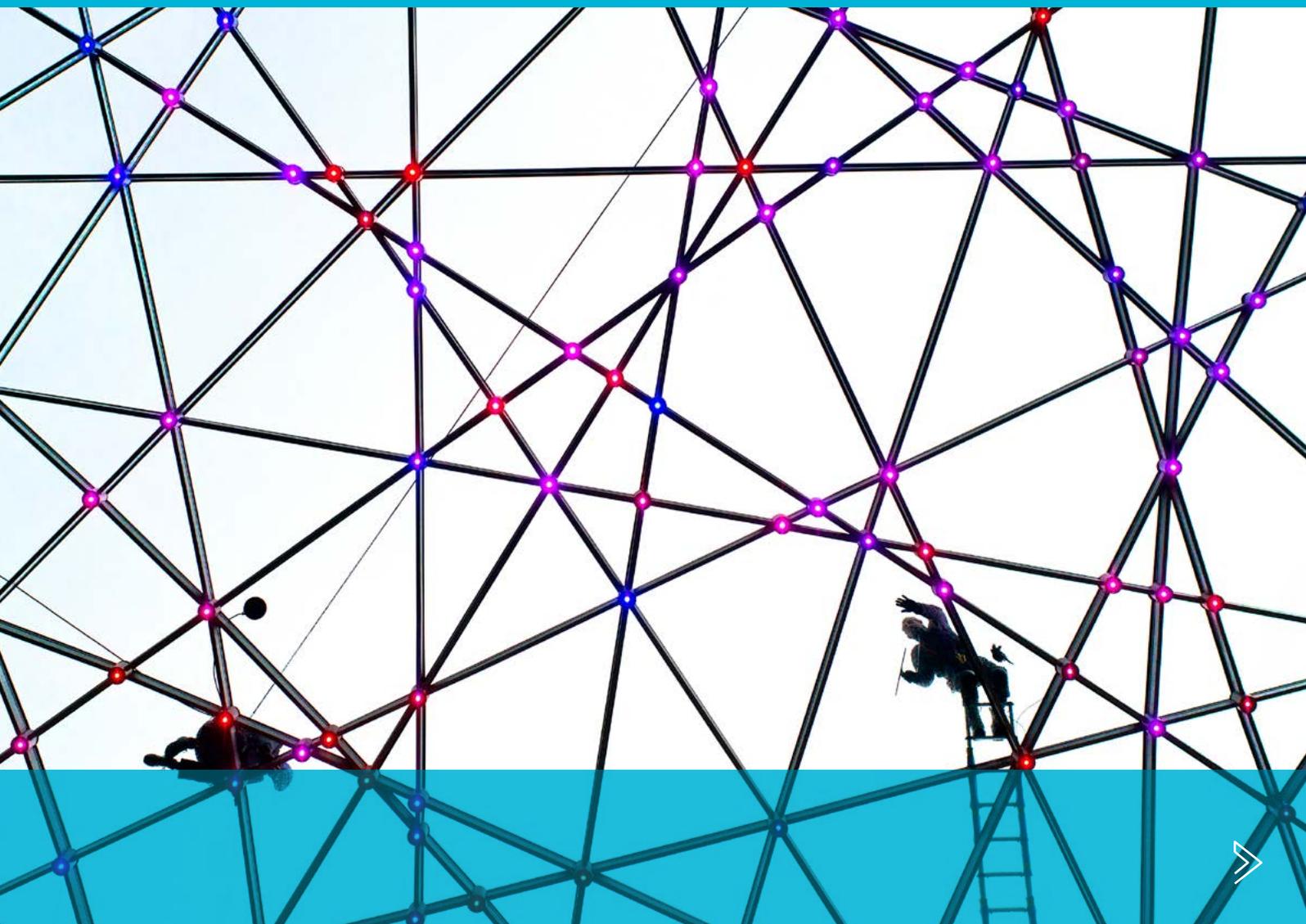




TRUST BASED ON UNDERSTANDING

Netherlands Court of Audit Strategy for 2016-2020



MISSION:

to help improve the performance and operation of central government and the institutions associated with it

'The Netherlands Court of Audit is responsible for auditing government revenue and expenditure.'
(article 76 of the Dutch Constitution).

'The government reports to parliament on its revenue and expenditure in accordance with the statutory provisions. The accounts are presented to parliament once they have been approved by the Netherlands Court of Audit.' (article 105 (3))

'The object of the Netherlands Court of Audit is to audit and improve the regularity, efficiency, effectiveness and integrity of central government and the institutions associated with it. The Court also audits compliance with the Netherlands' international obligations. It passes on its audit findings, as well as its accumulated experience, to the government, parliament and those responsible for managing the entities it audits.'

Our traditional statutory task is, every year, to audit the regularity of the government's financial management and to issue an unqualified opinion on the central government accounts. To this end, we seek to establish whether the government has received and spent public funds (representing an annual figure of around €260 billion) properly and as agreed.

We also have a statutory responsibility to audit the effectiveness and efficiency of government policy. The question here is: have central government and the institutions associated with it achieved their policy objectives and, if so, have they done so in an efficient manner? In other words, we seek to ascertain whether the government has acted sensibly and economically in spending its money and whether citizens have had value for money.

To this end, we have been accorded a constitutional status as an independent body, i.e. operating independently of government and parliament. Our only objective is to ensure that the public administration operates effectively and meets high ethical standards. The questions of how the public administration is organised and exactly what products and services it is required to deliver is a political decision. Once this decision has been taken, it is our job to demonstrate, in an impartial manner, how the government is actually performing in practice and what improvements could be made, irrespective of the composition of parliament and the government. Thus, we help to uphold and improve the performance and operation of the government and the institutions associated with it.

In doing so, we also wish to strengthen public confidence in the government. After all, the presence of an effectively operating government that exercises due care in its use of public money and deals efficiently and effectively with social issues is a prerequisite for public confidence in the operation of democracy.



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Trust based on understanding

However much the world around us changes, the basic principle remains the same: public funds need to be subject to public scrutiny. The general public must be confident that the government takes care that public money is spent properly, carefully and economically. Public goods and services must be up to standard and must be organised in accordance with the relevant agreements.

We are now seeing a rapid process of change in the way in which society and the executive are organised. Government needs to take on a range of challenges that are likely to have a profound impact on society at large. The examples include an ageing population, the aftermath of the financial crisis, the international security situation and the problem of climate change. These are not simply Dutch problems. They are issues the solution of which requires international cooperation and hence international agreements. At the same time, the way in which the country is governed is also on the move: all sorts of responsibilities are being delegated to provincial councils and local authorities (certain social services being a recent example) or have been transferred to autonomous bodies such as ProRail or the UWV benefits agency, over which ministries do not have direct control.

What we are seeing is that the way in which public services are structured and funded is growing increasingly diffuse and complex. That often makes it difficult to track each euro from the taxpayer to the point of delivery, and hence to reach a judgement on the standard of public service provision. In some cases, it is not even clear 'who' is responsible for providing the service in question, let alone what its social impact and effects are. In other words, there are shortcomings in the way in which government reports on the spending of public funds and these undermine public confidence. The overriding need in this context is to foster understanding and to produce a modern form

of democratic reporting that is in keeping with the principle that public account should always be given for the spending of public funds.

This is the setting in which we operate. Our job is to ascertain whether the government acts sensibly and economically in spending its money and whether citizens get value for their money. Our aim at all times is to enhance the transparency of public money flows, thus promoting a democratic form of reporting on the collection and spending of tax revenue and other government income. This is another purpose of our audits. And thus we seek to create understanding, which forms the basis for public confidence. In this climate of reorganisation and systemic change, our focus remains firmly fixed on closely tracking public money flows. In doing so, we concentrate on issues that are of great public interest, that entail certain risks to public interests and that represent a large monetary value.

We support every attempt to modernise the channels for public accountability. New technology can help to create more openness and ease the bureaucratic burden. We raise issues and encourage public debate wherever possible and necessary.

We have always sought to achieve the highest standards of quality, which is why we invest in new audit techniques and make maximum use of the opportunities offered by modern technology. Both parliament and society at large must be able to rely on our impartiality at all times. Here too, understanding ultimately forms the basis for trust. And trust in turn lays the foundations for an effective democratic state under the rule of law.

The Hague, March 2016

Arno Visser, President
Kees Vendrik, Board member
Francine Giskes, Board member

1

A CHANGING ENVIRONMENT



The Netherlands Court of Audit is responsible for auditing the way in which public funds are collected and spent. Our mission is and remains: to ascertain whether the government has spent its money sensibly and economically and whether citizens have had value for their money.

This is a permanent aspect of the democratic state under the rule of law that was founded 200 years ago. Our audits make a valuable contribution to good governance by central government. It's all about power and countervailing power. We are witnessing constant changes both in the locus of administrative decision-making and in the level at which public services and activities are organised. This trend is reflected by the decentralisation of tasks, policy reforms, reorganisations of government departments and agencies, and the increasingly prominent role played by European institutions. This process of transformation and the changes it has triggered are also affecting our own work.

Blurred borders

The world is getting smaller and smaller. Information technology is creating easy access to words, images and sounds from all over the world and better transport facilities mean that physical goods can be moved both more quickly and over greater distances than was the case in the past. More and more countries are joining forces, signing agreements regulating a growing number of common concerns. The member states of the European Union have formed a single internal market with shared values, based on the free movement of people, capital and goods. Under the Schengen Treaty, a number of European countries agreed to limit border controls to the external borders of the treaty area, so that customs procedures would no longer be needed at the internal borders between the countries concerned. Countries are signing international treaties under which they pledge to harmonise their legislation, for example in order to deal with tax avoidance by multinationals or so as to combat the causes and effects of climate change.

Although the Dutch Constitution dates back to the 19th century, there are very few areas in which the concept of national sovereignty may be said to have retained its original, 19th-century meaning. The physical borders of the Netherlands may remain the same, but the boundaries between the issues on which the Dutch are free to decide themselves and the issues that are decided (in part) for them by others have shifted beyond recognition. Today, in the 21st century, the Netherlands is still a decentralised unitary state whose national legislature defines and lays down the nature of the unity. At the same time, the bandwidth in which legislature operates is restricted by a growing body of international rules. Capital has little truck with national borders. Climate change is by definition a supranational issue. More and more people are seeking their fortunes beyond the borders of their home countries. The European Commission exerts a direct influence over the national budgetary policy. International agreements made in treaties have a direct impact on powers that used to fall within the remit of national governments. The European Central Bank supervises the major EU banks. An agreement was reached in Paris in December 2015

on a solution to the problem of climate change; this is no vague promise but a binding agreement that the signatories are obliged to translate into national policies.

All this has a bearing on organisations such as the Netherlands Court of Audit that owe their existence to national sovereignty and which are required to operate within the boundaries of that same sovereignty.

Conflict between public services and funding base

The recent financial, economic and euro crises have had a dramatic impact on Dutch government finances. The political response to these crises has been to announce massive spending cuts, tax rises and a raft of policy and organisational reforms. Government and parliament alike face the following challenge in the coming years: making sure that public services have a secure funding base in the long term, while ensuring that the same public services continue to meet the standard demanded by parliament. The long-term balance of revenue and expenditure remains under pressure. Despite the huge effort that has been made to guarantee the long-term sustainability of public finances, government and parliament need to remain alert so that any new risks can be addressed in good time.

There is a conflict between the pressure to find quick solutions to financial and other problems on the one hand, and the desire to ensure that any decisions take account of long-term financial and social impacts on the other. Due to the lack of time for resolving operational problems, it is often impossible to predict their effects on other policy areas or on issues that are difficult to express in monetary terms. This factor, too, affects our work as the auditor of public money flows.

Opportunities offered by technology

Technological advances, particularly in relation to communication and information (from open data to the 'Internet of Things'), are creating all sorts of new opportunities for citizens, businesses and government organisations. Technology is the driving force behind new forms of organisations, new services and new analytical methods. Technology facilitates and speeds up contacts between citizens and government, and also between government organisations themselves. It's becoming easier to access information and to share it with others. There are better opportunities for coordinating government activities and harmonising the work of different government bodies, thus boosting the effectiveness of the government as a whole and enabling a more accurate assessment to be made of the impact of government action.

While central government uses new and innovative technologies, it still finds it difficult to successfully adopt such technologies and to properly manage their cost and impact. At the same time, there is also a tendency sometimes to overestimate the opportunities afforded by technology and thus to expect IT to deliver too much, too soon.

New technologies raise new problems, in connection with security or privacy, for example. Technological innovations can change the structure of social relations, thus posing new challenges to the government. For example, the spread of automation and robotics has raised new problems in relation to the job market and education, while organisational and commercial ‘game changers’ built on new technologies are leading to rapid change in industries that have traditionally been bastions of stability. These trends are also affecting the choices we make.

A changing government sector

There is a growing tendency to regard reorganisation as the best way of solving financial and social problems. This includes disseminating responsibilities among lower levels of government, i.e. provincial councils and local authorities, as recently happened with social policy. More and more policies are being developed, implemented and funded in partnerships between different administrative strata and in networks or chains of private, public and semi-public organisations. At the same time as this is going on, we are also seeing a process of upsizing as the European Union and other international organisations steadily gain more influence over Dutch law-making. With the three traditional layers of public administration more closely interlinked than ever before in the delivery and funding of public services, it is now much more difficult to view them as separate, strictly autonomous administrative levels. This is another hindrance to members of parliament and audit offices in their quest to exert democratic control and extract political accountability from these administrative strata.

These constant reorganisations have turned ‘the government’ into a complex structure of organisations and funding techniques, with no consistently clear division of roles and responsibilities and with frequently blurred boundaries between public and private money flows. Practical experience has taught us that this situation may pose a risk to the effective and efficient delivery of public services and to the regularity of public spending. It also makes it more difficult for parliament to exercise its right to approve and amend budgetary policy. Tracking the flow of money from the Treasury to citizens is often no easy task. It also makes it harder to know exactly who is accountable for what, let alone to measure the results and impacts of government policies. For the general public, the situation is even more opaque. In other words, there are shortcomings in the way in which the government reports on the spending of public money. This has an impact on our work.

2

DELIVERING VALUE



2.1 To be continued: audits with added value

In-depth audits of the operation and effectiveness of government bodies and associated entities form the heart of our work. We make recommendations for improvements, based on our impartial judgement. Our job is to help find an answer to the question of public accountability. In doing so, we make certain choices, in the context of our desire to be an agile organisation that is able to respond to topical issues. We update and publish our audit agenda twice a year.

As in previous years, our audit programme for the coming years centres on policy fields and topics which we believe are likely to prove sources of risks or problems that could have relevant financial or social consequences. This applies both to our annual regularity audit of the annual report, which involves auditing the central government's accounts and operational management and presenting the findings to the Dutch House of Representatives on the third Wednesday in May (known as 'Accountability Day'), and to our performance audits.

Our aim is to focus on those areas in which we can offer the greatest added value. This may be because we are the only organisation capable of investigating the subject in question – either due to our statutory powers or because of our specific knowledge and expertise – or simply because no one else does it. But it may also be because of the added value that is inherent to a set of impartial, independent eyes. Based on the opportunity for adding value, we decide whether to perform a particular audit, and assess the best way of doing so, of reporting our audit findings and communicating these to the outside world.

The many changes in the way in which government is organised are also reflected both by the growing use of private-law executive agencies and by the tendency to form partnerships with the private sector. Not surprisingly therefore, members of parliament are taking a closer interest in topics such as privatisations and reorganisations and their consequences for democratic checks and balances in relation to powers, money flows and information. This remains a topical issue to which we will continue to pay attention. It will continue to form an aspect of our audits in all fields of policy.

2.2 To be expanded: modern and adequate reporting

Every year on the third Wednesday in May, we present our audit reports on the ministries' annual reports and our unqualified opinion on the central government accounts to the Dutch House of Representatives. These reports form the basis on which both houses of the Dutch parliament, i.e. the Senate (the Upper House) and the House of Representatives (the Lower House), can then discharge ministers from their responsibility for the financial management of their ministries. Our regularity audits over the past years have consistently shown that the regularity rating of government expenditure is high, viz. over 99%. This is a tremendous achievement and is by no means self-evident, whether viewed from a historical perspective or in an international context. It means that the government collects and spends its revenue in accordance with the rules and with the agreements made with parliament. This is one of the cornerstones of public confidence in the government.

The government may do 'the right things', but does it 'do things right?' Of course, a high standard of regularity is absolutely vital. But it doesn't say much about the social effects of government policy, whether intended or actually produced in practice. Moreover, an external opinion on the regularity of government expenditure may be of limited value if the government has transferred certain budgets to local authorities or schools, for example. Where this is the case, the authorities or schools in question are then largely free to decide for themselves how public funds are to be spent. In this situation, classifying government expenditure as 'regular' may mean no more than that the correct amount has been transferred to the correct account belonging to a local authority, school or autonomous administrative authority. But what actually happens to the money? We can answer this question only by looking beyond the central government accounts.

At the same time, simply saying that money has 'not been spent in a regular fashion' is not always an accurate reflection of the actual situation. One possibility is that rules and instructions are unnecessarily complex and excessive bureaucracy has led to a mistake being made. That's also something we want to know and explain.

That's why we are planning to do more to explain our opinion on the regularity of government spending. Our ambitions for our regularity audits in the years ahead are as follows:

- continue to stress the importance of a high standard of regularity and clear regulations;
- provide more information about major operational issues in the public sector;
- provide more information about the social impact of government policy.

We want to perform both more and more in-depth audits in order to paint a clearer picture of the impact of government policy on the streets and on the shop floor. We want to track down any inefficiencies in policy rules and operational management and identify opportunities for improvements. To this end, we will select a number of topical government spending themes every year, and trace each money flow to its final destination, linking the spending to the results achieved. We will also select a number of policy reviews and topics every year, which we will then subject to critical scrutiny.

2.3 Ongoing audit plans

We selected a number of government-wide topics in the previous strategy period that will continue to apply in the forthcoming period. Some of these, such as HR policy, IT and property management, have had such a big impact on the operation and effectiveness of the government in recent years that they require special consideration. Although we will be continuing our audits of these topics, our ultimate aim is to integrate them with our routine regularity audits in the future.

HR policy

The quality of the government's performance and operation hinges on the quality of its staff. We have expressed concerns in recent years about the absence of any strategic vision for HR policy and have found that, in some cases, the government lacks vital specialist expertise. For this reason, we will continue to monitor the government's HR strategy in the years to come, both by performing individual audits and as part of our regularity audits.

IT

If the government uses, manages and applies IT in an inadequate manner, this creates risks to the efficiency and the effectiveness of its operational management, and also poses a threat to its reliability and security. Examples of IT-related problems include the use of IT services by the police and criminal justice system as a whole, the IT support for the launch of the personal care budget, and the computer systems used by different government bodies as a mean of exchanging personal data on citizens. We will continue to examine IT-related problems, in both our annual regularity audits and separate audits.

Property management

Enormous amounts of public money are spent on the construction and maintenance of hundreds of office buildings, prisons, museums, barracks and so forth. These money flows are not all clearly traceable in the national budget. Moreover, such expenditure is invariably tied to long-term contracts in which minor short-term variations can have a huge financial impact in the long term. We have identified shortcomings in the government's property management in recent years. For this reason, we will continue to investigate the government's property management and the social and financial costs and benefits of the government's property transactions.

2.4 In-depth audits and long-term audit programmes

The changes outlined above have made it more difficult for citizens and MPs to understand the way in which government works in general and to follow its money flows in particular. This has the effect of undermining public confidence in the government. As a further factor, the crises that have overtaken the country in recent years have exerted financial pressure on the budget. The process of globalisation, coupled with the growing speed of communication, have both intensified the financial risks and made them harder to forecast. More understanding will help to create confidence in the workings of democracy. For this reason, we have decided to narrow the focus of our audit agenda by concentrating on topics that are of major financial and social relevance and which we can investigate in depth during a long-term audit programme.

(1) Understanding sustainable public finances in a European context

The money flows in the budgetary and reporting process are so complex that they cannot be subjected to public scrutiny without the assistance of experts. It has become well-nigh impossible for the man in the street to see where 'his' taxes and other forms of government revenue end up, both within and beyond the Dutch borders, and what benefits they generate at the point where they are spent. The government's efforts to manage its financial risks also remain a topical issue, as does the long-term sustainability of public finances. Our aim is to provide parliament and the public alike with information that can help them to exercise scrutiny in this particular area.

For this reason, we will be continuing the current series of audits of European trends and will be seeking, to a greater extent than in previous years, to link these to the issue of the sustainable funding of public services, thus creating a programme-based audit strategy. We will be looking at budgetary policy and accounting systems and will be examining EU aid programmes and money flows to and from the EU.

(2) Understanding government revenue

We want to focus more sharply during the coming strategy period on the reality of government revenue, both forecast and actual. The government now spends around €260 billion every year. This spending needs to be funded by an adequate level of revenue. The government is likely to receive approximately €250 billion in revenue in 2016, distributed over 26 different categories, each of which has its own accounting system and many of which are interrelated. Half of this income is tax revenue, with income tax being the biggest contributor. Other forms of government revenue include natural gas revenues, national insurance contributions, fines and user fees. There are also many forms of tax relief that are designed for specific public purposes and which reduce the potential level of tax revenue. This 'tax expenditure', as it is known, represents an aggregate figure of some €17 billion.

Although the government's Tax Plan is a useful document and is debated in parliament, it includes only part of the government's aggregate revenue. An additional problem is that taxes designed to achieve a specific policy effect are not evaluated in the same way as most other policy instruments. Our strategic decision to concentrate more on 'government revenue' as an audit topic will require us to accumulate specific expertise and audit experience in new fields. This is something that we are planning to do by setting up a long-term audit programme.

(3) Understanding care and social security

Public expenditure involves more than just the national budget. Indeed, spending on care and social security accounts for a growing proportion of public expenditure. Successive ministers have found it hard to control public expenditure, especially on care services. Moreover, the patterns of both care and social security spending and the available revenue are greatly influenced by demographic trends and the operation of the job market. This has prompted a social debate on the tenability of the existing arrangements and the effectiveness of government policy in this area.

For this reason, while we will be continuing to focus on the care sector, we will be widening our net to encompass more than just care alone. We will be pursuing an audit programme centring on the care expenditure for which the Minister of Health, Welfare and Sport is responsible, and on the social security expenditure for which the Minister of Social Affairs and Employment is responsible. Together, these two fields account for a growing proportion of public spending. Our aim is to continue our recent practice of auditing the spending of national insurance contributions on care services and, where possible, to replicate this practice in relation to social security. However, certain specific issues require their own specific audit strategy, and we will be seeking to meet this need by adopting a programme-based approach.

(4) New audit methods and techniques to create better understanding of effectiveness and efficiency

We are planning to create an even better understanding of the social impact of public spending during the years ahead. We wish to achieve this additional aim by exploring new audit methods and identifying synergies with new disciplines, from data analysis to psychology. New audit techniques and new analytical methods (such as the use of 'big data' and geodata, as well as information collected 'on the streets', inter alia by citizen auditors) should generate new information and bring more depth to our audit work. We also wish to make specific use of the opportunities offered by open data. We intend to analyse the effectiveness and impact of public funds by a combination of data analysis, file audits and practical observations. We are also planning to transpose the 'true price' or 'true value' method used in the private sector to the public sector, and use it as a means of calculating the true price of public services. We will be pursuing a programme-based approach to these in-depth audits, including experimentation with the aid of a test circuit.

2.5 Keeping a watchful eye on uncertainties and long-term issues

A dynamic society, a rapidly changing public sector and a political climate that is less firmly anchored in ideology and tradition mean that the government auditor must be able to respond to constant changes. As a complicating factor, Dutch society will face new social issues in the years ahead – issues that will affect current and future generations. On the one hand, we are witnessing the emergence of cyber crime, the vulnerability of electronic communications and the ownership issues raised by virtual data storage. At the same time, natural resources are being depleted, thus compelling society to switch to different sources of energy. There is no easy way of framing these problems and their solutions in accordance with the divisions and substance of conventional policy agendas.

Sustainability

Government grants and tax relief both fall within our immediate remit. We have performed a great deal of research into the government's energy policy in recent years, the findings of which remain both valid and relevant. We shall be continuing with this line of inquiry. Certain private sustainability obligations imposed as a result of legislation may fall beyond our remit. For this reason, the government and parliament should agree beforehand on the means by which policy outcomes and policy impacts will be measured, and on the cost of this monitoring operation. Open data offer new opportunities in this respect. However, we can also make use of our expertise in both national and international arenas, by collaborating with national audit offices in other European countries. For good reason, the UN recently called on national audit offices to play a part on monitoring the Sustainable Development Goals, in the wake of the new climate agreement reached in Paris in December 2015. This is a call that we will be pleased to answer.

Security

Security involves dealing with a wide range of risks and threats, both endogenous and extraneous. Moreover, it is not always possible to clearly define these risks in order to supply parliament with relevant information. In some cases, this is because the information is not in the public domain. In other cases, while we may have access to information, considerations of national security may prevent us from publishing everything we have in our possession. We must reach a careful, impartial decision each time.

International instability can have a huge impact on the way in which our armed forces are deployed beyond the national borders. However, there are also issues that transcend conventional military combat-readiness, such as the rise of cyber security in response to cyber crime. Problems such as identity fraud and the risks surrounding the 'Internet of Things' also demand new answers from the executive and hence a new audit approach.

Sustainability and security are two issues that require our attention and which we need to tackle in a modern way. To this end, we have decided to adopt a flexible approach to the organisation of our audit capacity, so that we can continue to respond to changing issues. Our audit agenda is a document that is constantly open to revision.

3

QUALITY, TECHNOLOGY
AND COOPERATION AS
OUR REFERENCE POINTS



Our audit findings must be of undisputed quality and they must get to the right places in the right way and at the right time. Only then can we help in the best possible way to improve the performance and operation of the government. In order to meet these requirements, the Court of Audit must be agile, sensitive to its operating environment, responsive and ready to cooperate and share its knowledge. We will continue our efforts to build a 21st-century audit organisation during this strategy period.

3.1 **Quality as a precondition**

Proven quality standards and effective working methods form the basis for every product of ours. We like to set our sights high. The quality of our work must be beyond reproach, our findings incontestable and our recommendations carefully formulated. Each and every audit opinion of ours must be based on fact. Our quality standards have been defined by the international community of government audit offices; these are the international standards that we wish – and are required – to meet. It is on this ambition that we must allow ourselves to be judged. In addition to using an internal system of quality assurance, we also ask external experts to read through our audit reports, so that they have been seen by a pair of ‘strange eyes’ as it were. We have an audit committee made up of independent members, whose job it is to subject our operations to critical review. Finally, we are planning to organise a peer review in the summer of 2017, which will involve a team of colleagues from a number of our international sister institutions taking a good, hard look at our organisation.

3.2 **Investing in methods and techniques**

In order to remain relevant, we will be making extra investments during this strategy period in the further transformation of our organisation into a state-of-the-art research institute. We will explore the opportunities offered by developments in IT and scientific innovations, for example. We need to be able to experiment, and this aspect will become a more integral part of our day-to-day work.

Large datasets

New research techniques and analytical methods (such as the use of ‘big data’ and geodata, as well as information collected ‘on the streets’, inter alia by citizen auditors) should generate new information and bring more depth to our audit work. We need certain specific expertise in order to use these sources of information and process the information obtained from them. That’s why we are investing in our staff. We are also planning to encourage research datasets to be distributed as far as possible in the form of open data, so that other people and organisations can use this information for the purpose of further research.

Opting for integrated reporting

We use the experience we gain in the course of our audits for modernising our own reporting techniques. We have taken the first step in this process by publishing our own accounts in the form of open data. Our plan is to gradually switch to integrated reporting in the coming years.

3.3 Wider reach, more partnerships

The primary readership of our audit reports consists of members of the Dutch parliament. It goes without saying that our audit findings are then made publicly available, and thereby become part of the huge quantity of information that is published on public services. We are aware of the fact that the media, parliament and the government operate in an information society, and we are familiar with the dilemmas that may arise in this context. Accordingly, we communicate in an effective but businesslike manner, showing sensitivity to the topics and organisations involved and to our operating environment.

We believe that the future will see a burgeoning of new opportunities and communication techniques, which will see us not just investing in the expansion of our domestic and international network, but also developing new products alongside our traditional audit reports.

Extending and investing in our network

The combination of trends transcending national borders and changes within our own borders means that we need to form partnerships in order to be effective. The Dutch association of government audit offices (NVR) and the international community of supreme audit institutions (INTOSAI) help us in our quest to find suitable partners, forge new alliances and perform joint audits.

We are open to the principle of close cooperation with other High Councils of State and public research centres in and beyond the seat of government in The Hague, including semi-governmental planning offices, research bureaus and universities. There are tremendous benefits to be gained from cooperation, particularly in the field of research. Moreover, other organisations can act as sources of inspiration, help to raise the quality of our audits, and make us more effective in getting our message across.

Refining new products

Thanks to the internet, new media and the swift rise in the popularity of personal multimedia devices, the general public now has direct access to our audit findings. People want to receive this information in various forms, from old-fashioned printed reports to digital web-based information, including graphics, but also in the form of raw research data and personal presentations on their own premises.

We will be continuing the trend of the past five years, which has seen us perform trials with many different types of products as alternatives to conventional audit reports. We start thinking about the type of product through which we wish to present our audit findings at an early stage in the audit process. Creating the right mix of print and digital, words and images, and on-line and real-life, helps to ensure that our audit findings are put to the best possible use.

IN CONCLUSION:

striking a balance between traditional quality and modern effectiveness

Our aim on the one hand is to be a strategic research partner supplying good-quality, well-researched audit findings. At the same time, the outside world wants immediate responses based on the latest figures.

We will continue to focus on continuity and to follow our policy of performing in-depth research into specific topics. These are audits covering a number of years and in which we can build up a position as an authoritative source of knowledge.

At the same time, we wish to retain our organisational flexibility and agility, so that we can respond to recent developments and new requests from parliament. We need to be agile enough to listen to those around us and take up unexpected challenges on topical issues.

The need to strike a balance between quality and continuity on the one hand and topicality and agility on the other is reflected by our decision not just to work on short-term audit projects, but also to invest in long-term research into a number of topics outlined in this document. We need to do both in order to create the desired degree of understanding. This is our ongoing mission for the forthcoming strategy period. In the end, understanding forms the basis for trust. And trust forms the basis for an effective, democratic state based on the rule of law.

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