakeholders to tackle the issue. In autumn 2019 it will present a plan aimed at significantly reducing homelessness in the years to come. More assisted living locations will be created to reduce the amount of time that people spend in homeless shelters. Eligibility for certain public services is conditional upon registration in the Personal Records Database. To ensure homeless people can access these services, the Personal Records Database Act will be amended, making the obligation for municipalities to register people under a correspondence address if they do not have a home address more clear.



## Integrated approach: when the system stalls

The complexity of the system of public services should never cause people to get shut out. The government wants to break down barriers between the various public services by getting them to work together more closely. Already, a number of programmes in the social domain take an integrated approach, looking at complex systems as a whole. In addition, new and existing policy should be designed from the citizen's perspective, instead of focusing on the system.

### **Decentralisation**

Decentralisation of services offers room for tailor-made solutions. At the same time, it is important that access to public services always meet certain minimum standards. In 2020 a human rights platform for municipalities will be set up for the purpose of bringing local strategies and other initiatives together, sharing best practices and clarifying minimum standards for the local level. In the context of decentralisation, the government will take measures enabling an integrated approach to specific issues like young people with a labour market or healthcare disadvantage.

### **Multiple problems**

People with multiple problems often have to deal with several different organisations and public services. Uncertainty about who does what and who pays for what can stand in the way of solutions. Several studies and pilot projects are currently being carried out into how access to public services could be improved for this specific target group. For instance, three regions will test a new way of dealing with criminal cases where multiple problems are at play. At the Erasmus University research is carried out into management and coordination in cases involving individuals with multiple problems. The problems of young people with complex care needs will be addressed by a bill, to be presented in 2020, that will allow a breakthrough in cases where cooperation between schools and youth care stalls.

### **People with debts**

It can be difficult for people with debts to gain access to the services they need. This is necessary, however, to ensure their right to an adequate standard of living. To this end, the government is implementing a Broad Action Plan on Debt. The Municipal Debt Assistance Act will be amended to facilitate early identification of debt problems. The Central Judicial Collection Agency (CJIB) is also testing data analysis methods to identify signs of debt build-up early on. To boost service delivery by volunteer organisations in this area, a grant has been awarded for the establishment of a national network of volunteer projects. Finally, the government is aiming for the Attachment-exempt Amount (Simplification) Act to come into force in the short term. The attachment-exempt amount is the minimum income that people must be left with so that they are able to support themselves ('essential costs of living'). Bailiffs may not include this amount in any attachment of earnings order.

### **Coordinators and mentors**

The government aims to strengthen the roles of coordinators and mentors who can help people find the way to the services they need. Youth mentoring, like the Youth Initiated Mentoring (YIM) scheme, is provided in various parts of the Netherlands. Research is being conducted into the long-term effects of youth mentoring. Extra support and counselling will be made available to prevent school dropout. Funding is available for appropriate education counsellors, who give independent advice to special needs pupils who need assistance and their parents. Finally, the frontrunners' programme that helps municipalities provide client support under the Social Support Act and the Chronic Care Act will be continued in 2020.

### **The citizen's perspective as guiding principle**

The government agrees that the starting point in drafting and implementing policy and legislation should be the question of what individuals need – the citizen's perspective ('burgerperspectief'). This can help improve access to public services for members of the public, as the end users of these services. To that end, the government has started a campaign on using plain language ('Direct Duidelijk'), aimed at Dutch public authorities. Civil servants are also encouraged to use guidelines on drafting good-quality policy and legislation.



## Participation and protection: asserting your rights

Participation and protection are key aspects of access. Public bodies should adapt their services to the needs of the people for whom they are intended. This can take shape for example through participation procedures at the design and decision-making stages for public services, in which members of the public are invited to give their opinions. But there are also other easily accessible ways to enable people to make suggestions for improvements. A person does not always need to go to court to assert their rights. People need to know where they should lodge their complaint and they must have faith in the procedure that follows. The government recognises that access to justice begins with access to proper information, advice and counselling.

### **Participation in decision-making procedures**

The government underlines the importance of public participation in decisions that affect their interests. Therefore, it will establish conditions that public participation procedures must meet. Among other things, the government wants to expand the reach of internet consultation on legislative proposals. The government will also strengthen citizenship education, which teaches pupils how society works, what their own rights are and that they

should respect the rights of others. A youth parliament will be established in 2020 to increase young people's participation in political decision-making. Finally, the democracy festival, held for the first time in 2019, will become an annual event where people can get together in an informal setting to talk about societal issues.

### **Reporting and handling complaints**

There are various contact points where people can lodge a complaint about how they have been treated by government institutions. Anyone is entitled to lodge a complaint and the organisation that the complaint concerns is responsible for ensuring it is dealt with properly. The government will help people who find themselves stuck in the system when dealing with two or more public institutions. To simplify dispute resolution in the social domain, a manual is available on combining the procedures for lodging an objection against a municipal decision and for lodging a complaint about a service provider. Various ministries are studying whether an integrated procedure for objections and complaints could be laid down in law. The network of anti-discrimination services will be maintained and reinforced to enable victims of discrimination to be able to submit a complaint in their own municipality.

### **Access to justice**

Anyone seeking justice in the Netherlands wants to meet with as few obstacles as possible. Where necessary, they should be given assistance in this respect. When the system of subsidised legal aid is revised – by the end of 2024 – everyone should have both digital and physical access to a clear range of affordable services, such as an online tool that gives user-friendly, reliable and expert advice to those seeking justice, fewer unnecessary proceedings in administrative courts of law and a simpler, more user-friendly system for collecting payments through the courts.



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