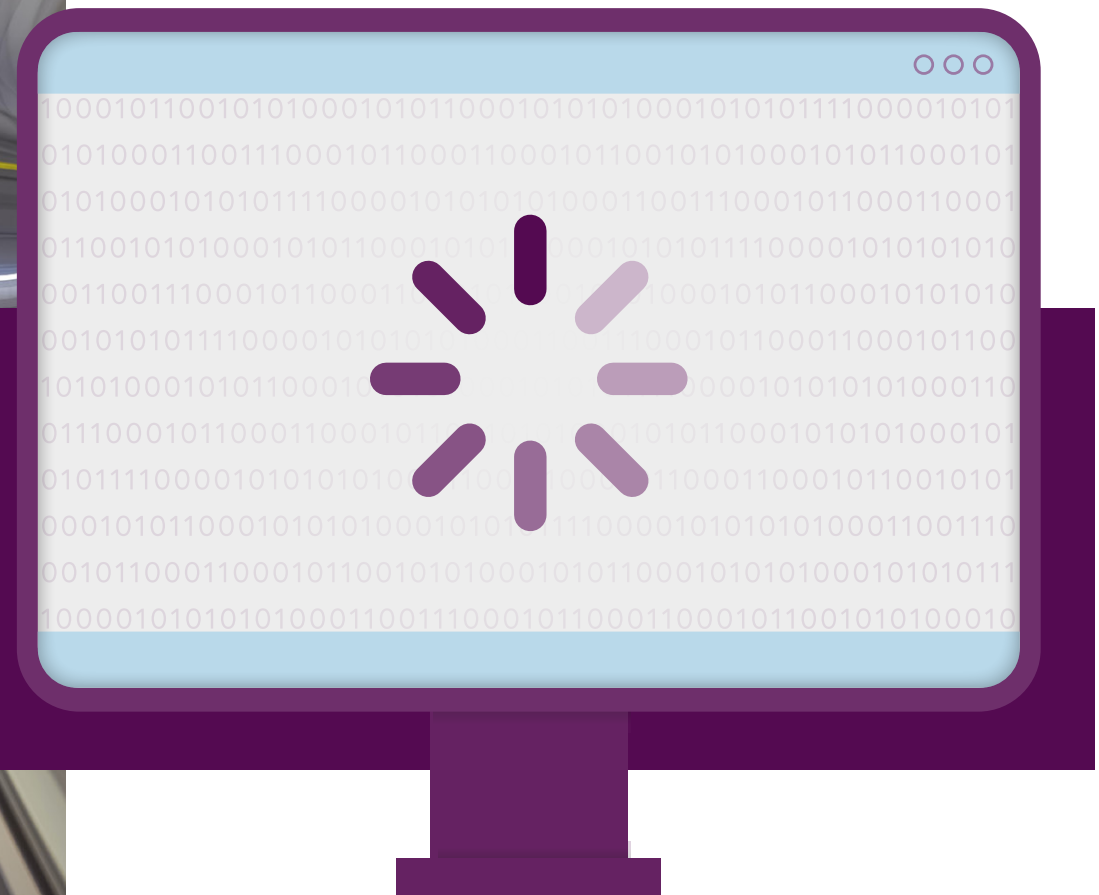


Groundhog Day

Recurring patterns in 35 years of work on improving the government's digital information management



Set up pursuant to the Dutch Open Government Act (*Wet open overheid; Woo*), the independent Advisory Board on Public Access and Information Management (*Adviescollege Openbaarheid en Informatiehuishouding; ACOI*) is a permanent body that advises the Dutch Cabinet and Parliament when asked and on its own initiative on public access to government information and the improvement of information management and that also acts as an intermediary for journalists, academic researchers and other professional stakeholders.

The members of the Advisory Board on Public Access and Information Management are:

Ineke van Gent, Chair of the Advisory Board
Martin Berendse, Vice-Chair
Caroline Koetsenruijter
Serv Wiemers
Jamila Aanzi



Preface

Have you seen the film *Groundhog Day*? Phil, a lazy reporter, is sent to a small American village to cover Groundhog Day. The event is about a groundhog predicting the arrival of spring, but that's not the issue here. Time suddenly stops in that village. Morning after morning, Phil wakes up on Groundhog Day and has to cover the event. To me that would be a nightmare – I want to move forward. So, I was truly happy when the loop was broken and everything turned out okay. The film became a classic and 'Groundhog Day' became a fixed expression for an unpleasant situation that is keeps repeating itself.

This Groundhog Day feeling regularly came up in the interviews for this review of digital information management

by the government. Efforts have been underway for years to get the house in order, which is a prerequisite for the performance of government tasks, for justifying this performance and for later research and historiography, according to the Public Records Act (*Archiefwet*). It is also a necessary condition for the timely provision of information that people need and that they are entitled to under the Open Government Act. Time and again, plans, projects and programmes were set up to break patterns and improve information management. But the results these produced were unsatisfactory, and new initiatives would be launched again and again – hence the title.

This review answers the question: why has the government failed so far

to permanently improve its information management? It will help us to consider the other question: how can we escape Groundhog Day i.e., what patterns do we need to break on the path towards an open government and sound information management? We will gladly address this question in our advisory report on the multi-year plan for improving the government's digital information management, which will be issued shortly.

On behalf of the Advisory Board on Public Access and Information Management,

Ineke van Gent
Chair

Contents

Summary	5
1 Introduction	8
2 Legal framework for sound information management	11
3 Context: Information management must move along with a changing world	15
4 Pattern: The importance of information management is underestimated	18
5 Pattern: Autonomy and the interests of individual organisations are given too much priority	21
6 Pattern: Specialists are not correctly positioned	24
7 Pattern: An incident-driven rather than a long-term approach	28
8 Pattern: Insufficient control of compliance with arrangements made	31
9 Pattern: Standards and general facilities are underutilised	34
10 Current situation	37
Literature consulted and sources	41

Summary

Reviewing 35 years of digital information management by the government, this report is part of the advisory report that the Advisory Board on Public Access and Information Management (hereinafter the 'Advisory Board') will issue in the first quarter of 2024 on the multi-year plan for improving the government's digital information management. Other building blocks underlying the advisory report are the preliminary reports on the current state of information management issued by the Information and Heritage Inspectorate (*Inspectie Overheidsinformatie en Erfgoed*), the Association of Netherlands Municipalities (*Vereniging van Nederlandse Gemeenten*), the Interprovincial Consultation (*Interprovinciaal Overleg*) and the Association of Regional Water Authorities (*Unie van Waterschappen*) at the Advisory Board's request.

The review gives a provisional answer to the question: why is the government's information management still not in order? This should give a clear picture of what is needed to improve the situation: a widely shared and forward-looking approach to structuring information management. After all, despite all efforts, the government's information management is still not in order, as the preliminary reports also conclude. The problems surrounding public access and information management are set in a vicious cycle of a lack of will, a lack of power and a lack of skill. In this review, we distinguish six patterns that emerged from the tremendous amount of material (reports, policy plans, interviews).

These patterns keep repeating themselves, affect one another and keep one another in place. A deadlock has now arisen, which is all the more problematic as the world has changed dramatically in the past few decades. Digitalisation, for example, prompted explosive growth in the amount of government information, which now comes in many types and formats, and the

government increasingly started operating in a network, in supply chains consisting of numerous public and private partners. At the same time, there were rising expectations of the government, like Google, being able to supply all that information at the push of a button.

The six patterns are the following:

1. The importance of information management is underestimated

Ministers and top officials do not feel any urgency to get and keep public information management in order. Managing information is not regarded as a main duty but merely as a precondition or as a part of business operations, and therefore as overhead. This chronic lack of consistent attention and resources erodes major foundations of the rule of law, such as transparency, due care and accountability. This is partly explained by the fact that sound information management requires choices and initiatives that exceed the Cabinet's and public office holders' terms of office.

2. Autonomy and the interests of individual organisations are given too much priority

A widely shared and forward-looking approach to structuring information management for the government as a whole is lacking, partly because it has never been clear who the commissioning parties and owners were. The call for a wide approach is often heard and leads to consultations and the drafting of plans, but not to action. When push comes to shove, the organisations' own interests tend to outweigh the general interest of a government-wide approach, while – remarkably – the organisations overlook the importance of sound information management for the performance of their own organisation.

3. Specialists are not correctly positioned

Inspired by the idea that digitalisation would allow every government employee to take care of their own information management, the government has cut back on archive staff and information specialists, including those for documentary information provision (*documentaire informatievoorziening*; DIV), for decades. On the other hand there has been a persistent lack of attention for developing the knowledge and skills of all government employees in the area of digital information management. At present the DIV function is organised too much at distance, because of which DIV specialists are no longer properly positioned to bring about the right changes.

4. An incident-driven rather than a long-term approach

Incidents or critical reports were usually a reason to initiate projects to get public access or information management in order. However, many of these projects addressed only part of the problem, were allocated a temporary budget, focused on preventing a repetition of incidents and did not result in permanent improvement. Digitalisation has been a complicating factor here, with the


fragmented use of digital technology having created a complex, organically grown application landscape in which digital technology is generally – and wrongly – regarded as the current or future solution to all problems.

5. Insufficient control of compliance with arrangements made

Numerous projects, programmes and solutions have not materialised over the years due to a lack of control of compliance with arrangements made. To start with, there is no clear central control. The Minister of the Interior and Kingdom Relations fulfils the role of coordinating government member very reticently, and ministries, provincial authorities and municipal authorities rely on their own autonomy. Where information management was not part of the control cycle, systematic audits and substantive quality checks were often lacking. The same holds true for funding. There is no overview of expenses incurred, resources required or avoided/avoidable costs. Even where this is in order, the long-term administrative involvement needed to achieve the goals set is lacking. In disregard of the statutory provisions, consequences or sanctions also seem not to be applied when a person or organisation does not have proper information management in place.

6. Standards and general facilities are underutilised

The multitude of arrangements, norms and standards for sustainable accessibility remain underutilised. They are often not mandatory and, as a result, are not applied or are not applied consistently. General IT facilities also hardly get off the ground, without a doubt partly as a consequence of the gap between the IT silo and the archiving silo in software procurement and also because knowledge about information management is only available far from the workplace. The result is ever-increasing fragmentation of information management i.e., information anarchy.



Given the preliminary reports, the patterns identified can still be recognised today, although changes have in fact been initiated. Administrative attention for public access and information management has increased with the introduction of the Open Government Act, the multi-year plan and the modernisation of the Public Records Act. Many organisations have taken concrete steps in order to start managing information, such as phasing out network folders, archiving or more effectively archiving e-mails and text messages, and introducing a quality system.

However, we still see insufficient sense of urgency, fragmented information management, a fragmented approach to the issue, insufficient direction and insufficient knowledge and resources being available for this core duty of the government. Specifically, we point out aspects that consistently emerge in this review – the use of standards, the application of metadata and control on the basis of information management plans. There is every reason to consider what is needed to break this deadlock.

1 Introduction

1.1 The government is struggling to get its information management in order

For decades now, the government has struggled to get its digital information management in order, even though a properly functioning information management system is essential for a properly functioning government. The childcare allowance affair has made it clear that the stakes are high. Poor information management was one of the reasons why the injustice could continue for so long. Responding to the *Ongekend onrecht* ('Unprecedented Injustice') report of the Childcare Allowance Parliamentary Inquiry Committee, the Cabinet said in January 2021:

"We need to store our information [...] in such a way as to guarantee its permanent accessibility, findability, correctness, completeness and reliability in order to ensure that we can account for and provide reasons for our actions at any time before, during and after the making of policy and legislation. Correct and accessible information is also required for the day-to-day operations of the government itself.

Sound information management is a precondition for the correct provision of information and an essential component of our democratic state under the rule of law, and is also badly needed for an improved interplay between MPs, the Cabinet and civil servants."¹

Here, the government set itself a clear and concrete task: getting its information management in order. For this purpose, the central government has drafted a multi-year plan entitled *Open op Orde* ('Open for everyone') and has made a budget of €787 million available. This is not the first time the government promises to do better in future. Many critical reports containing firm recommendations have been issued since the late 1980s. Although these reports were generally followed by several improvement programmes, they never resulted in the permanent improvement desired and many people considered them a repeat performance, like Groundhog Day. This raises the question:

Why has the government failed to properly address this issue to date?

¹ See the letter to the House of Representatives of 15 January 2021: Cabinet response to the *'Unprecedented Injustice'* report.

1.2 Why has there been no success? Six recurring patterns

In this report, the Advisory Board on Public Access and Information Management (hereinafter the 'Advisory Board') looks back on 35 years of work on improving the government's digital information management, identifying the following six patterns that hinder permanent improvement of digital information management:

1. The importance of information management is underestimated
2. Autonomy and the interests of individual organisations are given too much priority
3. Specialists are not correctly positioned
4. An incident-driven rather than a long-term approach
5. Insufficient control of compliance with arrangements made
6. Standards and general facilities are underutilised

These patterns were identified using advisory reports and other reports issued in the period under examination about the status of digital information management by the government and using ten semi-structured interviews held with experts. The patterns keep repeating themselves, affect one another and keep one another in place. Time and again, the government has failed to break these patterns and take steps towards a widely shared, coordinated and forward-looking approach to improving digital information management.

Based on the six patterns, lessons can be learned that support the execution of current plans, including the multi-year plan that is mandatory under the Open Government Act, as well as future plans.

1.3 Relationship with the advisory report about the multi-year plan

This report looks back on the past and is part of the Advisory Board's advice on the multi-year plan intended to improve the government's digital information management. The obligation to prepare a multi-year plan was inspired by the idea that better and faster disclosure of government information is possible if the underlying information management is 'in order'. The ministers and state secretaries of the Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations and the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science are responsible for drafting the multi-year plan in consultation with municipal, provincial and water authorities.

The Open Government Act provides that the term of the multi-year plan is approximately eight years. Sent to the House of Representatives on 11 December 2023, the central government's multi-year plan succeeds the current multi-year plan *Open op Orde* ('Open for everyone'). The umbrella organisations of municipal, provincial and water authorities have drawn up their own multi-year plans for the other levels of government, which have also been sent to the House of Representatives.

The Advisory Board's duty is to provide periodic advice on the multi-year plan, with the advice in any event covering the current state of information management in the public administration, the progress made with the execution of the multi-year plan and access to public information. The Advisory Board has asked the Information and Heritage Inspectorate (*Inspectie Overheidsinformatie en Erfgoed*; IOE), the Association of Netherlands Municipalities (*Vereniging van Nederlandse Gemeenten*; VNG),

the Interprovincial Consultation (*Interprovinciaal Overleg*; IPO) and the Association of Regional Water Authorities (*Unie van Waterschappen*; UvW) to issue preliminary reports. These reports were published in September 2023.² The advisory report on the multi-year plan itself will be published in the first quarter of 2024.³

As a result, this report does not contain any recommendations; it interprets and explains the developments of the past 35 years.

1.4 Reader's guide

The next chapter first explains the legal framework for sound information management and answers the question: when is information management sufficiently in order? Chapter 3 subsequently outlines three major developments arising from digitalisation within the government. This context is a precondition for understanding why getting and keeping digital information management in order is a complex task. Chapters 4 to 9 discuss the six recurring patterns. Chapter 10 returns to the present day and outlines the current state of information management using the aforementioned preliminary reports.

2 See the ACOI news report of 18 September 2023: [*Government information management still not in order*](#).

3 See the ACOI's letter to the Minister of the Interior and Kingdom Relations of 28 March 2023: [*Advice on amending the information management multi-year plan*](#).

2 Legal framework for sound information management

This report focuses on recurring patterns that prevent the government from getting its digital information management in order. But when is it good enough? When is information management sufficiently in order?

This report focuses on recurring patterns that prevent the government from getting its digital information management in order. But when is it good enough? When is information management sufficiently in order?

The practical answer is: when information that is relevant to the functioning of the government and democracy is available to all and can be used by all for as long as is necessary. The legal answer is: when at least the rules of the Public Records Act and the associated subordinated legislation (i.e. the Public Records Decree and the Public Records Regulations) are complied with. To aid a proper understanding, this chapter describes the main principles and terms of the Public Records Act, using the more modern wording included in the bill modernising this Act (hereinafter the 'new Public Records Act').

The Open Government Act now acknowledges that sound information management is also necessary for the disclosure of information, as Section 2.4(1) of the Open Government Act (the duty of care in respect of information) and temporary Chapter 6 (about a multi-year plan for information management) refer to the rules the Public Records Act sets for the controlled retention and

destruction of government information.

2.1 Information management

For the purposes of this report, we define 'information management' as follows:

The set of arrangements, activities and organisational and technical facilities for the careful management of information by government organisations.

This report focuses on archiving as part of information management, which is subject to the legal framework provided in the Public Records Act. Other interests the government should consider include information security (under the Government Baseline for Information Security), personal data protection (under the General Data Protection Regulation) and public access (under the Open Government Act).

2.2 Government information belongs to us all

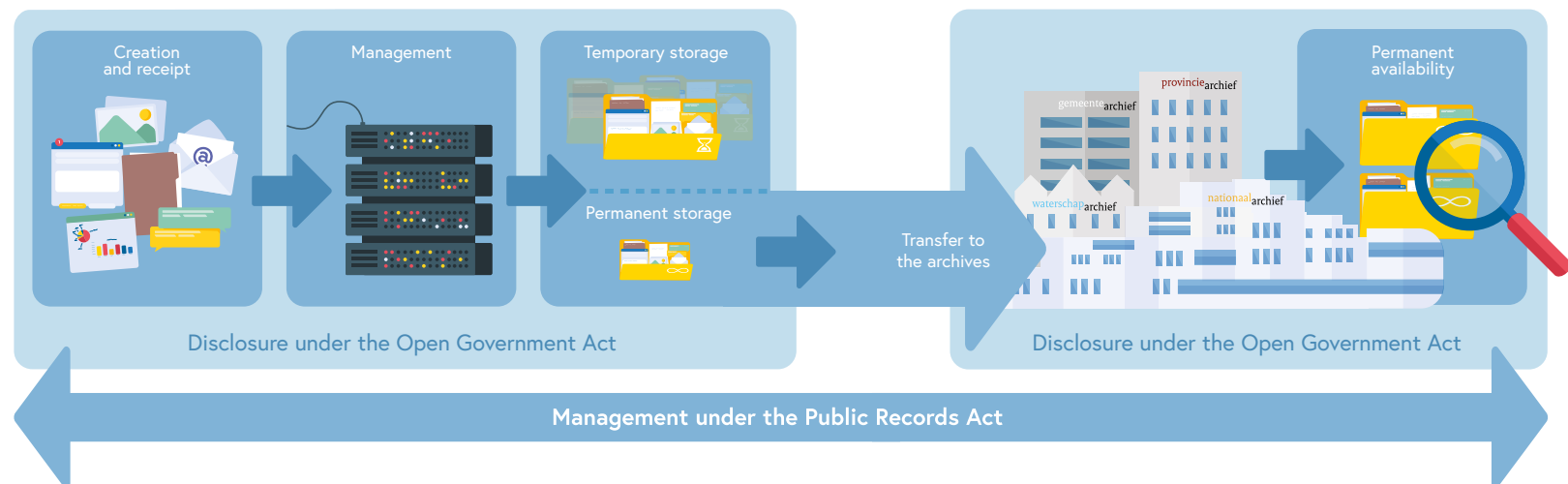
Government information belongs to us all. It is at the heart of sound public governance and a functioning democracy. The interests a government organisation needs to balance when structuring its information management are enshrined in Section 1.3 of the new Public Records Act. These interests relate to the importance of government information:

- for the performance of the public duties of the relevant government body or the public duties of other government bodies, and accounting for this performance.
- for everybody, in taking note of, exercising, and performing rights and obligations.
- for research.
- and as part of cultural heritage.

In short: proper archives constitute the memory of government organisations themselves and of society in the short and long terms.

The right of all people to access government information, i.e. public access, and the grounds for exception are laid down in detail in the Open Government Act. The Public Records Act applies as well, as it regulates public access to information available at Nationaal Archief (the 'National Archives') and the decentralised archiving services. This Act also requires the government to properly manage information throughout its life cycle, making this Act the most important framework for structuring information management. Figure 1 shows the connection between these two Acts.

Figure 1: Connection between the Open Government Act and the Public Records Act.



2.3 Key terms of the Public Records Act

Government information: documents, irrespective of their form

In this report, the terms 'information' and 'documents' are used interchangeably to refer to government information within the meaning of Section 2.1 of the Open Government Act and Section 1.1 of the new Public Records Act:

Document: a written record or other set of recorded information that has been drafted or received by a government body and that, by its nature, is related to the public duties of that government body.

This definition of 'document' is technically neutral, which means that the form in which information is recorded is irrelevant. As a result, the definition includes not only text documents, such as letters, permit applications, grant decisions, advisory memorandums or reports – other manifestations such as photographs, video and audio recordings, e-mails, websites, databases and algorithms are also within the scope of the Open Government Act and the Public Records Act, provided that they are related to the work performed by government organisations. It is equally irrelevant where (on a device or server) documents are stored or who owns the equipment.⁴

Managing information: lasting accessibility for as long as is necessary

Citizens' right to access government information is underpinned by

the government's duty of care in diligently managing this information. This duty of care is laid down in Section 2.4(1) of the Open Government Act and refers to Section 3 of the 1995 Public Records Act, which discusses both the 'good, orderly and accessible condition' and the destruction of documents. Section 4.1 of the new Public Records Act modernises the wording and the explanation of the section:

Responsible government bodies take appropriate measures to make their documents accessible and to keep them accessible on a lasting basis. This means that the organisation ensures that the documents are available, legible, interpretable, reliable and protected from changes of any kind for as long as is necessary, i.e., for the applicable retention period.⁵

This section stresses that digital documents require continuous care and that the measures may vary depending on the importance of information for the performance of duties, accountability, later research and heritage.

Selection: applying retention periods and destroying information after the expiry of a period

The Public Records Act also provides that government organisations must define retention periods for the various categories of documents after weighing interests in public 'selection lists'. This is how the Public Records Act regulates what government information should be available at any time and what government information

4 The explanations to the Open Government Act and the Public Records Act state that this definition does not fundamentally differ from those of the Government Information (Public Access) Act (*Wet openbaarheid van bestuur*; Wob) and the 1995 Public Records Act (which uses the term 'archive records').

5 See the Explanatory Memorandum to the new Public Records Act, pp. 19-20.

should no longer exist. By destroying information, the government keeps an overview of information management and prevents unnecessary management costs, and destruction may be necessary for privacy protection (in addition to limiting public access).

Transfer to archiving services

Only documents that need to be retained indefinitely are transferred to archiving services after 20 years pursuant to the current Public Records Act or, under the new Public Records Act, after 10 years. The archiving services ensure that the documents are retained permanently and are made available to the general public. In the near future, the Public Records Act will replace the Open Government Act in regulating public access to the documents transferred.

2.4 Archiving by design

This report uses the term 'archiving by design'. The term has several definitions, all of which boil down to a single method, i.e.:

The identification of measures for the permanent accessibility of government information when the organisation structures or restructures a work process or procures, designs or adapts an information system. This includes the timely incorporation of measures for permanent accessibility and controlled destruction.

The purpose is to avoid repairs being needed afterwards – when the work process is already being followed or when a system has already been put to use – to get a grip on information management. The term 'archiving by design' is sometimes used in a different way, i.e. to emphasise that the permanent accessibility of digital information must be guaranteed from the time the information is created or received.⁶ Where paper archives used to be cleaned up and organised just before they were transferred to the archiving services, this is more time-consuming and complicated for digital archives if insufficient thought has been given to this in advance.

⁶ 'Permanent accessibility' means that the information is findable, available, legible, interpretable and reliable for those who are entitled to it, from the moment the information was created and for as long as is necessary, and that the accessibility of the information is guaranteed even when changes of any kind occur.



3 Context:

Information management must move along with a changing world

IT facilities, government complexity and expectations in respect of the government have changed dramatically since the late 1980s. This was mostly driven by digitalisation, which brings great challenges for information management. Although digital technology has significantly facilitated the creation and sharing of information, it has become a greater and continuous challenge for the government to ensure that this information can always be found and used.

This chapter outlines three important developments demonstrating that information management had to move along with a changing world.

- Technological developments: digitalisation has resulted in an exponential increase in information that can take a wide variety of forms.
- Administrative developments: the government has become a complex information chain.
- Social developments: citizens expect the government to provide information quickly and have ever higher expectations of digital (as well as non-digital) services.

3.1 Technological: digitalisation has resulted in more information that takes a wide variety of forms

Before the age of digitalisation, the government's information management consisted of paper files that were manually managed and physically stored in a government organisation's own archives. Some of the files were destroyed after the expiry of the retention periods included in the organisation's selection list. Files to be retained indefinitely were ultimately physically transferred to the depots of Nationaal Archief or the decentralised archiving services.

All this changed when computers became commonplace in the 1990s, followed by the emergence of the internet. The government started using Microsoft office applications and had individual employees save files on network drives. Document management systems (DMS) and case management systems were introduced to improve collaboration, create digital files and retain and destroy documents in a controlled way. Key registers, containing up-to-date information on persons, addresses, buildings, vehicle registration numbers and so on, were also set up for authorised government bodies to use. Citizens' requests and applications could increasingly be submitted to the government online and the internet became a more and more important means of communication within the government, with citizens and companies, and for informing the public.

The government's information management changed drastically as a result, with an exponential increase in the production, distribution, use and reuse of digital information. All government employees were now able to digitally produce, save, share and manage documents, which they did in an increasing number of different applications and file formats. Information was recorded not only in 'traditional' text documents such as letters, reports and memorandums, but also in a range of new forms, such as e-mails, websites, chat messages, databases and algorithms. Managing and archiving all these digital flows of information and communication brought great challenges.


Another consequence was the reduced shelf life of information. Digital files – the bits and bytes – may become corrupted and the information carriers, software and file formats used may become obsolete quickly, rendering the information stored in the files inaccessible. This means that sustainable accessibility of digital information often cannot be guaranteed in all instances.

3.2 Administrative: the government has become a complex information chain

The Dutch government is currently made up of over 1,600 organisations and agencies. Digitalisation promoted the exchange and reuse of information within and outside the government, leading to government duties being increasingly performed in chains that also included other public and private actors. While enhancing the efficiency and effectiveness of government actions, it also transformed the government's digital information management into a complex information chain. This made it more complicated to manage information, as arrangements had to be made with parties outside the organisation as to who was responsible for ensuring that shared information remained findable, usable and reliable. It added to the uncertainty about who was to manage and retain what digital information. The fragmented way in which information is managed has also made it more difficult to obtain an overall view of all information the government has available about citizens, companies and administrative topics.

3.3 Social: digitalisation fuels citizens' high expectations

Society's expectations of the government and the relationship between citizens and the government have changed in the wake of digitalisation and the introduction of the internet. In our information society, we have become accustomed to instantly receiving information that is relevant to us and it has become easier for citizens to join the public debate and get involved in the design of government policy. As a result, the government is equally expected to supply all relevant information at the push of a button.



Moreover, the quality of the government's digital (as well as non-digital) services needs to meet ever higher requirements and expectations.⁷ A failure to live up to these expectations easily triggers disappointment and distrust. Problems in information management are an increasingly important factor here, giving rise to situations such as the unlawful use of information for enforcement purposes, citizens desperately attempting to have their own data changed in government systems or journalists engaged in endless litigation in order to gain access to public information.

3.4 It is a complex task

Against this backdrop, it becomes clear that getting and keeping digital information management in order is a complex task. Significant efforts have been made in many areas to enable digitalisation within the government, bringing numerous benefits for both the government and citizens and companies. Nevertheless, the current state of information management also reveals an excessive focus on digitalising processes, including the post process, when moving along with a changing and digitalising world, with insufficient attention being paid to adapting the procedures for working and working together with digital technology. This has resulted in the government's digital information management partly remaining behind in the paper era and in a general failure to connect information management with user-friendliness in document management systems and case management systems. In its recent report

Rapportage en Speerpunten ('Report and Primary Concerns'), the Government Commissioner for Information Management used the metaphor of a motorised stagecoach that has never developed into a modern-day car.⁸

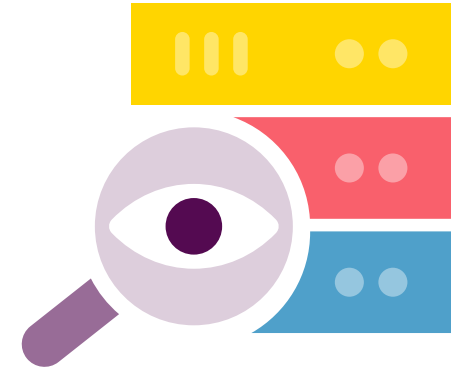
The result is that information that is relevant to the functioning of the government and democracy is generally not available to all and cannot be used by all in a timely fashion. The rapid pace of developments does not justify the conclusion that the government was simply unable to keep up with those developments in the past 35 years. Patterns can be identified that continue to prevent the government from getting and keeping digital information management in order. In the next chapters, six of these recurring patterns are discussed and supported by quotations from previous reports and the interviews held.

⁷ The Council for Public Administration (*Raad voor het Openbaar Bestuur*) already identified this development in 2003 in its *Trias informatica. ICT en overheid in vogelvlucht* ('Trias informatica. IT and the government in a nutshell'), and this trend has continued in the past twenty years.

⁸ Government Commissioner for Information Management 2023, pp. 2-3.

4 Pattern

The importance of information management is underestimated



Many reports paint a picture of the consistent underestimation of the importance of information management for the government's functioning. The experts we interviewed for this study confirmed this picture. This underestimation manifests itself in two ways. Firstly, politicians and top officials are not giving the issue much attention and they do not feel the urgency to get and keep information management in order. Secondly, managing information is not regarded as a main government duty but merely as a precondition.


4.1 There is no sense of the urgency of the problem

"It is strange that the government, being an 'information-processing industry', gives so little permanent attention and allocates so few resources to its information management. Information is the government's premier capital asset rather than merely a topic of minor importance, as people often think."⁹

This is how the Council for Culture and the Council for Public Administration stressed the importance of information management in their 2008 report *Informatie: grondstof met toekomst-waarde* ('Information: raw material with future value') and pointed out the government's negligence in dealing with this issue. The Councils were pessimistic, believing that major foundations of the rule of law, such as transparency, due care, accessibility, accountability and responsibility, would be eroded if no drastic changes were made.¹⁰

⁹ Council for Culture & Council for Public Administration 2008, p. 8.

¹⁰ Council for Culture & Council for Public Administration 2008, p. 7.

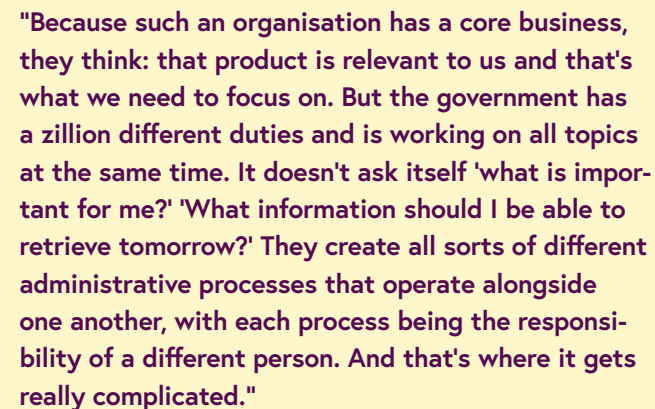


Eight years later, in 2016, the two Councils observed that the lack of attention for information management was still a persistent problem. In *Het puberbrein van de overheid* ('The government's adolescent brain'), they wrote: "At all levels of the government, we see a substantial and continuing lack of awareness, focus and knowledge regarding the importance of information and information management. This is where the root cause of the problem is found and this is where the government should start looking for a solution."¹¹ Another five years later, in 2021, the Information and Heritage Inspectorate also observed a persistent underestimation of the importance of the permanent accessibility of government information among public administrators and top officials.¹²

According to those interviewed, this is partly explained by a lack of interest in this topic among ministers and public administrators. The subject is "not sexy" and "there's no credit to be gained from it". In the view of public administrators, getting and keeping information management in order is too expensive and time-consuming and requires choices to be made and initiatives to be launched that exceed the Cabinet's and public office holders' terms of office. This, too, makes it hard to encourage public administrators to recognise the importance of the issue and to instil a sense of urgency in them.

4.2 Information management is considered a precondition rather than a main duty

Both the interviews and the reports reveal that government members and public administrators predominantly view information management as part of business operations. As a result, they consider it a precondition rather than a main government duty enshrined in the law.¹³ Government agencies mostly focus first on making and implementing policy as instructed, thereby overlooking the fact that sound information management is of great relevance when performing their primary duty. As an interviewee said:



"Because such an organisation has a core business, they think: that product is relevant to us and that's what we need to focus on. But the government has a zillion different duties and is working on all topics at the same time. It doesn't ask itself 'what is important for me?' 'What information should I be able to retrieve tomorrow?' They create all sorts of different administrative processes that operate alongside one another, with each process being the responsibility of a different person. And that's where it gets really complicated."

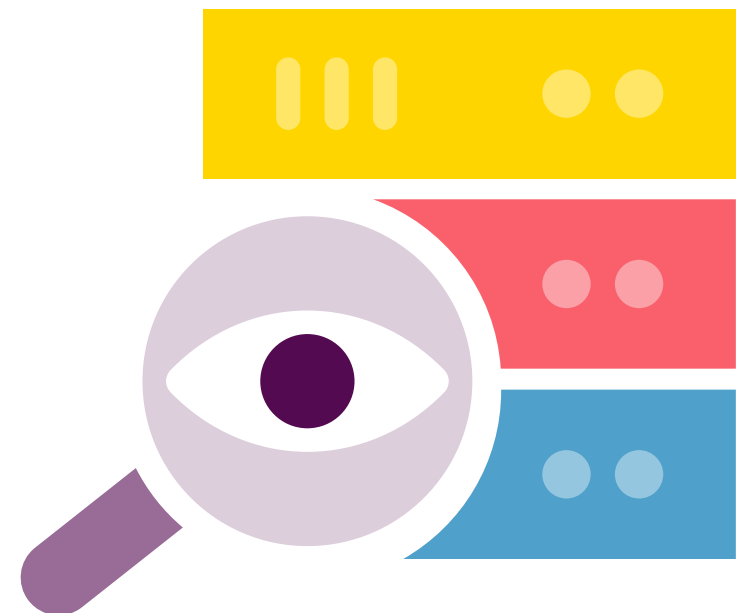
¹¹ Council for Culture & Council for Public Administration 2016, p. 10.

¹² Information and Heritage Inspectorate 2021, p. 4. In 2019, the name 'Heritage Inspectorate' (*Erfgoedinspectie*) was changed to 'Information and Heritage Inspectorate' (*Inspectie Overheidsinformatie en Erfgoed*). Only the new name and abbreviation (IOE) are used in this report, including for the period before 2019.

¹³ See, for example, Council for Culture & Council for Public Administration 2008, p. 5.

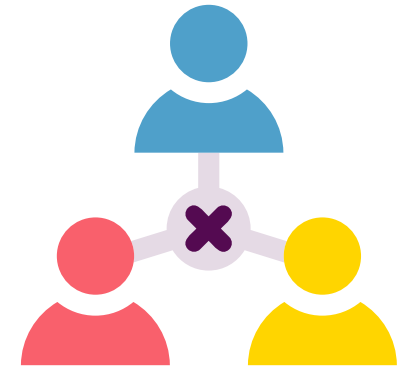
A consequence of this view of information management is that the resources needed for it are mostly regarded as overhead instead of an investment. As a result, it has become the subject of many spending cuts over the years. This obviously led to badly needed investments, such as system and software maintenance, being omitted and to pressure on the continuity of information management funding. As one of those interviewed said:

"Information management is generally not a permanent budget item. That's not a good thing. If you need to replace an entire document management system in one go, that costs a lot of money. But if you know this has to be done once every so many years, you can include it in the budget."



5 Pattern

Autonomy and the interests of individual organisations are given too much priority



When getting their information management in order, government organisations generally focus too much on their own organisation. This precludes collaboration, preventing the creation of a sound joint approach to the problem. The reports and interviews highlight two important aspects that form the basis for this pattern. First of all, it is unclear why it is important for information management to be in order. In addition, where important decisions are to be made, a government organisation's own interests appear to outweigh the public interest.

5.1 It is unclear why we do it and who we do it for

An essential part of the problem is that people working at government organisations are often unclear about why it is important to get information management in order and for whom this is important. According to those interviewed, discussions mainly revolve around the nature of the problem and its solution. In principle, there is nothing wrong with that. However, such discussions disregard the question of who the commissioning party is and who is responsible for the information. Issues such as informational value

and who bears the responsibility for it are often overlooked when addressing the problem.

The interviews also reveal that the interests of society at large are insufficiently being considered. Regarding this issue, one of the interviewees pointed out two major misunderstandings. Firstly, organisations mainly archive documents and improve information management because laws and regulations require them to and not because they feel any desire to improve the performance of their own organisation. Consequently, getting information management in order is mainly regarded as an obligation rather

than an investment. Secondly, organisations feel that the archives containing government information belong to them, while they contain public information or information that belongs to citizens or companies. This means that the information requirements of citizens are often insufficiently part of the motivation for getting information management in order.

The Netherlands Court of Audit also found that many government employees generally hardly feel, or do not at all feel, that it is their duty to make the information they use available and accessible to others. As long as they are able to retrieve their own information, they do not sufficiently see a need to manage that information in a properly structured way.¹⁴ This was an issue even in the paper era, but at that time it had less severe consequences. After all, the working file ended up with an archivist, who made sure the file could be found if and when anyone asked for it. In the digital age, considering permanent accessibility for both the organisation itself and for others is important from the moment the information is created.

5.2 An organisation's own interests prevail when choices are made

Unclear motivation is not the only impediment. Getting information management in order and arriving at a shared approach to that end are often under pressure of the excessive significance that individual organisations attach to their own interests.

¹⁴ Netherlands Court of Audit 2010, p. 17.

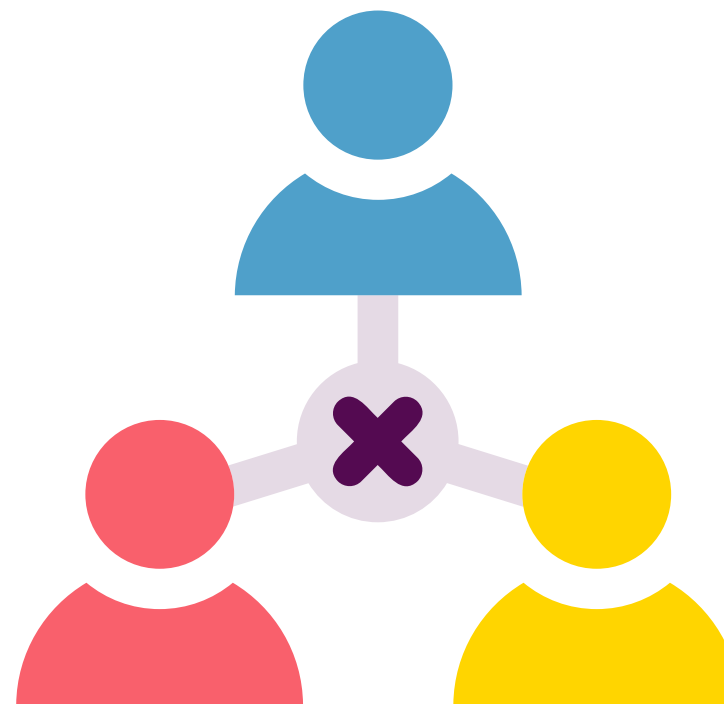
¹⁵ Information and Heritage Inspectorate 2013, p. 10.

Collaboration is regularly obstructed as organisations attempt to remain in control and assume – wrongly, in most cases – that they are too different from one another to set up joint procurement, for example. In 2013, the Information and Heritage Inspectorate concluded that although core departments advocated an approach to digital information management that encompassed all of the central government, at the same time they attach great value to their 'own' plans and solutions. The Inspectorate spoke of tension between collaboration and the organisations' desire to steer their own course.¹⁵

The interviewees confirmed this tension, noting that this problem will still exist ten years from now. They stated that there is too much siloisation, which prevents organisations from operating as a single government. The question 'how can we do better together?' is not asked enough. One of the interviewees stated that this had always been one of the government's flaws:

"We always talk from the perspective of substance and never from the perspective of the connection we have. We never speak from the perspective of people who are facing a challenge together."

This is a problem at all levels of government. One of those interviewed accused subnational authorities of a 'church tower mentality'. Many authorities of small municipalities resist collaboration with the authorities of large municipalities, sometimes out of fear of being absorbed by the large municipality during the next municipal redivision. Even where municipalities are merging, a shared decentralised approach is often out of the picture. With the focus being limited to pooling information and reconciling the systems, in view of the resources available investing in a future approach that is not perceived as beneficial in the short term is not top of mind.



6 Pattern

Specialists are not correctly positioned



Where archivists used to occupy an important position in an organisation, this has been different for information professionals since the start of digitalisation. There are several reasons for this. Firstly, the idea emerged that the advent of digital work processes allowed government employees to increasingly perform archiving duties themselves. In addition, information specialists and the Documentary Information Provision (*Documentaire Informatievoorziening*; DIV) department have been the subject of budget cuts for decades.¹⁶ On top of this, there has been a persistent lack of attention for developing the knowledge and skills of government employees in the area of information management and the corresponding duties.

6.1 Every government employee became an archivist

The advent of digitalisation gave rise to the idea that every employee was perfectly able to be an archivist and manage their own information. In the past, every government organisation had its own specialists in the post room and the archives who assessed what information had to be retained in which file and when files

had to be destroyed or transferred to the public archiving service. Consequently, information was managed much more centrally. Because of digitalisation, the archives were no longer available only on paper and in a single physical place. Archiving – with the exception of the destruction of information – became a series of acts that every government employee should be able to perform on their computer, for which purpose document management systems and case management systems were installed.

¹⁶ The names given to this department differ from one government organisation to another and have also changed over the years. In this publication, 'DIV' also refers to post and archiving duties and information management in its more recent form.

And yet, in practice, this archiving duty has turned out to be more complex for average government employees than anticipated. The systems do not adequately support employees in information management and employees are insufficiently familiar with the requirements of information management. The multiplicity of systems and growing amount of information also complicate – rather than facilitate – digital information management.

The interviewees agreed that it was too readily assumed that government employees could take on these duties. An interviewee said in this respect:

"The digital way of working has been tremendously underestimated. People thought that anyone could do it. Yes, of course, everyone can work digitally, but everyone does it in their own way."

6.2 DIV costs have been consistently cut back

This new way of working gave rise to the idea that information specialists were no longer needed. This resulted in consistent cost cuts for the DIV function, causing crucial knowledge about information management to flow out of the organisation. Cost cuts in the DIV departments ran counter to the advisory reports and other reports issued over the years. Even back in 1999 the

Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations itself observed in *Het geheugen als collectieve kracht* ('The memory as a collective force') that this would lead to an untenable situation:

"[...] The main problem is that in the 'digital' situation there is generally no one who professionally organises, manages and cleans up the material and keeps an overview. (...) Greater freedom, less physical visibility and more archiving chaos are just a few of the changes arising from digitalisation."¹⁷

The interviews reveal that digitalisation prompted an unjustified reduction in the number of information professionals. An interviewee said in this respect: "We used to have a DIV department, [...]. Those people were made redundant due to cutbacks, but they should have been replaced by something else." Another interviewee believed that digitalisation of information management was wrongly seized as an opportunity to cut costs. "I think that was rather disastrous. If people had said from the beginning 'the DIV function is changing, so we'll transform it. We'll recruit advisers and other people at a higher level to ensure that all employees properly understand their new responsibilities, apply them well and have someone to turn to if they have questions', things would have been very different."

¹⁷ Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations & Synergie Consultancy 1999, p. 16.

The cutbacks in the DIV department reduced the overview of and grip on information managed by the organisation. The Netherlands Court of Audit confirmed this picture in 2010: "Employees largely manage information themselves, as they see fit. As a result, it depends on the individual employee whether any given archival item is indeed managed in an accessible way in practice."¹⁸

The spending cuts also affected the position of documentary information provision within the organisation, as its distance to the actual work process of an average employee became ever greater. Practical guidance and control were partly lost as a result. An interviewee said about the situation that had arisen: "When everything was still on paper, you generally had a DIV department that told you how to do your work properly. And then this changed to 'see here, guys, here's your hardware, here's your software, good luck with it.'" Employees of the DIV department are now regarded as outsiders, an interviewee told us: "You can see that people in the DIV departments have all sorts of ideas. 'They'll have to this in that way; we'll do this like that.' But the other departments simply don't accept their initiatives. The DIV people often get the response 'who are you to tell me how to do my job?'"

Another consequence of the cutbacks is a lower level of knowledge in the organisation – knowledge that is needed to come up with long-term solutions to problems that have arisen in information management. External employees are increasingly

hired to resolve IT and information management issues. "They work very hard, but they don't stay very long. Employee turnover is high, which means there's no continuity," one interviewee said. As a result, it continues to be a major challenge for the government to retain a certain level of knowledge and skills. The cutbacks also impact the position of the organisation in talks with suppliers and the way in which archiving functionalities are integrated into IT systems.

6.3 Information management knowledge and skills are lagging behind

The consequences of the cost cuts might have remained limited if consistent attention had been paid to enhancing government employees' knowledge and skills in the area of information management. An impediment here is that information management is only rarely a mandatory component of the induction programme and appraisal interviews with government employees. That is why, in 2016, the Council for Culture and the Council for Public Administration called on the government to act in their joint report *Het puberbrein van de overheid* ('The government's adolescent brain'):

18 Netherlands Court of Audit 2010, p. 6.

"Join the Minister of the Interior and Kingdom Relations in taking the initiative to develop a training programme in 2016 for public administrators and managers in the field of information management that covers operations, accountability, proof and investigation. Also ask the Minister of the Interior and Kingdom Relations to ensure that – with effect from 2017, or earlier if possible – the induction programmes for new civil servants address the importance of sound information management and the responsibilities that every individual civil servant has in this area."¹⁹

In the past few years, catch-up efforts were made with the aim of increasing knowledge and skills with regard to information management within the organisation. A case in point is the Information Management Learning Centre, which offers central government employees the opportunity to participate in training courses and e-learning courses. Information management remains only a small aspect of induction programmes. One of the interviewees experienced this first-hand: "When I took up employment, no one told me anything to the effect of 'you're a civil servant now, so everything you produce is government information. This is not just for you, and not even just for your work process. It's bigger than this, so there are a number of rules and you need to be aware of their significance.'"

¹⁹ Council for Culture & Council for Public Administration 2016, p. 55.

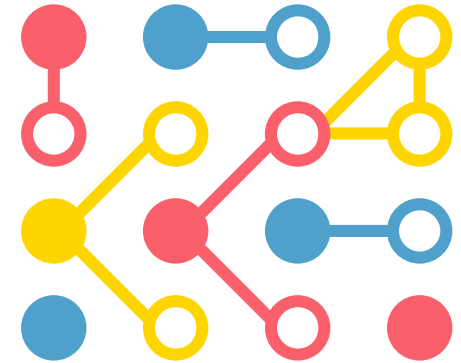
²⁰ Council for Culture & Council for Public Administration 2016, p. 27.

Ironically, it is the very shortage of knowledge and skills that maintains the knowledge and skills problem. The Council for Public Administration and the Council for Culture wrote in this respect: "Too many government officials are totally in the dark about the actual importance of sound information management and the role they have to play in this. As long as this lack of knowledge and awareness continues, no attention is paid to the issue and the problems will not be resolved. Education, training and building an integrated vision are bare necessities here."²⁰ An interviewee said in this respect: "If you eliminate the solution by reducing training in this field, you lose a knowledge area you need in order to get a picture of information management as a whole."



7 Pattern

An incident-driven rather than a long-term approach



Over the years, all sorts of initiatives have been launched to get digital information management and public access in order, generally in response to an incident or a critical inspection report or advisory report. Most of these actions, projects and programmes addressed only part of the problem and did not result in permanent improvement, while also focusing too much on IT solutions.

7.1 Temporary efforts are not permanently embedded

In 2010, the Netherlands Court of Audit observed the following in a background study of the central government's information management:

"Looking back on the past three decades, we see a pattern of a one-off action that addresses a sub-issue that is current at that time, after which enthusiasm fades until the next report is published and another

issue is addressed. Solutions are not available or are available but not implemented as standard solutions everywhere, allowing problems to accumulate."²¹

The Netherlands Court of Audit subsequently also gave a clear warning: "If the issue is not resolved in the near future, the problems the government is already experiencing but that are

²¹ Netherlands Court of Audit 2010, pp. 7-8.

currently still considered incidents (whether rightly or wrongly so) will become permanent in nature."²² It is evident that the issue has not been resolved to date, one of the reasons being that problems in information management were often approached in a programmatic way and addressed by implementing a project or programme on the assumption that this would 'solve' it all. Such an approach can only be successful if it leads to permanent improvements that, after completion of the project or programme, are properly embedded in the organisation and receive continuous attention. As regards the central government's improvement programmes, an interviewee told us that "the trick is to internalise this to a far greater extent and incorporate this into the ministries' structures as an ongoing process. This should include people who are committed to this work for a longer period of time." However, practice has shown that this is not always a success. As one interviewee said: "The process keeps repeating itself through various incidents, but the projects initiated never produce any permanent results."

Public administrators are also reluctant to consistently free up budget for a longer period of time. An interviewee said in this respect: "We only have a limited period of time [a government period]. Everything that's thought up must be implemented in that same period of four years, while you should be saying 'this process takes a much longer time to complete.'" One of the interviewees even spoke of the 'four-year strain' in this connection. "We're always told that results have to be produced in four years' time. If only we dared discuss the long term, too."

22 Netherlands Court of Audit 2010, p. 11.

23 Netherlands Court of Audit 2010, pp. 7-8.

7.2 IT is often wrongly regarded as the perfect solution

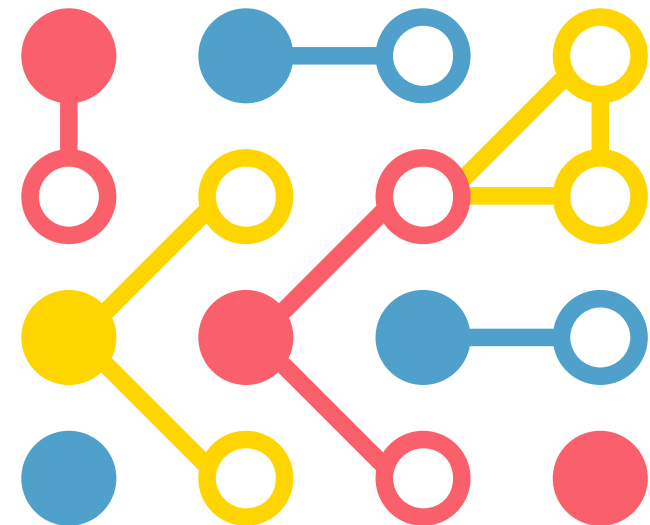
Any approach to sorting out problems in information management generally focuses on IT solutions, such as the idea that the procurement of a new document management system resolves the information management issue. There is excessive confidence in IT solutions or, as one interviewee phrased it: "The idea was: IT/AI will fix it shortly, so for now we'll just retain all documents and wait for the good things to come." In its background study, the Netherlands Court of Audit also identified an overestimation of technological solutions:

"We have previously warned of the pitfall of IT enthusiasm – many public administrators have insufficient insight into the possibilities and especially the impossibilities of IT, which increases the risk of them overestimating technical possibilities. At the same time, they underestimate the amount of time, money and manpower that will be needed to actually implement IT projects."²³

In practice, the way in which IT is used is in fact a complicating factor in getting information management in order. The Information and Heritage Inspectorate outlined this problem within the central government as follows in its 2021 report *Een dementerende overheid 2.0* ('A government suffering from dementia 2.0'):

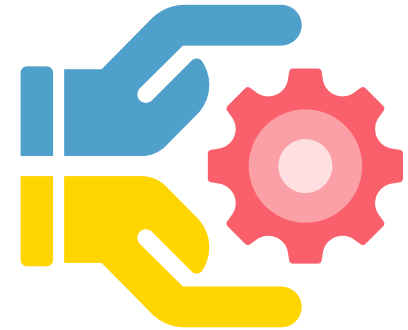
"These [systems] are not always connected and their interrelationship has often historically grown and is extremely complex. The IT of implementing organisations in particular, which process tremendous volumes of messages and data, includes numerous legacy systems. Moreover, the requirements set for these systems are not coordinated and are of insufficient quality to enable responsible management of information. On top of this, a lot of government information is used and managed outside the existing (digital) frameworks without retaining any context."²⁴

²⁴ Information and Heritage Inspectorate 2021a, p. 16.



8 Pattern

Insufficient control of compliance with arrangements made



A sound joint approach to information management requires not only clear arrangements, but also supervision and control of, and compliance with, the arrangements made. Numerous projects, programmes and solutions have not materialised over the years due to a lack of such control. Three contributing factors emerge from the reports and interviews, i.e. a lack of evaluation, a lack of strictly regulated control, and a lack of consequences where errors are made or obligations are not fulfilled.

8.1 A lack of evaluation precludes insight into the state of information management

Many government organisations have insufficient insight into the state of their information management and what it takes to improve this. Evaluation and monitoring are largely or fully absent, generally because no planning and control cycle has been set up. The Information and Heritage Inspectorate has stressed the need for this on several occasions. In 2009, it noted a lack of sufficient direction and control of information management at government organisations, with all the associated risks for sound operations,

the accountability function and securing archives as heritage. As regards archiving, the Inspectorate emphasised that the management of organisations still insufficiently recognised the importance of information management and insufficiently secured it in the control cycle.²⁵

In 2013, too, the Inspectorate observed that the majority of ministries had no working system that included regular audits or any systematic substantive quality control, stating that this prevented the persons with ultimate responsibility at the ministries from rendering account of information management and

²⁵ Information and Heritage Inspectorate 2009, p. 7.

that this carried a significant risk of them not being in control.²⁶ In 2021, the Inspectorate again called on the ministries to set up an integrated governance and control cycle to manage, protect and secure government information.²⁷

As planning and control have generally been insufficiently organised, in practice insight into the state of information management is also often lacking. This leads to an incomplete picture of the investments needed and in many cases precludes an identification of requirements within the organisation. This, in turn, also translates into information management costs being insufficiently included in the budget and prevents organisations from anticipating future developments. The result is that information management remains a topic that is not discussed until it causes problems in the work process.

Furthermore, government organisations hardly have any figures about the impact of poor information management or the consequential costs of faulty information systems. This led one interviewee to argue for "properly identifying how much time an official organisation spends on searching for information in vain or for a long time. If we can make it clear that every civil servant spends several hours a week on this and we subsequently show how much it costs, people might start to take action." As this information is not available, it is regularly wrongly assumed that poor information management does not have serious consequences for the organisation.

26 Information and Heritage Inspectorate 2013, p. 23.

27 Information and Heritage Inspectorate 2021, p. 5.

28 Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations 1991, p. 49.

29 Council for Culture & Council for Public Administration 2016, p. 31.

8.2 Overall control is not strictly regulated

The inability to properly embed information management in the accountability cycle reveals an underlying problem, i.e. that of a lack of overall or central control. In principle, the Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations and the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science are jointly responsible for controlling information management and archiving. This is not very visible in practice, however, as the Ministries do not always agree on how to implement the Public Records Act. The Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations itself has also been shifting the focus of its role from exercising control to encouraging compliance since the early 1990s.²⁸ but this did not have the intended effect. In this context, the Council for Culture and the Council for Public Administration speak of a 'coordination backlog' in the area of information: "The role of the Minister of the Interior and Kingdom Relations as a coordinating government member for the provision of government information has been fulfilled very reticently for decades."²⁹ One of those interviewed observed in this context: "[...] no one has real overriding authority. Obviously, the central government is too fragmented in that respect." Subnational authorities are also guided by their own responsibility when structuring information management. Another interviewee said the following about the local level:

"We have inter-administrative supervision, but that doesn't include the substance. They only check whether the executive accounts for its actions to the central government. [...] And then there's a very sizeable network, a patchwork, of municipal archivists (or others) exercising internal supervision. [...] It's highly fragmented and, as such, inefficient."

A complicating factor in assigning responsibilities is that government organisations increasingly collaborate in information chains and networks. In theory, responsibilities can be properly defined based on existing frameworks and arrangements, but experience has shown that in practice ambiguities remain.³⁰ That is why nearly all of the solutions proposed to resolve this issue advocate some type of centralisation and strengthening of frameworks or supervision, combined with increased expertise.

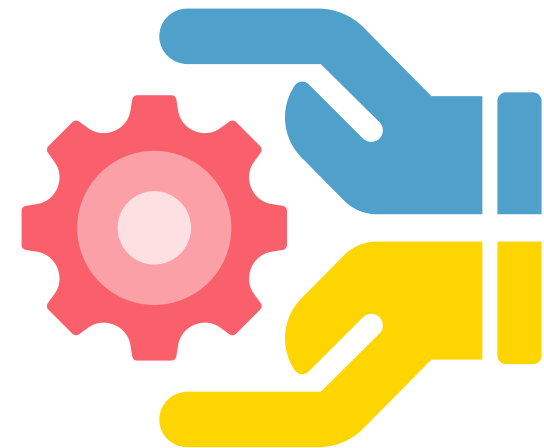
8.3 There are no consequences

Poor control leads to a lack of consequences for government employees at all levels – and therefore the government organisation as a whole – who do not have their information management and archiving in order. Employees are often free to store information or documents as they see fit and to ignore the rules, as they can easily circumvent the information management

systems that generally saddle them with additional acts and 'burdens'. One interviewee believed the solution was mainly to be found in proper management: "They need to be clearer about this, that there'll be consequences if people don't use the information management system."

In that connection, several interviewees also pointed out that statutory provisions, such as those of the Public Records Act, were being ignored: "People don't comply with the legislation. They do recognise the law, but they decide not to act accordingly. There are insufficient means for administrative enforcement."

This is reinforced by the fact that information management was not a mandatory topic in annual reports for a long time. The information management issue is left out of the assessment cycle for more senior and administrative positions in particular, as a result of which the urgency discussed above is not felt. One of those interviewed said that there was much to be gained by improvements in this respect: "I think that things will only start to change if the assessment interviews of public administrators have a negative outcome."



30 Stichting ICTU 2016a, p. 4.

9 Pattern

Standards and general facilities are underutilised



Government organisations structuring their information management in similar ways brings numerous benefits. In the past few decades, a multitude of arrangements, norms and standards have been developed in different disciplines.³¹ Most of them have not been declared binding due to a lack of consensus and because they are regularly revised. This means that the option of implementing information management standards remains underutilised. General IT facilities also hardly get off the ground.

9.1 Standards are not applied consistently, if at all

The standards that *have* been established are not always applied consistently, if at all. An interviewee said in this respect: "And the standards we do have aren't implemented in any way. The e-mail guideline, not implemented at all, how to archive chats,

implementation hasn't even started. [...] This takes a lot of time." Where any obligations are imposed, the 'apply or explain' principle is often used. A failure to monitor and evaluate them very strictly leaves the door open for large-scale evasion of the application of those standards or even the introduction of different standards. In short, this should be regulated more strictly, as one interviewee also confirmed:

³¹ In terms of information management, these could include model selection lists for the – temporary or permanent – retention and destruction of government information, the standard for metadating documents (metadata for permanently accessible government information – *metagegevens voor duurzaam toegankelijke overheidsinformatie*: MDTO) and requirements for structuring systems for the permanent accessibility of government information (*duurzame toegankelijkheid van overheidsinformatie*: DUTO).

"This was already an issue when the Information Management Baseline was published. It was essentially nothing more than an integration of information-related provisions taken from existing legislation. So you would think that we were already familiar with it and that we were legally required to comply with it. [...] But we weren't supposed to attach any significance to it, so the Baseline very rapidly disappeared into nothingness."

Information management standards are also insufficiently considered in IT development and implementation. "It's clear that IT mainly has a technical focus, even though this isn't about technology but about information management as such. You need to translate the one into the other, there needs to be consultation," according to one interviewee. Another interviewee said that insufficient input is requested from the people who are ultimately supposed to work with the system. The information adviser and archivist join the discussions about the procurement and adaptation of new systems either too late or not at all: "People should be saying: if you build something, it needs to look like this, otherwise it's useless to us. Those are the people who know the practical ins and outs. They have the knowledge, but they aren't invited to the discussions where systems are being thought out."

An attempt to merge the focus on digitalisation and the focus on archiving in practice is 'archiving by design'. This essentially means that from the time a document or 'information unit' is created until the time of its ultimate retention or destruction, thought is

given to what is needed to archive and disclose the document. This basically entails that automatic archiving and disclosure are placed at the front end of the process. Correctly structuring the information management system is crucial here, which calls for standards to be drafted.

However, this approach has not been embedded in the government's procedures, one interviewee said:

"Archiving by design, we haven't taken up the issue and we won't take it up shortly. It's very complicated, too. [...] It's a wonderful goal to work towards, but translating the theoretical concept into a system, the procurement conditions and our working methods is something the government has no experience with. [...] You also need to make it more concrete. [...] So if you say we need 'archiving by design', you set to work preparing concrete selection lists and you ensure that these cover civil servants' day-to-day activities."

9.2 General IT facilities hardly get off the ground

Another problem in this context is that general IT facilities hardly get off the ground. A general facility is a service used by multiple parties in a specific government domain, such as a digital workplace, a portal, a data centre or an access pass. It could reduce

costs and enhance efficiency in terms of maintenance, management or energy savings, for example. For general facilities, it is also easier to further develop and implement standards for permanent accessibility and sound information management.

The interviews show that it is hard to achieve this in practice. Those interviewed stated that the solutions offered are not sufficiently trusted, leading individual divisions of government organisations to create their own schedule of requirements and turn to the market with those. The maturity levels of the various organisations or parts of organisations may also differ, or organisations may have specific requirements for the structure of the process supporting the general facility. This gives rise to fragmentation, which in turn obstructs joint management and maintenance. This leads to a large number of temporary facilities with asynchronous depreciation periods, which hinders collaboration even more. Another reason is that organisations are reluctant to commit themselves for longer periods of time. The result is a diversity of processes and systems for duties that, on paper, are performed in a similar way.

One of the interviewees also said that the persons responsible for the system lack the overriding authority to guarantee the use of shared facilities: "Currently, at least three to five times a week I get Article 44 of the Constitution thrown in my face or people tell me 'we're an administrative authority and this is our responsibility.'" There are, however, a few examples of success, which have brought many advantages, such as payroll and personnel administration system P-Direkt or the central government's web archiving facility.





10 Current situation

This review is a building block for the Advisory Board's advisory report on the government's multi-year information management plans, as are the preliminary reports of the Information and Heritage Inspectorate, the Association of Netherlands Municipalities, the Interprovincial Consultation and the Association of Regional Water Authorities we have received. Painting a picture of the current state of digital information management, these reports tell us something about the extent to which the review outlined above reflects the situation today.

The first important point to note is that changes have in fact been initiated since the multi-year plan approach was commenced and the Open Government Act entered into force. Administrative attention for implementing the Open Government Act has increased and, as a result, getting information management in order is receiving more and more attention as well. The modernisation of the Public Records Act also contributes to this. A large number of organisations have taken steps in line with the goals envisaged by the Cabinet and progress has been made with their application in practice. For instance, many organisations are starting to manage information by phasing out network folders and by archiving or more effectively archiving e-mail and text messages, and many parties are introducing a quality system or have already implemented it.

10.1 Bottlenecks according to the preliminary reports

The preliminary reports largely confirm the patterns outlined in this review, with the Information and Heritage Inspectorate stating in its preliminary report about the central government that compliance with the Public Records Act is not up to par because information management has been given little attention for a long period of time. The Inspectorate blames this on a lack of leadership and vision and identifies four specific problems: there is no overview of and no insight into government information, information is not subjected to management, a lack of organisation and metadating, and a failure to implement proper 'retention or destruction' rules.

This corresponds to the findings included in the preliminary report of the Interprovincial Consultation. Many provinces indicated that information management is fragmented, that information awareness among employees is limited and that control is lacking,

resulting in insufficient insight into where information is stored, how it is managed and who is responsible for it.³²


The Association of Netherlands Municipalities and the Association of Regional Water Authorities have drawn similar conclusions. What is more, in many cases the increased administrative attention for implementation of the Open Government Act does not translate into adequate resources. This seems to be an urgent problem in small municipalities and joint arrangements in particular, which cripples the process of getting information management in order. In the monitor of the Association of Netherlands Municipalities, authorities of smaller municipalities and joint arrangements often indicate that they are too small to seriously address the issue of information management.

Another problem they identify is the knowledge and skills issue. In some cases, they simply do not have sufficient knowledge and capacity – a problem that persists due to the tight labour market. The Information and Heritage Inspectorate regards this as a corollary of a wider problem, and its analysis is in line with the relevant statements made in the review:

"Over the years, the lack of attention for the issue has led to substantial cutbacks in information management conducted by the traditional DIV units in the expectation that new IT tools would allow every employee to manage their own post room and archives. So far, IT has failed to live up to the promise of providing sound information management. IT and information management are often entirely separate islands. The cost cuts resulted in a significant loss of knowledge of information management at the central government. Investments are currently made to recruit new information management employees, and these people are indeed indispensable if the government is to further structure information management using modern IT resources. The results of the investments in staff should crystallise in the next few years. More is not automatically better, as information management is also a practical process. However, attention at directorate level – now and in the years ahead – is essential for the proper design of information management."³³

32 See the preliminary report of the Interprovincial Consultation to the ACOI of 15 March 2023: *Preliminary report for the ACOI*

33 See the preliminary report of the Information and Heritage Inspectorate to the ACOI of 23 August 2023: *The ACOI's questions regarding the status of the central government's information management*.



The Association of Regional Water Authorities also established a link with standards, metadata and the Open Government Act index in its preliminary report: "Despite all efforts made towards implementing the Open Government Act, the conclusion is that information management is still insufficiently in order given the demands placed on it in our time. [...]" The challenge is "to continue reasoning from the citizen's perspective" and it is crucial here "to add standardised and consistent metadata to the information." The metadata for permanently accessible government information (MDTO) was also pointed out in this respect.³⁴ Moreover, the Association of Regional Water Authorities noted that opportunities could be found "in standardising and uniformising information management throughout the government, which can have great added value for both citizens and the government. In any event, the current version of the Open Government Act index is not sufficient to achieve this goal."³⁵

The Association of Netherlands Municipalities observed that many municipal authorities also face challenges in developing and establishing an information management plan and in using metadata for digital information management. In addition to the MDTO standard, there is a need for "a standard for file formats, an e-depot API and a destruction API."³⁶

10.2 A look ahead

Finally, all preliminary reports endorse that the government still has a long way to go in getting its digital information management in order. To this end, patterns will have to be broken and steps will have to be taken towards a widely shared, coordinated and forward-looking approach to improving digital information management. The multi-year plan for improving digital information management – which has been made compulsory in the Open Government Act and was sent to Parliament on 11 December 2023 – serves this purpose.³⁷ The Advisory Board will issue an advisory report on the multi-year plan to the Minister of the Interior and Kingdom Relations and the State Secretary for Education, Culture and Science in the next few months.

34 See the preliminary report of the Association of Regional Water Authorities to the ACOI of 28 June 2023: *Preliminary report of the Regional Water Authorities on digital information management.*




35 See the preliminary report of the Association of Regional Water Authorities to the ACOI of 28 June 2023: *Preliminary report of the Regional Water Authorities on digital information management.*

36 See the preliminary report of the Association of Netherlands Municipalities to the ACOI of 6 July 2023: *Request for a preliminary report on digital information management.*

37 See the letter to the House of Representatives of 11 December 2023: *Digital information management multi-year plan.*

Study method

This review is based on:

-  A literature study of the main advisory reports and other reports of the past 35 years covering the government's digital information management (see the list of literature consulted), including publications on IT facilities and their development, public governance and management, and relevant letters to the House of Representatives. The publications were written by or on the instructions of administrative authorities themselves and by external organisations and inspectorates.
-  A series of ten semi-structured interviews and several work sessions with experts who have been involved in the government's information management in the past few years. When selecting candidates for the interviews, we aimed for diversity in expertise and experience at the subnational authorities and central government and experience with executive, inspection, policy and administrative duties. We asked the interviewees about their personal experiences and views. The interviews were conducted in confidence to prevent reticence.
-  The preliminary reports obtained by the Advisory Board.

Literature consulted and sources

Brief description	Full description
Netherlands Court of Audit 1987	Netherlands Court of Audit, <i>Archiefbeheer en -behoud bij het Rijk</i> , 1987
Netherlands Court of Audit 1991	Netherlands Court of Audit, <i>Machineleesbare gegevensbestanden; archivering en beheer bij het Rijk</i> , 1991.
Netherlands Court of Audit 1998	Netherlands Court of Audit, <i>Beheer en archivering van digitale bestanden</i> , 1998.
Netherlands Court of Audit 2007	Netherlands Court of Audit, <i>Lessen uit ICT-projecten bij de overheid (Deel A)</i> , 2007.
Netherlands Court of Audit 2008	Netherlands Court of Audit, <i>Lessen uit ICT-projecten bij de overheid (Deel B)</i> , 2008.
Netherlands Court of Audit 2010	Netherlands Court of Audit, <i>Informatiehuishouding van het Rijk. Overzicht van een dynamisch vraagstuk, een achtergrondstudie</i> , 2010.
Central Government Audit Service 2022	Central Government Audit Service, <i>Inrichting departementale sturing informatiehuishouding</i> , 2022.
Elias Committee 2014	Elias Committee, <i>Parlementair onderzoek naar ICT-projecten bij de overheid</i> , 2014.
IT and Government Committee 2001	IT and Government Committee, <i>Burger en overheid in de informatiesamenleving; de noodzaak van institutionele innovatie</i> , 2001.

Brief description	Full description
Information and Heritage Inspectorate* 2005	Information and Heritage Inspectorate, <i>Een dementerende overheid?</i> , 2005.
Information and Heritage Inspectorate* 2009	Information and Heritage Inspectorate, <i>Verslag van het toezicht in 2008</i> , June 2009.
Information and Heritage Inspectorate* 2012	Information and Heritage Inspectorate, <i>Beperkt houdbaar? Duurzame toegankelijkheid in een digitale omgeving bij de rijksoverheid</i> , 2012.
Information and Heritage Inspectorate* 2013	Information and Heritage Inspectorate, <i>Duurzaam duurt het langst. Digitalisering en duurzame toegankelijkheid van informatie bij de kerndepartementen</i> , 2013.
Information and Heritage Inspectorate* 2015a	Information and Heritage Inspectorate, <i>Onvoltooid digitaal. De kwaliteit van de digitale archieven bij de organisaties van de Rijksoverheid</i> , 2015.
Information and Heritage Inspectorate* 2015b	Information and Heritage Inspectorate, <i>Webarchivering bij de centrale overheid bij decentrale overheden</i> , 2015.
Information and Heritage Inspectorate* 2018	Information and Heritage Inspectorate, <i>Wel digitaal, nog niet duurzaam. Informatiebeheer bij departementen</i> , 2018.
Information and Heritage Inspectorate 2021a	Information and Heritage Inspectorate, <i>Een dementerende overheid 2.0?</i> , 2021.
Information and Heritage Inspectorate 2021b	Information and Heritage Inspectorate, <i>Archivering en ketensamenwerking</i> , 2021.
Information and Heritage Inspectorate 2021c	Information and Heritage Inspectorate, <i>De informatiehuishouding van Toeslagen. Rapport over de naleving van de Archiefwet bij Toeslagen</i> , 2021.

* In 2019, the name 'Heritage Inspectorate' (*Erfgoedinspectie*) was changed to 'Information and Heritage Inspectorate' (*Inspectie Overheidsinformatie en Erfgoed*). Only the new name and abbreviation (IOE) are used in this report, including for the period before 2019.

Brief description	Full description
Information and Heritage Inspectorate 2022	Information and Heritage Inspectorate, <i>Ministerie SZW. De stand van de informatiehuishouding in 2022, 2022.</i>
Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations 1995	Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations, <i>Terug naar de toekomst: over het gebruik van informatie en informatie- en communicatietechnologie in de openbare sector, 1995.</i>
Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations & Synergie Consultancy 1999	Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations & Synergie Consultancy, <i>Het geheugen als actieve kracht; De archieffunctie binnen de digitale overheid, 1999.</i>
Nationaal Archief 2007	Nationaal Archief, <i>Gewaardeerd verleden, 2007.</i>
Childcare Allowance Parliamentary Inquiry Committee 2020	Childcare Allowance Parliamentary Inquiry Committee, <i>Ongekend onrecht, 2020.</i>
Council of State 2020	Council of State, <i>Ministeriële verantwoordelijkheid. Een ongevraagd advies van de Afdeling advisering, 2020.</i>
Council for Culture 2006	Council for Culture, <i>Het tekort van teveel, 2006.</i>
Council for Culture 2013	Council for Culture, <i>Selectie. Een kwestie van waardering, 2013.</i>
Council for Public Administration 2003	Council for Public Administration, <i>Trias informatica. ICT en overheid in vogelvlucht, 2003.</i>
Council for Culture & Council for Public Administration 2016	Council for Culture & Council for Public Administration, <i>Het puberbrein van de overheid – informatiebeheer in ketensamenwerking, 2016.</i>
Government Commissioner for Information Management 2023	Government Commissioner for Information Management, <i>Informatiehuishouding, de postkoets met hulpmotor. Rapportage en Speerpunten van de Regeringscommissaris Informatiehuishouding, 1 May 2023.</i>

Brief description	Full description
Government Programme for Sustainable Digital Information Management 2020	Government Programme for Sustainable Digital Information Management, <i>Informatiehuishouding in cijfers</i> , 2020.
Government Programme for Sustainable Digital Information Management 2021	Government Programme for Sustainable Digital Information Management, <i>Stevig in ontwikkeling. Over de vakvereisten van informatiehuishoudingsprofessionals bij rijksorganisaties</i> , 2021.
Staat van de Uitvoering 2022	Staat van de Uitvoering, <i>Staat van de Uitvoering 2022</i> , 2022.
Stichting Het Expertise Centrum 1998	Stichting Het Expertise Centrum, <i>Digitaal documentbeheer. Orde in de digitale chaos</i> , 1998.
Stichting Het Expertise Centrum 2005	Stichting Het Expertise Centrum, <i>De moderne informatiehuishouding van de digitale overheid het archief op het bureau</i> , 2005.
Stichting ICTU 2016a	Stichting ICTU, <i>Kwantitatief onderzoek beleidsinformatie digitaal archiveren</i> , 2016.
Stichting ICTU 2016b	Stichting ICTU, <i>Verkenning informatiehuishouding decentrale overheden</i> , 2016.
Stichting ICTU 2021	Stichting ICTU, <i>Evaluatie campagne 'Werken met overheidsinformatie'</i> , 2021.
Information Society and Government Study Group 2017	Information Society and Government Study Group, <i>Make it Happen!</i> , 2017.

