

Letter of 2 July 2018 from the Minister of Social Affairs and Employment to the House of Representatives on the main outlines of the process to reform policy on civic integration

Civic integration system to be overhauled

Too many newcomers to the Netherlands are reliant on social assistance for too long. This is an unacceptable outcome of the current civic integration system. The changes introduced in 2013 were intended to improve the system's performance. But this has not proved to be the case. There are too many obstacles preventing newcomers from using the system as a threshold for participation in Dutch society. It is too complicated and ineffective. Moreover, it exists in too much of a vacuum, so integration is not linked to participation – in society and in the world of work. As a result of fast-growing demand for civic integration lessons, opportunists are exploiting the gap in the market, leading to abuses and in some cases, fraud. The loan system has pushed prices up, and has led candidates to perform below their capacity or even consciously seek exemption. Courses are often difficult to combine with either voluntary or paid work. Despite demonstrable efforts, many candidates fail the civic integration examination. As a result, they are exempted from the civic integration requirement. This means that after a highly frustrating learning pathway, people are insufficiently proficient in the Dutch language to stand on their own two feet and build a future in the Netherlands.

These shortcomings are underscored, not only by the evaluation of the legislation¹ which I sent to your House on 27 June 2018, but also by many other studies.²

In the past few decades, changing views on integration, and lessons learned on the best and fastest ways of preparing newcomers for full participation in Dutch society have led to many policy changes. Nonetheless, we have yet to find a system that enables newcomers to achieve the desired results adequately, rapidly and in large numbers. The current system is the latest to be found inadequate. The issue has proved complex and difficult to deal with in practice, especially given the variations in make-up and size of influxes of newcomers into the Netherlands over the years. We have no clear understanding of what does work.

In this letter I will outline my thoughts on improving civic integration policy.³ In doing so, I take my lead from the 2017 coalition agreement provisions aimed at increasing the effectiveness and efficiency of civic integration, and upgrading the language proficiency requirement from A2 to B1. Even after the system has been adjusted, it will still be a challenge to achieve the desired results. In the next few years we will seek to gradually strengthen the system by monitoring and, where necessary, adjusting those components with which we have less practical experience. My aim is to create a system that is robust and adaptable. Monitoring and evaluation will therefore occupy a central place, as instruments to strengthen evidence-based policymaking and enable timely adjustment.

¹ *Inburgering: systeemwereld versus leefwereld. Evaluatie Wet inburgering 2013* [Civic integration: system versus reality. Evaluation of the Civic Integration Act 2013], Significant, June 2018. Sent to the House of Representatives on 27 June 2018.

² *Landen in NL: de vluchtelingenstroom in integratieperspectief* [Landing in the Netherlands: refugee flows and integration prospects], Erasmus University, 2016, and the Netherlands Court of Audit report, 2017.

³ In response to a request by Thierry Baudet (Forum for Democracy (FVD)) during the debate of 17 April 2018 and the request of the Permanent Committee on Social Affairs and Employment to respond to the 'Vluchtelingenwerk Integratie Barometer 2018' [Dutch Refugee Council 2018 civic integration survey] of 26 April 2018.

The current financial frameworks, and the resources earmarked in the coalition agreement to upgrade language proficiency will be key prerequisites. After debating this outline with the House of Representatives, I will work with the main stakeholders to flesh it out and draft a bill. According to current plans, it should be feasible for the new legislation to enter into force in 2020.

Everyone participates, preferably through paid employment

The ultimate aim is that civic integration enables newcomers⁴ to the Netherlands to participate as soon as possible, preferably through paid employment. As yet, that is too seldom the case. That is bad for the Netherlands as well as bad for newcomers. In this letter, I will put forward my proposals for adapting the civic integration system. My aim is to put the municipal authorities, central government and newcomers in the best position to enable the latter to participate in Dutch society as soon as possible.

To achieve this, I plan to introduce several innovations in relation to previous systems:

- A Dutch qualification, without unnecessary time loss, is the best starting position for the labour market. Young newcomers will therefore start vocational training as soon as possible.
- Intensification of learning pathways. To enable newcomers to achieve language proficiency level B1 within a few years, language lessons should be combined with paid or voluntary work.
- No more exemptions will be given for demonstrable efforts. Everyone needs to learn self-reliance.

As owners of their own integration, newcomers will also have responsibilities. They will be responsible for doing everything in their power to participate as soon as possible, by learning the language, working and taking an active part in our society. And they will have to meet requirements set and tested by central government. Newcomers who do not make enough effort will face the consequences sooner and more often than in the current system. In return, newcomers will receive more assistance from the municipal authorities. The improvements target everyone of whom civic integration is required – men and women in possession of asylum or other residence permits. In this respect and in response to the motion submitted by Bente Becker (People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD)), I want to prevent women from being disadvantaged.⁵

The changes to the civic integration system should ensure that the municipal authorities have more and better scope to ensure newcomers enter employment and achieve level B1 for language proficiency. At the moment, newcomers are often not on the municipal authorities' radar, but are themselves responsible for choosing a civic integration course and taking out a loan to pay for it. This does not work because there is no synergy. The changes will promote synergy by placing civic integration firmly within the social domain, in particular through the Participation Act. That is why it is essential for the municipal authorities to be given more control over its delivery, with responsibility for increasing its effectiveness while avoiding past mistakes. We will anchor certain major elements in law and use an appropriate funding method to ensure that the municipal authorities take up this

⁴In this letter, the term 'newcomers' is understood to mean everyone who, in accordance with the Civic Integration Act, is required to pass the civic integration examination. This includes holders of asylum residence permits and adult family members who join them later, normal family migrants and 'others' (e.g. spiritual leaders). The Civic Integration (Preparation Abroad) Act remains unchanged.

⁵ House of Representatives 32824 2017-2018 session, no. 216 (Becker motion).

task, acting as uniformly and effectively as possible in key areas. To make civic integration more effective, municipal authorities must make full use of the enforcement instruments at their disposal under the Participation Act.

After the civic integration system has been revised, central government will remain responsible for policy on important elements, including enforcement and the national examinations in language proficiency and knowledge of Dutch society. Central government will also be responsible for enabling conditions, financial frameworks and quality assurance.

The Social and Economic Council report of 25 May 2018⁶ shows that in the past few years, a considerable effort has been made to support refugees and asylees who have been granted residence permits (hereafter: 'asylees') in their efforts to seek work or training. There is, however, a long way to go. As I announced on a previous occasion, during this government's period in office I intend to take action on several fronts to improve the labour market position of both Dutch citizens from non-Western migration backgrounds and asylees. For this purpose I have launched a programme to promote integration in the labour market. Civic integration should dovetail seamlessly with this programme.

In fleshing out the coalition agreement, we consulted a wide range of stakeholders with the aim of benefiting as much as possible from existing knowledge and experience. In various working and theme groups, around 100 experts representing the municipal authorities, employers, language course providers, the Divosa network, the Association of Netherlands Municipalities (VNG), the Central Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers (COA), the G40 urban network and the Refugee Council worked with government partners and academics to see how the civic integration system could contribute most effectively to meeting the social goal of participation by all, preferably through paid employment.

In the coming years, too, we will monitor and, where necessary, adapt the components with which we have less practical experience, so as to strengthen the system progressively without having to make major changes. In doing so, we will draw on insights from the behavioural sciences, as well as on the experience of newcomers themselves. Right from the start, monitoring and evaluation will occupy a central position. This will lead to a system that is robust and adaptable and, above all, works.

Structure of the letter

I will examine a number of issues in turn that should be seen in relation to one another, with reference to the relevant observations from the evaluation of the Civic Integration Act (these sections are in italics).

- I. Intake procedure and continuous line – no time to lose
- II. Personal civic integration and participation plan – results and enforcement
- III. Upgrading the language proficiency requirement to B1 and learning pathways
- IV. Reforming the market for civic integration courses
- V. Modernising the examination system
- VI. Support for asylees

⁶ *Vluchtelingen en werk: een nieuwe tussenbalans* [Refugees and work: taking stock], Social and Economic Council, May 2018.

I. Intake procedure and continuous line – no time to lose

The evaluation sees preparation for civic integration as a potentially useful first step in the procedure, but finds that it should dovetail more closely with the civic integration programme itself, and that the COA and the municipal authorities could share information more effectively. After newcomers are settled in a municipality, integration activities are put on hold for around six months (on average) while the newcomer deals with all kinds of practical matters, e.g. finance, housing etc. As a result, valuable time is lost and continuity is interrupted. This is undesirable. In addition, newcomers are insufficiently capable of making independent choices in the early stages of civic integration, and municipal authorities have too little understanding of the needs and development of newcomers to give them appropriate assistance. Moreover, municipal authorities' limited role in the current civic integration system makes it difficult for them to establish strong links with related policy areas such as the Participation Act.

As the Scientific Council for Government Policy pointed out in its report 'No time to lose',⁷ it is essential to start as soon as possible with activities aimed at integration and participation. At present, it often takes too long and valuable time is lost. The municipal authorities need to get involved with newcomers settling in their municipalities at the earliest possible stage. In the case of asylees, a continuous line will be created from the reception centre to settlement in a municipality, so that the best use can be made of the time spent in the reception centre.

The coalition agreement sketches a future in which asylum seekers with a good chance of being granted a residence permit⁸ will be accommodated in reception centres in the vicinity of the municipality in which they will, in time, be given a home. The State Secretary for Justice and Security will work out the details of this approach. This model equips municipal authorities to take control of the civic integration procedure at the earliest possible stage. But there is no need to wait for the new system to be put in place. Under the current system, asylum can be granted at an earlier stage, so that people can devote their time and energy to integrating and preparing for work. The time spent in the reception centre can also be used for civic integration.

Making optimum use of the time spent in the reception centre

A package of measures was introduced in late 2015⁹ to cater for the growing influx of asylum seekers. I plan to prolong these measures and expand them – specifically those relating to Dutch lessons for asylum seekers with a good chance of being granted a residence permit, and to the civic integration preparatory programme. The programme, which takes 14 weeks, was upgraded in 2016. It comprises Dutch lessons, a civics module, a module on the Dutch labour market, and individual coaching. The reception centres also offer voluntary work activities – for example through the Pharos (Dutch Centre of Expertise on Health Disparities) voluntary work project. Voluntary work enables asylees to familiarise themselves with Dutch society and encourages their participation and integration. By screening and matching, account can be taken of their work potential, enabling them to find a job more quickly.¹⁰ Every labour market region now has a regional coordinator responsible for speeding up and streamlining labour market participation and integration procedures.

Comprehensive intake procedure

⁷ <https://english.wrr.nl/publications/policy-briefs/2016/02/16/no-time-to-lose-from-reception-to-integration-of-asylum-migrants>.

⁸ Asylum seekers from countries with a high percentage of applications granted, such as Syria and Eritrea.

⁹ House of Representatives 19637 2016-2017 session, no. 2243.

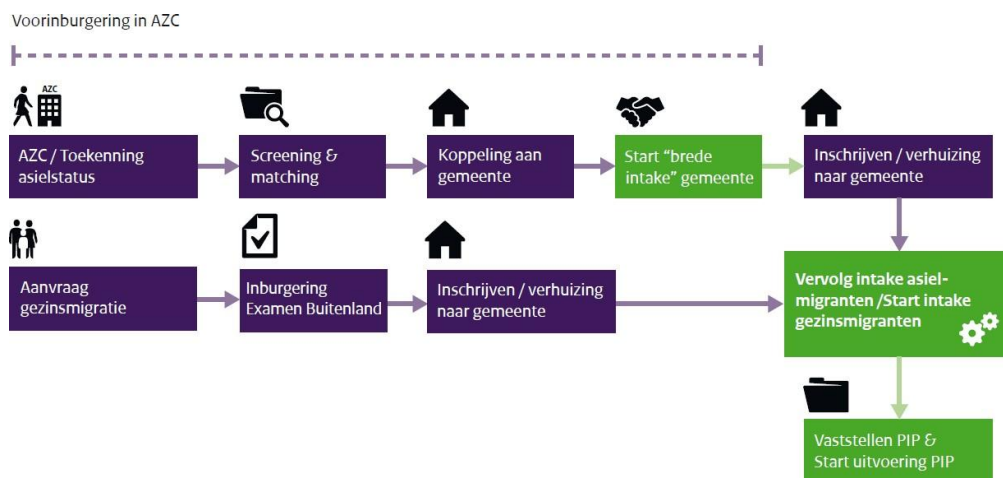
¹⁰ *Regionale plaatsing vergunning houders en kans op werk* [Regional placement of residence permit holders and job opportunities], Netherlands Bureau for Economic Policy Analysis, 2018 .

If municipal authorities are to adequately assist those obliged to participate in the civic integration process – especially asylees – in their pathway to integration and work or other forms of participation, these authorities should at least know who the individuals concerned are, what their personal situation is and what they need to enable them to lead self-reliant, financially independent lives. I therefore propose that municipalities should introduce a comprehensive intake procedure that establishes each individual newcomer’s starting position and development opportunities, based on their degree of literacy, level of education, practical competencies, job skills, work experience, ability to learn, motivation, interests and degree of self-reliance, as well as any other factors that may affect their civic integration, such as their family situation, social network, and physical and mental health.¹¹

An intake procedure of this kind will help municipal authorities take comprehensive, integrated action within the wider social domain, including the Participation Act. The intake procedure is of great significance for the follow-up programme. For this reason, it must be as objective and as nationally uniform as possible. To achieve this, central government will draw up the necessary criteria and frameworks.

To enable newcomers to start their programmes as soon as they can, it is essential that the intake procedure take place as quickly as possible. In future, once holders of asylum residence permits have been matched with a municipality, the intake procedure could start in the reception centre, with the municipal authorities in charge, but working in collaboration with the COA. Use would also be made of the information collected by the COA (which it already shares with the municipal authorities through the task monitoring system).

Figure: Comprehensive intake procedure and continuous learning pathway



[Noot vertaler: platte tekst van figuur hieronder]

Civic integration preparatory programmes in the reception centre

Reception centre/asylum residence permit granted – Screening and matching – Matched with municipality – Comprehensive intake procedure starts – Registration/settlement in municipality

Application for family migration – Civic integration examination abroad – Registration/settlement in municipality – Follow-up intake procedure for asylee/start of intake procedure for family migrants – PIP drafted and launched

¹¹ *Syriërs in Nederland, een studie over de eerste jaren van hun leven in Nederland* [Syrians in the Netherlands, a study of the first years of their lives in the Netherlands], Netherlands Institute for Social Research, 2018.

II. Personal civic integration and participation plan, results and enforcement

In my proposal, the intake procedure marks the start of an individual pathway from civic integration to participation, and results in a personal civic integration and participation plan (PIP). A PIP will be drawn up for every newcomer. It will be a tailor-made personal programme for learning the language in combination with work, voluntary work, a course of study or work experience. The PIP can also cover important enabling conditions, such as childcare, and agreements on support with budget management and how long this will be needed. The pathway to the final goal will be set out in the plan, along with the time allowed to achieve it. Meeting the civic integration requirement is part of this, in addition to how the newcomer will participate to their full capacity in society, either through training or paid or voluntary work. To monitor progress, the municipal authorities will hold interviews with the newcomer at set times during the course of the PIP. The PIP entails obligations for both the newcomer and the municipality. Both parties make a commitment to it, and the municipal authorities monitor the newcomer's progress.

Requirements for newcomers

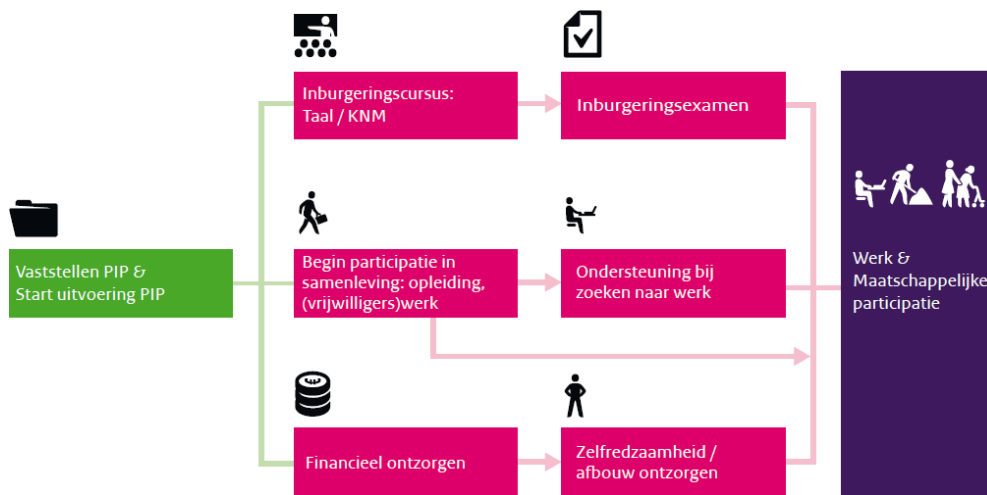
Every newcomer is required to achieve results, i.e. to meet the civic integration requirement within the prescribed period (either by sitting the civic integration examination or following one of the other pathways described under IV). Newcomers who, through their own fault, fail to meet the civic integration requirement on time will be fined. They will also not be eligible for a permanent residence permit or naturalisation. When assessing whether failure is due to the fault of an individual, factors such as behavioural effectiveness will be taken into account, along with factors that are counter-effective, such as debt problems.

The PIP will build on municipal authorities' responsibilities in relation to benefit claimants under the Participation Act, including enforcement of the cooperation, language proficiency and voluntary work requirements. Under the Participation Act, all benefit claimants are required to make use of provisions offered to them by the municipal executive, including social activation geared to employment, as well as to cooperate in exploring employment opportunities and, where applicable, in drafting, implementing and evaluating an action plan. If claimants fail to cooperate sufficiently, their benefits are reduced. Benefit claimants who speak little or no Dutch have to make every effort to master the language. If they refuse or make too little progress, their benefits are reduced. The language requirement gives the municipal authorities a powerful instrument with which to compel benefit claimants to make an effort to learn Dutch. It will not be non-binding, but a statutory requirement for both municipal authorities and benefit claimants.

As set out in the coalition agreement, the government will enter into dialogue with municipalities on active enforcement of the voluntary work requirement.

The requirements set out in the Participation Act do not apply to newcomers not receiving benefits (i.e. those who are employed, have independent means, receive student finance and/or have a partner earning an income). In fleshing out my proposals, I aim to find a means by which the municipal authorities can enforce the agreements set out in the PIP for this group too. Newcomers who, through their own fault, fail to cooperate with regard to their PIP may be required to pay a fine or personal contribution, possibly repeatedly.

Figure: Personal civic integration and participation plan (PIP)



PIP drafted and launched

Civic integration course language/Knowledge of Dutch society

Civic integration exam

Start participation in society: training or (voluntary) work

Help in seeking work

Budget management support

Self-reliance/ Budget management support phased out

Work & participation in society

III. Upgrading the language proficiency requirement to B1 level and learning pathways

The evaluation shows that 85% of newcomers sitting examinations take the civic integration language proficiency test at A2 level. The remaining 15% take the state examination in Dutch as a second language (NT2). Under the current system there is no incentive for newcomers to sit their exam at the highest possible level. Some of them are quite capable of achieving B1 level, but to be sure of passing their civic integration exams on time, take the exam at A2 level. The evaluation also shows that civic integration lessons do not always match newcomers' needs or level. There is a need among newcomers for more practical, context-oriented language lessons. Though intensive and/or dual courses combining study and work experience are essential in enabling newcomers to participate as soon as possible in Dutch society, there are not enough of them. The evaluation concluded that the exemption on the basis of demonstrable effort, and in particular the four required attempts at each exam component, is both ineffective and disproportionate. The time spent trying to meet the requirements by newcomers needing this exemption could be put to better use by, for example, learning practical skills that will help their participation and integration in society. Moreover, the number of attempts each candidate needs to make to be eligible for exemption puts considerable pressure on the capacity of the exam system.

One of the priorities identified in the coalition agreement was to upgrade the civic integration language proficiency requirement from A2 to B1, making B1 the standard level.¹² This is the level needed for a good starting position on the labour market. However, we must face the fact that not everyone is capable of achieving this level, that success doesn't only depend on motivation and effort. A person's ability to master a foreign language is also determined by whether or not they are literate in their own language, the extent to which they have had a formal education and how great the difference is between their own language and the language they are trying to learn. In other words, newcomers' background is a determining factor.

We are now thinking in terms of a system with learning pathways to match the level, skills and other factors agreed in the PIP.

The aim is for everyone to integrate at the highest possible level, and to participate to their full, individual capacity, preferably through paid employment. We are now planning to introduce three learning pathways.

B1 pathway (pathway 1)

The norm will be for newcomers to follow the pathway leading to the examination at B1 level. Newcomers who are unable to achieve this level may take the exam at a lower level, but this first needs to be established through objective assessment. Cognitive skills, level of education, work experience and family situation are decisive factors in determining the rate at which a person can learn the Dutch language. It is important for newcomers to be taught at their own level. Some are capable of achieving the required level fairly independently and by following an intensive pathway, others need context-oriented lessons over a longer period of time. Those capable of achieving a higher level than B1 will be encouraged to sit the examination at B2 level. If after considerable effort and an objective test, an individual proves incapable of passing the examination at B1 level, they may do some of the exam at A2 level. Some of those currently granted exemptions are capable of achieving A2 level with more lessons. This group will follow the B1 pathway.

Training pathway (pathway 2)

Newcomers' learning potential needs to be exploited more effectively because this is crucial if they are to have lasting prospects of work. Around 30%¹³ of newcomers are under 30 and potentially have a lifetime of work ahead of them. To use their capacity to the full, I wish for them to gain a Dutch qualification as quickly as possible so they can enter the job market. I will be working with the Minister of Education and Science in the next few months to determine how this group can start their education at the right level and with the right language support. We are thinking in terms of a bridging programme, with Dutch lessons and a focus on other learning skills.

Self-reliance pathway (pathway 3)

The majority of those currently granted exemptions are not capable of passing the language proficiency examination at A2 level, for instance because they have learning disabilities or are illiterate in their own language. Even after they have completed a literacy programme, many will still

¹² For more information (in Dutch) on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages and language proficiency levels, such as A2 and B1, see the Dutch Language Union website <http://taalunieversum.org/inhoud/erk-nederlands>. Teachers and students can go to www.erk.nl. 'Can do' descriptors (in Dutch) have been designed for every level. For the requirements for each component and level, see [http://downloads.slo.nl/Documenten/ERKgrid%20\(1\).pdf](http://downloads.slo.nl/Documenten/ERKgrid%20(1).pdf).

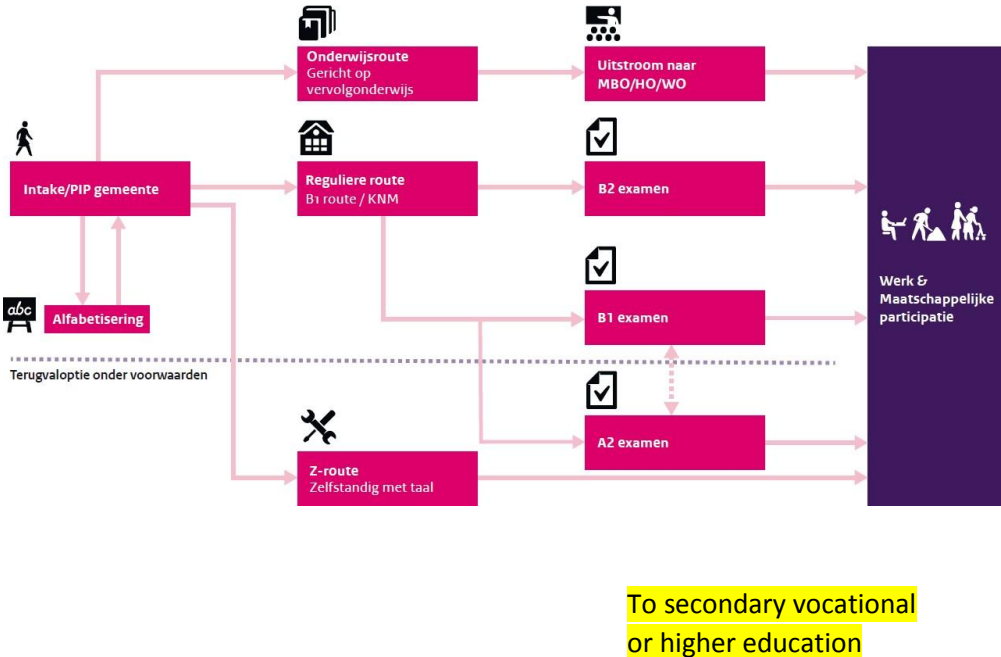
¹³ As at 1 May 2018.

have difficulty reading and writing. In the current system, this group is given an exemption and then left to their fate. In the new system, they will be given extra attention through a special self-reliance pathway.

In the next few months, stakeholders and experts will work on the content and structure of the self-reliance pathway and identify the target group¹⁴ that will actually benefit. Generally speaking, these are people who are objectively deemed incapable of completing the normal exam pathway because of learning difficulties. The self-reliance pathway is by no means free of obligations. It is not intended as an option for people who are capable but unwilling, or as a dumping ground for problematic target groups. As with the other learning pathways, the intake procedure will lead to a PIP setting out the necessary components and time frame. This pathway is geared to achieving self-reliance in our society and the highest attainable level of language proficiency.¹⁵ Newcomers need to be able to talk to their children’s teachers, to organise their basic affairs and to become financially self-reliant.

Assessment in this practical pathway will be based on the attainment targets agreed with the individual in question (comparable to those in the lowest level of secondary education, which focuses on practical skills). For people who are illiterate, it is important to bring the literacy programme forward, since a degree of literacy is an important enabling condition for the intake procedure. In the next few months, I will set out the criteria for determining whether an individual following pathway 3 has met the civic integration requirement. Time and money can be spent more efficiently by providing an alternative pathway for people with learning difficulties, matching their capacities and giving them a better start in the Netherlands.

Figure: Civic integration learning pathways

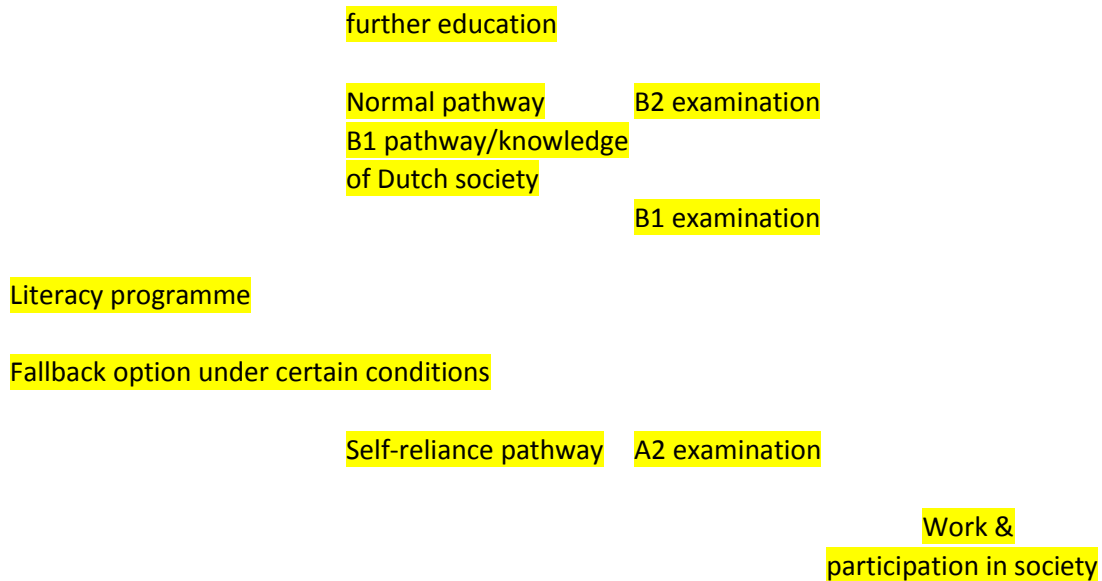


Intake procedure/PIP (municipality)

Training pathway Geared to

¹⁴ Individuals who have attended an international bridging programme for a few years, but have proved to have learning disabilities that are too significant to allow them to make the transition to a pre-vocational course, or illiterate newcomers who are not proficient in their own language.

¹⁵House of Representatives 32824 2017-2018 session no. 214 (motion submitted by Peter Heerma (Christian Democratic Alliance (CDA)) and Bente Becker (VVD)).



IV. Reforming the market for civic integration courses

The evaluation shows that newcomers are insufficiently equipped to make independent choices about the course and provider that best suit their educational level and learning capacities. They rely to a great extent on the information they gain through their social network or the municipality's or language school's website. Practical matters such as distance and whether or not they will receive an allowance for their travel costs play an important role. As a result, many newcomers choose a course on the basis of factors other than its quality and whether it matches their capacities and level of education. According to the evaluation, the municipal authorities indicated that they would like to have more influence on course provision and the newcomers' choice of provider. This would also give them more scope to link civic integration with other policy areas, such as the Participation Act.

There are many institutions providing good civic integration courses in the Netherlands. However, in the past few years, the wrong incentives have regularly led to providers angling for the biggest possible loans from the Education Executive Agency (DUO) while failing to provide decent courses. There have been a few cases of fraud, which the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment is now investigating. That is a waste of public money and undermines the success of civic integration. Experience – and, most particularly, the evaluation – show that it is unrealistic to expect newcomers to shoulder the responsibility for their own civic integration programme from the outset.¹⁶ At this stage, many newcomers are insufficiently capable of organising their own civic integration in the way that is required of them. The Scientific Council for Government Policy (WRR) notes that the majority of newcomers lack the skills to be able to do this.¹⁷ For a start, applying for a DUO loan is a huge obstacle. Many newcomers also find it difficult to start the civic integration course on time and to keep up with it. Finding a suitable course, or changing courses, is difficult too, since the market lacks transparency. These issues are particularly problematic for people who are insufficiently proficient in Dutch. Such individuals are often unaware of their rights and obligations, make the wrong choices in relation to their civic integration pathway and, as a result, fail to meet their civic integration requirement on time. They then face the consequences: a fine or non-remission of their DUO loan,

¹⁶ *Inburgering: systeemwereld versus leefwereld. Evaluatie Wet inburgering 2013* [Civic integration: system versus reality. Evaluation of the Civic Integration Act 2013], Significant, June 2018. Sent to the House of Representatives on 27 June 2018.

¹⁷ See also *Weten is nog geen doen* [Knowing is not the same as doing], WRR, 2017.

with the risk of falling into debt. Clearly, this does not help them get off to a good start in the Netherlands.

I plan to abolish the loan system through which newcomers pay for their courses in advance. This money is needed to make civic integration more effective, with municipalities playing a key role in managing integrated pathways. Civic integration, including the obligation to achieve results, is part of this. The municipal authorities will be required to deliver customised solutions. This is not compatible with funding through a loan taken out by the newcomer.

Given these problems, but also to enable municipalities to take charge and ensure adequate provision, I propose introducing a new civic integration system in which the municipal authorities purchase courses from selected providers. They will receive a civic integration budget from central government for this purpose, and will be responsible for guaranteeing:

- adequate provision for each of the three pathways;
- flexible, effective provision, which can be combined with other activities, such as work;
- provision geared to achieving the targets for civic integration and participation.

The municipal authorities will thus have an instrument at their disposal to give the quality of civic integration courses a serious boost. Newcomers will acquire municipal civic integration provision as part of their PIP. As a result, some newcomers may get far more support (in the form of Dutch lessons, for instance) than they can pay for in the current system, while others will be able to manage on less. In this way, budgets for civic integration courses can be used far more effectively and efficiently than is now the case.

Regional cooperation

An estimated 15,000 people a year will be required to attend civic integration courses in the next few years.¹⁸ There are simply too few newcomers for every medium-sized or small municipality to be able to supply differentiated, customised provision. Given the degree of customisation needed for each of the three pathways, regional cooperation (e.g. within a labour market region) is the obvious approach, certainly for small and medium-sized municipalities.

Quality of civic integration courses

*The evaluation concludes that there is sufficient provision, certainly in terms of quantity. However, the content does not always meet demand. Newcomers are generally satisfied with the courses they have attended, in particular the quality of the teachers. However, they are critical of the varying levels within the same class, and the content of the courses. In the current system, quality assurance organisation 'Blik op Werk' is responsible for safeguarding the quality of civic integration courses. Few newcomers are familiar with the organisation's website or hallmark. According to the evaluation, many of the actors interviewed experienced the Blik op Werk hallmark as a clerical exercise rather than a genuine appraisal of the quality of civic integration courses.*¹⁹

It is essential to safeguard the quality of civic integration courses. By making the municipal authorities responsible for purchasing them, I expect their quality to improve considerably. After all, it is in the interests of municipalities to ensure high-quality courses that help newcomers find work as quickly as possible. In the current system, *Blik op Werk* is the holder of the hallmark for civic

¹⁸ Source: Ministry of Justice and Security prognoses.

¹⁹ For the record, classroom supervision has been in place since 2017, involving both the Social Affairs and Employment Inspectorate and the Inspectorate of Education. Provisional results were not included in the evaluation, but will be evaluated at the end of this year.

integration courses and screens providers for compliance with the norms, based on several indicators. Financial supervision and supervision in the classroom have recently been stepped up,²⁰ the latter with the assistance of a committee in which the Inspectorate of Education is represented. I shall take further measures if these have too little effect.

V. The examination system

With the entry into force of the Civic Integration Act in 2013, the examination system was changed. Since then, language components have been tested separately, and in 2015 a new component 'preparing for the labour market' (ONA) was introduced. Though, in theory, this component represents added value for newcomers, the evaluation concludes that the test is ineffective. In its current form, ONA is highly theoretical and requires a degree of language proficiency that many newcomers have not yet acquired at the start of their civic integration pathway, when this component should bring the greatest added value. Municipalities also indicate that they would like to play a more prominent role in ONA, since they are responsible for helping benefit claimants find a job. In addition, many of the actors interviewed advocated a differentiated examination system, suited to the potential and competencies of newcomers, so that people with the potential for achieving a higher level of language proficiency and people with learning difficulties could follow a useful pathway that contributes to their further integration.

The current examination system comprises seven components: 1) fluency in Dutch; 2) listening comprehension skills; 3) writing skills; 4) reading comprehension skills; 5) knowledge of Dutch society; 6) preparing for the labour market (ONA); and 7) the participation statement. Responsibility for the participation statement has already been devolved to the municipalities. As I have already indicated, this will also be the case for ONA, which will also be more practice-oriented, thus providing the best possible contribution to newcomers' work prospects. Once the civic integration system has been revised, municipal authorities will have a direct relationship with newcomers, enabling them to provide a suitable work orientation programme including, where possible, work experience placements with local employers (in accordance with the motion submitted by Chantal Nijkerken-de Haan (VVD) and Bente Becker (VVD) on 21 December 2017).²¹ I have decided that the language proficiency and knowledge of Dutch society components of the civic integration examination should continue to be tested at national level. They should be seen as the core of the civic integration curriculum, and should therefore be uniform. The attainment targets of the knowledge of Dutch society module will be revised and, where necessary, updated, as requested by Jan Patternotte (Democrats '66 (D66)) et al in their motion of 14 April 2018.²² The guiding principle will continue to be our shared, fundamental norms and knowledge of the democratic rule of law.

VI. Activation and budget management support

In the current situation, asylees rely on social assistance benefit for too long, and they run the risk of falling into debt. I want this group to be activated and to receive budget management support right from the start, with a view to preventing them getting into financial difficulties. This support should be provided for as long as necessary, and should be geared to self-reliance and activation.

Municipalities will be instructed to put a budget management support system in place for all newcomers. This will apply to all municipalities and is in line with current practice (for example, that seen in Rotterdam). Until newcomers have found their feet, the municipalities will deduct recurring

²⁰ House of Representatives 32824, 2016-2017 session, no. 161.

²¹ House of Representatives 34775 2017-2018 session, no. 35 (Nijkerken-de Haan and Becker motion).

²² House of Representatives 32824 2017-2018 session, no. 211 (Patternotte motion).

costs (rent, gas and electricity bill and insurance contributions) in advance from their benefit payments. The newcomers will then receive the remainder, in addition to any allowances. The municipal authorities have the required instruments at their disposal, and some municipalities already deduct rent and health insurance contributions from benefit payments and provide additional budget management support for less self-reliant newcomers. I will commission a study to explore the strategies currently used by municipalities, and the problems they encounter. I will also explore whether budget management support can be made compulsory.

I would like to propose providing budget management support for a period determined on the basis of the intake procedure and the PIP, so that newcomers' progress and efforts can be monitored. Individuals will be obliged to commit to this; it will be among the agreements the newcomer reaches with the municipality. Less self-reliant newcomers will be given budget management support for as long as necessary, with benefits in kind. The aim is to make the newcomers responsible, and to activate them. Newcomers who make an effort to integrate will become self-reliant faster, and therefore deserve to manage their own finances.

In principle, the municipality of Rotterdam deducts certain recurring costs (e.g. collective health insurance contribution, rent and, where necessary, energy bills) from newcomers' benefit payments, in accordance with section 57 of the Participation Act. This entails a customised approach. If newcomers run into debt, the organisations responsible for assisting them request the Municipal Credit Bank to help them with basic budget management, including learning financial self-reliance.

Impact on other legislation

The requirements relating to civic integration will, in principle, also be used in relation to the Aliens Act 2000 (for those wishing to acquire more permanent residence status) and the Netherlands Nationality Act (for those wishing to acquire Dutch nationality). The proposed changes to civic integration will therefore have direct consequences for each of these systems too, in terms of both content and procedure. For example, the devolution of responsibilities to the municipalities may impact the Immigration and Naturalisation Service (IND). In fleshing out the changes proposed in this letter, I will therefore ensure that account is taken of cohesion between the two current **loan** systems **[Noot vertaler: SZW heeft bevestigd dat 'leenstelsel' een tyfout was. Maar AVT heeft niet de bevoegdheid om kamerbrieven zomaar aan te passen. Mocht dit wel kunnen, dan dient de vertaling te luiden als volgt: "between the two current systems (i.e. that of the Aliens Act (2000) and the Netherlands Nationality Act)"]** and the new system, in terms of both content and delivery, and that where necessary this is strengthened.

Monitoring, evaluation and information exchange

The proposed changes to the civic integration system call for strong commitment from all stakeholders. The success of the system will depend to a considerable extent on the commitment of the municipalities and their ability to deliver. This will be monitored from the start, so that measures can be taken promptly when problems arise. The monitoring system will be designed as part of the evaluation framework in consultation with the municipalities, the Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations.

If the municipal authorities and other parties are to carry out their tasks effectively, they need to share information and work together closely. For instance, municipalities need to be informed by

the IND, COA or DUO in good time so that they can contact newcomers with a civic integration requirement and monitor their progress. Conversely, when assessing applications for a more permanent residence status, the IND will need to be informed as to whether an applicant has fulfilled their civic integration requirement. All the parties involved need estimates of expected numbers of newcomers with a civic integration requirement in order to ensure sufficient capacity for intake procedures, courses and examinations. I therefore plan to flesh out information exchange procedures in close consultation with the parties involved. Problems will be discussed with them, so that workable solutions can be found.

Financial frameworks

I plan to fund the changes to the civic integration system within the current financial frameworks. In addition, the government announced in the coalition agreement that it would earmark extra funds as of 2019 to raise language proficiency levels. Municipalities already receive funds to assist asylees – €2,370 per individual – in choosing civic integration and participation statement pathways, for example. The municipal authorities also receive allocations from the Participation budget, which may be used for this target group. The combination of extra funds and the funds now available for civic integration and related purposes forms the hard ceiling for spending on the new system. Regarding funding for the municipal authorities, my preference is for a model that corresponds to commitment and results, and I am thinking in terms of a form of performance-based funding. In my view, the relevant agreements should not be non-binding. This will of course be fleshed out in a spending plan, agreed in consultation and cooperation with the municipalities, with specific attention being devoted to monitoring and evaluation.²³

Follow-up

My aim is for the new Civic Integration Act to come into force in 2020, as soon as this is justifiable in terms of implementation. The act will continue to provide the framework for the conditions under which newcomers must meet their civic integration requirement (and the period in which they must do this). The same applies to the consequences for those who, through their own fault, fail to meet the requirement. The act will also establish municipalities' leading role in the system, set out the funding frameworks and specify the way newcomers will be assisted in their civic integration pathway.

The proposed changes to the civic integration system are based on knowledge, research and practical experience. We are indebted to the many people we discussed this issue with for their contribution. I would like to continue to benefit from their knowledge, with specific attention being paid to the role of the municipalities, which ties in with the role they already play in the social domain. During the preparatory process, a wide range of stakeholders was involved, from employers and language teachers to interest organisations. Many expressed their appreciation for this, and their willingness to be involved in the follow-up. I would like to continue to involve them and other relevant stakeholders, so as to provide clarity at the earliest possible stage regarding the implications of the new system for them (e.g. municipal procedures within the social domain, funding, organisational frameworks, staffing, etc.) and to enable municipalities to learn from each other. This also applies to the executive agencies involved in civic integration pathways, including DUO and partners at the other ministries. This approach will be used to distil an implementation plan from the main outlines presented in this letter. As soon as political

²³ This adjustment is also part of the programme that brings together central and local government and the financial principles underpinning it.

agreement has been reached on the shape the new system will take, I will draw up an agenda describing how we will achieve it, and how we will ensure that all parties are prepared. I will also examine how the effectiveness of the new system can be monitored, and will inform the House of Representatives accordingly.

In the interim

Many parties have drawn attention to problems with the integration of newcomers who have arrived in the Netherlands since the influx of refugees reached its peak. Many have become entangled in red tape, while municipal authorities and other parties are formally limited in their scope to help them.²⁴ The proposed changes to the system will come too late for this group. At the same time, many municipalities and other organisations are themselves trying to find ways of preventing future problems, and are using all the means at their disposal within the current system. I want, therefore, to help municipalities develop methods that are in line with both the current and new system and that contribute to successful integration and participation. I am thinking in terms of pilot projects, including projects geared to integrating women reunified with family members in the Netherlands, in accordance with the motion submitted by Bente Becker.²⁵ I will also commission a list of best practices in municipalities that have taken an active approach to civic integration, and, where possible, facilitate knowledge-sharing.

²⁴ A number of problems in the current system will be resolved by changes to the Civic Integration Scheme to be introduced as of 1 July 2018. Attending a course in Dutch as a second language and undergoing training will be grounds for extending the time limit for civic integration.

²⁵ House of Representatives 32824 2017-2018 session (Becker motion).