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House of Representatives

Bureau Woordvoering Kabinetsformatie
(Communications Office for Formation of the Government)

Ms M.I. Hamer, informateur
(person charged with exploring possibilities for forming a coalition government)
Postbus 20018 2500 EA Den Haag

4 June 2021 | Advice for a healthy society

Dear Ms Hamer,

Together with many other organisations that are active in the field of sport, physical activity, health, and well-being, the Netherlands Sports Council (NLsportraad) has been eagerly looking forward to the letter 'A physically active and healthy population in the Netherlands'. The Ministry of Health, Welfare, and Sport, the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, the Ministry of infrastructure & Water Management, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment, and the Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations recently sent this letter to the House of Representatives.¹ Following the manifesto 'Physical activity as the new normal'² there was hope that the government would take measures that would make an end to the decades-long pandemic characterised by a lack of physical activity, overweight, and associated diseases such as diabetes, cardiovascular diseases and depression. Unfortunately, the Netherlands Sports Council is forced to conclude that this pandemic, and the vulnerability for new pandemics, will still continue for several more decades despite the measures proposed in the letter. This is sufficient reason for the Netherlands Sports Council to sound the alarm and to provide advice for the coming government period aimed at establishing a healthy and vital society.

The Netherlands Sports Council advises the next government to take far-reaching measures aimed at making sport and physical activity a self-evident and integral part of our society. The need for this has never been so urgent. The Council considers it essential to draft a Sports Act in the form of emergency legislation and to modify legislation in other areas including education, childcare, care, spatial planning, and working conditions. In addition, financial investments are needed to create a larger and better range of sports and physical activities for the benefit of as many people as possible: young and old, the fit and less fit, in all regions and neighbourhoods.

Insufficient sense of urgency for the problem at hand

Of course, a first step has already been taken in the sense that several government ministries now realise that sport, physical activity, vitality, and health are also influenced by policy in their areas. Encouraging sufficient sport and physical activity requires action from the ministers directly responsible for sport and physical activity but also from the ministers responsible for education, childcare, care, spatial planning, housing, infrastructure, working conditions, et cetera. In the letter, the five ministries emphasise the importance of sufficient physical activity and recognise the fatal consequences of a lack of physical activity. The letter also mentions that, before the corona crisis, less than half of the population engaged in sufficient physical activity, and that this percentage only decreased further during the corona crisis. However, the urgency of this enormous problem is not sufficiently taken to heart and not reflected in the proposed plans.

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SUBJECT
Advice for a healthy society

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Lack of physical activity is becoming chronic.

The Netherlands Sports Council wishes to add to the analysis by the ministries that the decrease in physical activity is at risk of becoming chronic for many people. The Council notes that there is a trend for many employers, including the national government, to switch to a 'hybrid working model' on a large scale. The danger inherent in such an approach is that people will end up sitting at home even more and will miss the physical activity that is a natural consequence of commuting from home to work, working in a large office building, and the motivation provided by colleagues to stretch their legs during breaks. During the corona crisis, the number of memberships and subscriptions for sports clubs and gyms has also decreased quite a lot.³

In addition, the corona crisis has highlighted the urgency of ensuring that the population does enough sport and physical activity to strengthen the immune system. New research has shown that the effectiveness of vaccinations depends in particular on maintaining an active lifestyle.^{4, 5}

Speeding up the timeline

The evidence is growing all the time and the urgency is greater than ever before, but the 'policy advice' presented by the ministries to the next government does not reflect this urgency at all. The Netherlands Sports Council considers the proposed target, the proposed measures, and the timeline presented in the letter 'A physically active and healthy population in the Netherlands' as falling far short of what is needed. The Netherlands Sports Council calls on the government to shoulder its responsibility for eliminating risk factors in relation to a lack of physical activity and to take adequate measures for protecting the public health. The Netherlands Sports Council views the measures proposed in the letter as 'more of the same'. The Council expects these measures to have only a limited effect. The Council had previously recommended speeding up the timeline for having at least 75% of the population engage in sufficient physical activity.⁶ This target must be realised by 2030 and not 2040. And to achieve this target, the government must set out on a new path tomorrow and take iconic measures.

Thinking outside the box

The policy advice provided by the ministries reflects traditional frameworks and thinking, whereas innovative and ground-breaking work is needed to implement real changes. For decades now, efforts have been made to encourage sport and physical activity by providing information, setting up projects and programmes, and making (temporary) subsidies available. More of the same, in other words: more information, projects and subsidies is not the solution. A physical activity agreement to supplement the current sports agreement can also not be expected to have much of an effect, as long as the partners in these agreements are limited by the existing (legislative) frameworks and only have the proposed instruments available to turn things around.⁷ Within the existing frameworks in other areas of policy, sport and physical activity do not play a role, and this impedes collaboration between sport and other sectors.⁸ Thinking outside the box is therefore needed.

From health promotion to health protection

According to the Netherlands Sports Council, the letter 'A physically active and healthy population in the Netherlands' puts too much of an emphasis on (non-binding) health promotion and (individual) behavioural change. The outcome of this is predictable: if the government continues to focus on health promotion and behavioural change, then a large part of the population, including vulnerable groups, will not benefit from government policy.⁹ In view of the demonstrated lack of physical activity, it's important to ensure that the risks

associated with a lack of sport and physical activity are recognised and dealt with, and that more physical activity is viewed as an essential measure for protecting the health of the population.

For example, there is no existing campaign for physical activity during working hours, but approval and encouragement on the part of employers is needed to reduce the amount of time spent sitting down during work. Opportunities for physical activity closer to home are also important. After all, the fitness room at the office is no longer accessible on a daily basis. In primary and secondary education, sufficient breaks for physical activity, effective physical education, and school-centred swimming activities must be implemented, whereby sufficient physical activity is not a choice made by the school manager or teacher but a self-evident and natural option for all pupils. A vibrant sports infrastructure with adequate facilities and professional coaches close to home are needed to increase the level of physical activity in leisure time, in order to teach people appropriate physical activities and to keep them motivated on an ongoing basis. Such a situation can be realised throughout the country only if the mandate for such activities is assigned to municipalities.

Structural integration in a legal context

The campaigns recently initiated by the national government¹⁰ are completely inadequate for realising the necessary changes. In line with its previous recommendations, the Netherlands Sports Council advises the government to focus not only on behavioural change but also on changes in the surroundings, the systems, and their legal context. A structural integration of sport and physical activity is needed in the daily worlds of children, adults, and seniors: schools, childcare, work, care, and leisure time. Although these settings are mentioned in the letter 'A physically active and healthy population in the Netherlands' and the relevant ministries are involved, the measures proposed do not penetrate very far into the systems. In order to establish a structural and systematic integration into the system, sport and physical activity need to be included in the legal context in these areas.¹¹ That is the only way that the government can assign a clear responsibility to schools, childcare centres, employers, care facilities, healthcare insurers, and municipalities to facilitate more sport and physical activity in all possible places. That is the only way that the sport and physical activity sector can make a real difference. And that is also the only way to ensure that, in the near future, the negative trend that has been in place for decades can finally be reversed.

Quickly drafting a Sports Act

A new government perspective is needed on sport and physical activity. In its advice 'The positioning on the playing field' and the associated addendum, the Netherlands Sports Council recommended treating sport as a public facility and codifying this in a Sports Act.¹² Sport and physical activity in leisure time should no longer be viewed as a hobby but as a necessity. The Council has therefore recommended setting up a robust and sustainably financed system of sports, in which municipalities and sport providers are the most important players.

The Netherlands Sports Council recommends drafting a Sports Act for the leisure setting, which also includes a clear task for the government: a 'duty of care' to provide sufficient sport and physical activity facilities for the population. Such a Sports Act has become even more urgent now that people are becoming increasingly dependent on their own leisure time and their own neighbourhood to engage in physical activity. The Netherlands Sports Council advises the new government to draft the Sports Act and implement it as soon as possible. At the same time, investments are also needed to build additional facilities, encourage greater professionalisation, create paid jobs in the sport sector, and ensure the accessibility of sport and physical activity for vulnerable groups.¹³

A government capable of implementing measures quickly

The Netherlands Sports Council is more than willing to assist the new government with advice on sport and physical activity in leisure time and in relation to other policy areas. When relevant, the Netherlands Sports Council collaborates with other advisory bodies to do so, as was also the case for the advice 'Enjoying physical activity'.¹⁴ This advisory document described which measures can lead to an increase in sport and physical activity at school and how the educational sector and children's development can also benefit as a result. This advice is still more relevant than ever and awaits the next government.

The corona crisis has made it clear that the government is very much able to quickly implement necessary and far-reaching measures in order to protect the population. Health protection measures are needed to ensure that the population of the Netherlands is physically active and healthy, measures that also belong in any post-corona recovery plan. We have already seen the far-reaching consequences of the corona crisis for a population that is not sufficiently fit and resilient. The Netherlands Sports Council hopes and expects that the next government will decide as quickly as possible to reverse the disastrous and increasing pandemic of a lack of physical activity and will implement the necessary and iconic measures to accomplish this.

On behalf of the Netherlands Sports Council,

Michael van Praag
Chairperson

Mariëtte van der Voet
Secretary

The Netherlands Sports Council is composed of a chairperson and nine members and is supported by a secretariat. In addition to chairperson Michael van Praag, the Council consists of the members Ahmed Aboutaleb, Marjolein Bolhuis-Eijsvogel, Farid Gamei, Jiske Griffioen, Leanne van den Hoek, Meryem Kilic-Karaaslan, Erik Scherder, Elke Snijder and Bernard Wientjes. Claudia Bokel is the permanent advisor to the Council

Endnote

- 1 Letter to the House of Representatives: A physically active and healthy population in the Netherlands
- 2 Manifesto on Physical Activity as The new normal.
- 3 Fewer people in the Netherlands member of a sports club the past year - NOCNSF
- 4 Column by Erik Scherder - Physical activity strengthens the immune system and therefore the effectiveness of COVID-19 vaccination | News report | Netherlands Sports Council (nederlandse-sportraad.nl)
- 5 Column by Erik Scherder - Hybrid working models: An extra risk for lack of physical activity | Publication | Netherlands Sports Council (nederlandse-sportraad.nl)
- 6 The positioning on the playing field | Advice | Netherlands Sports Council (nederlandse-sportraad.nl).
In that regard, the Netherlands Sports Council also notes that the definition of 'sufficient physical activity' (the physical activity guidelines) must urgently be updated to reflect the latest insights from the WHO.
- 7 Advisory report: Agreement?! Managing matters via agreements as a balancing act | Publication | Council for Public Administration (raadopenbaarbestuur.nl)
- 8 The fitness of the sports sector A qualitative analysis of the current organisation and financing of sport | Publication | Netherlands Sports Council (nederlandse-sportraad.nl)
- 9 The fitness of the sports sector A qualitative analysis of the current organisation and financing of sport | Publication | Netherlands Sports Council (nederlandse-sportraad.nl) Legal and financial addendum – appendix to the advice The positioning on the playing field | Advice | Netherlands Sports Council (nederlandse-sportraad.nl)
- 10 Work on your fitness at your own pace | fitopjouwmanier.nl A bit of physical activity every half hour. Take the initiative! | Campaigns | Arbo (Health & Safety) portal
- 11 Legal and financial addendum – appendix to the advice The positioning on the playing field | Advice | Netherlands Sports Council (nederlandse-sportraad.nl); see appendix B overview of legislation and treaties.
- 12 The positioning on the playing field | Advice | Netherlands Sports Council (nederlandse-sportraad.nl);
Legal and financial addendum to The positioning on the playing field | Advice | Netherlands Sports Council (nederlandse-sportraad.nl)
- 13 Legal and financial addendum to The positioning on the playing field | Advice | Netherlands Sports Council (nederlandse-sportraad.nl)
- 14 Enjoying physical activity | Advice | Netherlands Sports Council (nederlandse-sportraad.nl)