



Rijksoverheid

# THE PRINCIPLES

OF GOVERNMENT COMMUNICATION

# **THE PRINCIPLES OF GOVERNMENT COMMUNICATION**

# Introduction

In practice, government communication is subject to a combination of both written and unwritten rules. These rules arise through the contribution of various national commissions and in consultation with parliament. The right of public access to information, as laid down in the Constitution and the Government Information (Public Access) Act, is the primary cornerstone of government communication policy.

The unwritten rules are rooted in a commitment to maintaining good democratic relations. They are a natural result of our political system (government vs. opposition) and the relationship between the government and the public, as it is conceived in the Netherlands. These principles are fundamental, enduring criteria that are meant to serve as a guide for assessing specific communication issues in specific situations. The criteria, which are formulated in broad, general terms, indicate the parameters within which government communication should take place. This is not simply a 'one size fits all' scenario: every activity can – and should – be judged on its own merits, in the light of prevailing circumstances.

The principles of government communication are used by ministries and the Information Council to assess proposed communication projects, such as media campaigns using the broadcasting slot allotted to central government. They apply to public information initiatives, press briefings and official communication on behalf of members of the government.

It is up to parliament, in its capacity as an oversight body, to decide if a line has been crossed in a particular case. Reactions on the part of the media and the public often play a role in helping parliament to arrive at such a decision. If there are indications that a line is in danger of being crossed, it is up to the relevant minister or state secretary to determine this. To that end, he or she is authorised to confer with the rest of the government, if necessary.

Upholding these principles ensures that the public has broad trust in official statements and other central government communication.

Communication on the part of local and provincial authorities should be subject to a similar approach, tailored to their own position in our political system.

# 1. THE RIGHT TO COMMUNICATION

**The principal aim of central government communication is to enable members of the public to exercise their right to communicate with and receive information from central government and to support a well-functioning democracy.**

- > When we refer to the 'right to communication', we are using the expression informally to refer to a fundamental principle of government communication, not to an explicit statutory right. The right of public access to information, which is enshrined in both article 110 of the Constitution and the Government Information (Public Access) Act, is the point of departure for government communication.
- > Actively disseminating official information is one of the key tasks of government communication.
- > In terms of the public, the purpose of government communication is to enable people to optimally fulfil their role as citizens, Dutch nationals and consumers.
- > In addition to the above, the purpose of government communication is also to influence the formation, implementation and evaluation of policy.

## 2. RECOGNISABLE

**Regardless of the channel or medium being used, central government is always recognisable as a participating party in communication, whether as its source (or one of its sources) and/or as an interested party or stakeholder.**

> In order to avoid engaging in veiled influencing, government communication should, at all times, be labelled as such. Clarity about the source of communication fosters trust and transparency, and the public has a right to this information.

### 3. GOVERNMENT COMMUNICATION IS ABOUT POLICY AND ORGANISATION

**Central government communication always deals with the substance of policy, and in that regard, with the functioning of government itself. Members of the government should exercise caution when using their own media channels and third-party products to which the government contributes financially. They should never appear in paid mass media campaigns, such as television ads.**

- > Government communication should be about policy and organisation, not about crafting the personal image of ministers, state secretaries or other government officials. The emphasis is on publicising and clarifying. This is one of the reasons that ministers and state secretaries are not permitted to appear in paid mass media campaigns. Members of the government are expected to be judicious in the use of their own media channels. Any activities that deviate from this rule are reviewed in advance by the Information Council.
- > Even when the government communicates through its own media – including its own periodicals – it must still ensure that the selected medium does not acquire overtones that are contrary to the principles of government communication. This does not alter the fact that ministers and state secretaries should be able to function as the ‘face’ of their respective organisations.

## 4. ACTIVE COMMUNICATION

**The government actively explains its policy and the considerations underlying it to the broadest possible audience. It is, in principle, authorised to use all means of communication at its disposal to do this.**

- > In order to enable citizens to exercise their rights and perform the duties required by a given policy, the government must actively ensure that the relevant information reaches the members of the public for whom it is intended. This is particularly true when trying to reach less accessible target groups; they may require differentiated use of multiple media instruments.
- > Communication is a policy instrument, just like grants and legislation are. Even when a given policy is still in the planning stages, it is necessary to reflect on how it will eventually be communicated.

## 5. COMMUNICATION REFLECTS POLICY PHASE

**In its communication and public information campaigns, central government always indicates the policy phase to which the information relates. The nature, content, tone and scope of the communication is tailored to the phase in question. If necessary, central government will also mention the capacity in which it is acting and what it wants the public to do. Before a policy has been approved by parliament, communication is factual in nature and straightforward in tone. This applies not only to the specific measures that are being proposed, but also to the underlying background and motives.**

- > In the interest of effective, democratic governance, the provision of information on the part of the government, regardless of the policy phase, should be comprehensive, timely, tailored to the audience in question and relevant.
- > Communication must also mention the status of the information within the policy process, for example: is it an initial orientation, a proposal or a decree.
- > There are strict requirements in place for state-financed communication about policy that has yet to be adopted by parliament. The communication must be factual and straightforward and not focus on the minister or state secretary in question. The phase of the policy process must be clearly stated and the communication must be proportional, which is to say that it cannot be more extensive than that of other parties with a stake in the decision-making process.
- > When announcing policy proposals, it is crucial that content be disseminated not only through formal channels but also in forms that are more accessible to the public (e.g. simplified versions of policy documents) – albeit without explicitly promoting the policy in question. A more promotional tone is, however, permitted when it comes to encouraging public participation in consultations and interactive policy formation.

## 6. INTERACTIVE POLICY PREPARATION

**The government will indicate at an early stage if the public is to be involved in the preparation of plans and measures, and if so, in what capacity. It will also be clear about what will be done with the outcomes of such interactive policymaking processes.**

- > In principle, members of the public must be given the opportunity to express their opinion on every proposed policy at an early stage in the process. It must be clear in all cases how public input fits into the overall decision-making process and what will be done with the outcomes.
- > Especially in the case of far-reaching issues, members of the public are entitled to know at an early stage how their contribution will be ensured.

## 7. AVAILABLE AND RESPONSIVE

**Central government ensures it is available to all citizens who wish to get in contact. Requests for information, complaints and so on will receive a swift and appropriate response. Individuals are free to decide for themselves which channel they would like use in order to communicate with the government.**

- > Having a right to communication implies that the government is available and responsive. 'Responsive' means that the government deals swiftly and appropriately with requests, complaints, and so on from the public. By monitoring its own performance, comparing it to that of other organisations and publishing the results, the government strives to improve its availability and responsiveness.
- > What is more, the right to communication is independent of technology: individual members of the public have the ability to choose the channel through which they would prefer to communicate with the government.

## 8. ADEQUATE AND ACCURATE

**Central government communication is accurate and contains enough information to allow interested parties and stakeholders to form their own opinions about current and future policy.**

- > In the interest of effective, democratic governance, the provision of information on the part of the government should be comprehensive, timely, tailored to the audience in question and relevant.
- > It is never permitted to omit, over-accentuate or wrongly report facts or arguments with a view to inducing the target audience to arrive at a different opinion about the matter in question.

## 9. ACCESSIBLE, COMPREHENSIBLE AND APPROPRIATE

**In terms of the technology employed and the substance of the message, government communication should be sufficiently accessible, comprehensible, timely and tailored to its intended audience. The end and the means should always be consistent with each other.**

> In view of differences between members of the public, messages should be tailored to their target audience wherever possible and necessary. The same message can be conveyed in various ways and through various channels. The key is to find an optimal mix of media and tones that reflects the experiences of the public. By linking the substance of the message and the channel used to convey it to specific target groups, the government has a much better chance of reaching individual citizens.

## 10. PROPORTIONALITY

**In its communication, central government observes the principle of proportionality when dealing with topics that are controversial and/or the subject of public debate. It also does this in the case of policy that has not yet been adopted by parliament. In such instances, communication should not be more extensive than that of other parties in civil society seeking to get their message out and should not interfere with the operation of independent media.**

- > In all phases of the policy process, the government seeks to avoid 'overkill' with respect to its communication. In principle, the government avoids releasing information through so many types of channels that it could lead to an imbalance with regard to the financial or other capabilities of other parties. This has long been a key condition for maintaining good democratic relations within the Netherlands.
- > Once a given policy has been approved by parliament, the government is free to communicate about that policy as much as it deems necessary, provided it stays within the bounds of the law and spends the relevant state funds in an efficient manner.

## 11. NO INVOLVEMENT IN PARTY POLITICS

**Central government communication should be kept separate from the interests of political parties. That said, situations may conceivably arise where ministers or state secretaries may be accompanied by government spokespersons at party political events.**

- > Both the public and the media often have difficulty distinguishing between a politician as a member of the government and a politician as a member of a party. In their capacity as a party member, politicians have to deal with many issues for which they are also responsible in government. It may therefore be advisable for a member of the government to be accompanied on certain occasions by a government spokesperson. In such cases, strict agreements must be made between government spokespersons and party spokespersons about communication duties, with the relevant responsibilities clearly identified.
- > Political assistants are not seconded to communication departments and do not perform any official communication activities.





Government communication observes a number of principles, which are the outcome of contributions of various national commissions and subsequent internal discussions in the Information Council. A key element of these principles is the right of public access to information, which is enshrined in both article 110 of the Constitution and the Government Information (Public Access) Act.

This text is published by central government.

The Government Information Service is responsible for editing this publication.

March 2017

Publication no. 102315