

# Government of Flanders 2019-2024 Summary of the coalition agreement



## SUMMARY OF THE COALITION AGREEMENT

Flanders is in a strong position. Unemployment is low, productivity is high and, thanks to our ambition, resilience and creativity, our performance is outstanding. We are excelling on a cultural, societal and economic level. Yet there is also unease. Living together in diversity presents us with challenges. And too many people find it hard to make ends meet, even when they have a job. There is a feeling that the burdens and benefits are not always evenly distributed.

### **Towards a society in excellent shape**

The Government of Flanders is making every effort to build a harmonious society in which everyone is offered opportunities to move forward. The Government makes a warm appeal to all Flemish people to write this attractive story together. Immense challenges await us in the coming years. We need everyone's commitment to deliver a successful response.

It is our ambition that Flanders should become an uncontested reference in the Europe of the twenties. Both economically and societally, we will turn our focus to the north and measure ourselves against societies such as the Netherlands and Scandinavia. We will set the bar high in all areas of our society. But we will do it in a way that leaves no one behind, regardless of origin, conviction, orientation or limitation. We will create a framework that encourages everyone to get the best out of themselves and to help build a Flanders that excels.

### **Excellent education**

Excellent education is the most important lever for developing every talent and improving collectively as a society.

In recent years, our education system has been thoroughly reformed. The careful roll-out of recent reforms should help create a new quality culture in our education. However, reforms can be perfected in the same way as any reform is thoroughly monitored and evaluated with a view to making the necessary adjustments.

This Government of Flanders wants to address five major challenges: the quality of education, the shortage of teachers and their status, the proper guidance of our children in the right place, the shortfall in capacity and the length of studies in our higher education.

Quality education is the key, including the command of a rich Dutch language. We will have children with a language disadvantage follow a language integration course and, if necessary, a language immersion class or a fully-fledged alternative, in order to avoid learning disadvantages and school drop-out. In this way children will really be able to enjoy equal opportunities. But we will also focus on the knowledge of modern foreign languages as an asset.

Pre-primary education will receive the same operating budget as primary education. Additional child carers will provide extra hands in the classroom.

We will continue to work on upgrading the aspect of knowledge, alongside skills, attitudes and personality development. We will introduce standardised tests that extend beyond school networks and umbrella organisations and toughen up attainment targets.

Freedom of education shall remain an important basic principle. The government will determine what pupils need to know and be able to do, whereas the schools and teachers will determine how they implement this on a pedagogical level. In the third stage of secondary education, community education can switch from 2 hours of "ideological beliefs" to 1 hour of "ideological

beliefs” and 1 hour of “cross-ideology dialogue”. But freedom also demands commitment. People and resources are intended for our children and schools, rather than for overarching structures.

By using one transparent, simple and uniform table in all schools in Flanders, we aim to ensure a transparent offer from the first to the last year. In secondary education, we will ensure that the current diversity of education forms (general secondary education (ASO), technical secondary education (TSO), secondary education in the arts (KSO) and vocational secondary education (BSO)), each with their own objectives (progression/two-fold objective/labour market), continues to be guaranteed and that no broad first stage will be rolled out. After all, more quality means receiving a broader basic education in primary education and at the start of secondary education, but then making a choice and qualifying as soon as possible.

We will remedy the shortage of teachers by, for example, making the teaching profession attractive again. Teachers must be assigned the status they deserve. We will strive to reduce significantly the burden of planning and move away from the culture of reporting everything. We will better reward seniority for new lateral entrants, and this will help us attract and retain more new teachers.

We seek to restore respect for teachers, the class council and the school management board. Teacher training will be upgraded.

Involved parents also make education strong. They actively contribute to creating the ideal learning environment needed for good educational performance.

Equally, we must ensure that our children receive the proper guidance: the right place in the right school with the right support. We will abolish the M-Decree and replace it with a real guidance decree for children with care needs as well as their teachers. In this way, we flesh out the guidance of children with care needs in a pragmatic and realistic manner: mainstream education if possible, special educational needs education, if necessary.

Capacity shortfalls pose a challenge. That is why we will make additional investments in sustainable and ecological school buildings. We want parents to be absolutely free in selecting the school of their choice for their children and we will abolish the double quota system, so that children are no longer classified into indicator pupils and non-indicator pupils. We will extend the principles set out for secondary education in the enrolment decree to primary education. A real neighbourhood school should moreover be the beating heart of the local community. The school infrastructure, and in particular sports facilities and multipurpose rooms, must be open for use by local associations.

Our higher education performs very strongly at the international level. We will increase the share of foreign-language bachelors. We must, however, reduce flexibility in the interests of students, parents and lecturers. Mandatory but non-binding entrance examinations with adapted remedial or reorientation pathways will be part of the solution, as is a stricter ‘cut’ between bachelor and master.

### **A strong economy and labour market**

Our education has the mission and ambition to tap into every talent in Flanders and to train our young people and send them to the **labour market** equipped with the very best skills. The challenges are immense. Vacancies remain unfilled, partly because jobseekers do not always have the right competencies. At the same time, too many Flemish people are still unemployed. The Government of Flanders will do everything in its power to raise the employment rate to 80% and in this way ensure that Flanders rises to the top in Europe. Over the next few years, we want to help an additional 120,000 Flemish people find a job. This requires a range of activation

measures. For example, the Government of Flanders will use the new job bonus to increase the difference between working and not working. The allocation of social rights on the basis of income instead of status will also reduce the unemployment trap. In addition, we will put in extra efforts to enable Flemish people to take part in refresher courses and continuous training (among other things via the principle of lifelong learning). Digital skills will become crucial in the coming years. With a new STEM action plan, we will address the shortage of technical and scientific profiles.

We will guide jobseekers intensively towards employment. The Flemish Service for Employment and Vocational Training (VDAB) will be assigned a clearer director's role. After three months, the jobseeker shall conclude a compulsory agreement on a personal pathway to work. Newcomers will also be required to register. Those who are distant from the labour market will be given opportunities in the social economy and in neighbourhood work. Anyone who does not find a job within two years can be required to do community service. The idea is to get people out of their social isolation as part of a pathway to work, while strengthening the skills of the jobseeker.

Also, a strong economy is only conceivable with motivated entrepreneurs. More than ever, we will foster entrepreneurial culture in Flanders. We will make efforts to lower further the barriers faced by SMEs. Anyone who is willing to roll up their sleeves and is not afraid to take risks will receive our support. We will help them even more efficiently to get started, to innovate, digitise, export and become more energy efficient, with the least possible administrative burden.

Digitisation is entering a new phase, in which all things and all people are connected. This will put traditional models and methods under pressure. It will create opportunities for tackling economic and societal problems in an innovative way, but will not be without risk. More than ever, initiatives in different policy areas need to be aligned with each other. Cooperation is the answer.

The Government will make **innovation and digital transformation** one of the spearheads of its policy. Flanders must become a trendsetter and a pioneer in terms of applications in the new data economy and artificial intelligence. A major priority is to implement the 5G network throughout Flanders as quickly as possible. This will ensure that we can use the latest state-of-the-art technologies to make Flanders healthier, to better coordinate traffic flows, to save energy, to exchange information more efficiently, to catch fraudsters more quickly, but also, for example, to launch new robotics applications or transmit large video files in the blink of an eye.

With a task force under the auspices of the Government of Flanders, we will take all possible measures in the coming weeks to alleviate the harmful consequences of a possible "no-deal Brexit".

### **A warm and caring Flanders**

The Government has high ambitions and wants all Flemish people to be able to give the best of themselves. This is only possible, however, in a **warm and social Flanders**. Flanders has an abundance of organisations, associations and volunteers who help shape our society and deserve our support. We will never abandon anyone who needs help. The Government of Flanders will appropriate the necessary budgets for support to vulnerable people. These budgets should preferably go to the people themselves rather than to the structures. We will reduce as soon as possible the waiting lists for people with disabilities. We will also continue to invest in youth support, mental healthcare and high-quality and affordable home and residential care for our elderly. Social entrepreneurship can help to reduce waiting lists. We will see to it that the invoice for care-dependent persons in a residential care centre remains affordable. A new care budget will be put in place for elderly people who have difficulty paying the nursing home bill. Also, we

will provide more staff per nursing home bed and tighten the control on per diem rates. We will also create extra places and greater flexibility in childcare. The affordability and viability of childcare is paramount. As a result, the Flemish people will be better able to reconcile work and family life. We will organise the "Growth Package", i.e. the new child benefit system, more efficiently.

The problem of poverty, and in particular child poverty, concerns us all. It is a shared responsibility, of society, of all policy makers. We will take measures in education, work, housing, etc. to prevent and combat poverty.

In a caring Flanders, everyone should be able to afford **decent housing**. Many Flemish people choose to buy a house, which is a good thing. During this term of office, we will shift the tax advantage from "having" a house to "acquiring" one. We will allow the home bonus - which has pushed up house prices - to be phased out. The registration duties were decreased from 10% to 7% during the previous term of office, and we will now reduce them further to 6%. We will encourage the renovation of houses, to make them more energy efficient and emit less CO2. On the other hand, we will ensure the private rental market remains of good quality and affordable. In addition, we will continue to invest in social housing. Each municipality is committed to the so-called Binding Social Objective. Municipalities that have reached the BSO can obtain financing from the Flemish authorities up to a maximum of 15%.

Social housing will be allocated chronologically to the people on the basis of the first come first served principle. The absolute priority rule of local ties will apply: a prospective tenant must have lived in the municipality continuously for at least five years in the last ten years prior to the allocation. In order to prevent abuse, we will also introduce a means test for the registration and allocation of social housing.

### **Combating abuse**

The Government of Flanders wants all the resources that are invested to end up in the right place. We will take strict action against all forms of fraud and abuse. The Government of Flanders will make effective and efficient enforcement a top priority, without lengthy procedures. When Flemish regulations are infringed, administrative enforcement and criminal law policy must be deployed in a complementary manner. Flanders has numerous competences in the fields of **justice**, enforcement and the administration of justice in administrative matters. The Minister of Justice and Administrative Enforcement will oversee these matters.

Within our competences we will step up the fight against organised and subversive crime. We will set up a special Flanders Enforcement Unit for this purpose. The Flemish public administration benefits from a smooth exchange of information with the federal intelligence and security services, but also with the local authorities.

### **An inclusive society**

Diversity in Flemish society can be an added value, but also presents us with challenges. That is why we are resolutely opting for a new approach. An approach in which we demand greater efforts from anyone entering our society, but where at the same time we increase efforts to encourage people to live "with" rather than "next to" each other. Newcomers who successfully **integrate** will be given every opportunity in our society. Everyone will have equal rights and obligations.

The bar will be raised for newcomers in terms of their knowledge of Dutch, our shared norms and values and their active participation in our society. We will ask them to sign a declaration of participation in Flanders and will abandon the free civic integration policy. Persons integrating will have to pay a financial contribution when they enter a civic integration programme. Access

to our social system will be restricted. Newcomers will first have to contribute to the system before they can benefit from the advantages of Flemish social protection. Anyone who wants to claim a healthcare budget will have to reside legally in Flanders for ten years and for five years without interruption. Asylum seekers will no longer receive retroactive child benefit upon recognition.

On the other hand, we will offer newcomers more opportunities by introducing a new pillar in the civic integration programme, to allow newcomers, for instance, to build a network through buddy projects and to help them integrate more quickly. We will pool and promote good practices in the field of coexistence. Organisations that encourage segregation will no longer be subsidised, but initiatives that promote coexistence deserve our support.

Those who were born here or have successfully integrated will become fully-fledged members of our community. We reject racism in all its forms and will act consistently against it. Additional actions will be taken to tackle labour market discrimination.

A great number of people with many different visions should be able to find employment in the Flemish public administration. But it will nevertheless be prohibited to display the external signs of any personal conviction. External symbols of ideologies, religions, political or other beliefs shall therefore not be worn by those in direct contact with customers. Local authorities will, however, remain free to flesh out the neutrality of their services. We will also guarantee neutrality in education. In Provincial and Community education, we will ensure neutrality in terms of ideology for teachers and pupils. Publicly funded education and education provided by cities and municipalities shall retain autonomy in this respect.

We will create a clear framework for dealing with religious communities. The recognition rules will be tightened so that we can better separate the wheat from the chaff. Those who oppose our society model will lose their recognition. Those who integrate will be our ally. Local religious communities that wish to be recognised and receive corresponding funding must successfully undergo a waiting period of four years.

Stricter recognition criteria will also be introduced for new schools. Setting up a school will only be possible after formal approval by the Government of Flanders. We want to make sure that schools in Flanders adhere strictly to basic and human rights. If there is any doubt as to radicalisation, state security or foreign interference, we will carry out a thorough audit.

### **A self-assured Flanders**

A shared society is only possible if our young generations are aware of our history. It is essential that we can experience the Flemish identity without any complexes, for example by means of shared symbols. Against this background, we will ask a group of independent experts to draw up a Canon of Flanders on a scientific basis. This is a list of anchor points from Flanders' culture, history and science, which will be used as guideline both in education and in the context of civic integration programmes. We are also looking forward to a museum that will make Flanders' history and culture accessible to the general public. The Flemish Public Broadcaster (VRT) will also help shape Flanders' identity.

The Government of Flanders will fully invest in an ambitious and coherent **international policy**. We will support our companies in their export activities and promote our tourist assets. An ambitious tourism policy will further this aim.

## **Environment, spatial planning, climate and energy**

Another challenge is care for the **climate**, for which we will set ourselves ambitious and realistic goals. The transition to a climate-neutral and sustainable society requires global action. Flanders cannot do this alone. By placing the emphasis on technological innovation (carbon capture, hydrogen, etc.), our companies and knowledge institutions can do a lot without jeopardising our economic growth, the competitiveness of our companies or our social prosperity. We aim to reduce Flanders' greenhouse gas emissions by at least 80% by 2050. In Flanders, we have sufficient in-house entrepreneurship, creativity, knowledge and expertise to get the job done. We are fully committed to energy efficiency and will double wind and solar energy by 2030. A more intelligent use of energy will also reduce our energy bill.

**Open space** in Flanders is also under great pressure. We cannot afford to fill all the space that is left with new build. That is why we will work on a shift in construction, in which we strive for a better balance between high-quality living, entrepreneurship and the protection of the open space. The government must be reliable. We will ensure that the right of ownership is safeguarded: anyone who suffers a disadvantage as a result of a new land use classification will receive full financial compensation. By 2030, an additional 10,000 hectares of forest are to be created. On top of that, a further 20,000 hectares of nature must be subject to effective nature management. This will make Flanders greener. Protection of the open space goes hand in hand with sustainable and innovative agriculture and horticulture as important links in Flanders' food sector and industries. We will also continue to take the lead in terms of animal welfare. Local authorities with a lot of open space will be given extra resources to safeguard that space as well.

## **Mobility**

There is no doubt that **mobility** will be subject to growing pressure in the coming years. For this reason, the Government will invest heavily in measures aimed at enabling citizens and businesses to switch smoothly between different modes of transport. Public transport, which we will make greener and more efficient, and cycling offer a way out of traffic jams in every municipality and city. With a guaranteed service, a larger provision and greater punctuality, we will make public transport reliable. And by doubling the investments in cycling paths, cycling will become even more a fully-fledged alternative.

We will equally continue to invest heavily in road infrastructure, in addition to alternatives to the car. The purchase of new environmentally friendly cars will become more attractive from a tax point of view. In the case of large infrastructure projects, we want to ensure that the general interest prevails. It is unacceptable that purely private interests block infrastructure works for a disproportionately long time. In the meantime, we are fully committed to technology that makes our infrastructure and vehicles smarter.

## **A lean modern government with a sound budget**

The Government of Flanders has always let itself be guided by the principle of due diligence as far as finances are concerned, and will continue to do so. We will keep the budget deficit as small as possible and are aiming for a balanced budget in 2021. The new Government of Flanders wants to be a government of real investment. This is necessary to prepare Flanders for the rapidly changing world. By the end of the term of office, we want to achieve the 3% standard for the joint R&D investments of government and companies. Targeted investments will be justified if they will ultimately prove profitable. If we implement reforms, they will have to fit within the overall budgetary objectives over the new term of office. We will also achieve significant tax reductions in certain areas (registration duties in the housing tax system, the friends' inheritance in the inheritance tax and the job bonus). This should give our families and our companies the necessary oxygen to realise, together with us, the dream of Flemish excellence. Our cities and municipalities will also be able to count on extra support. For instance, we will maintain the 3.5% growth target in the Municipal Fund and contribute to the pension costs of the local authorities.



We want a sound, lean but vigorous government that spends every euro with care and with a firm dose of realism. The local and Flemish authorities will become radically digital. Our aim is to provide state-of-the-art services to citizens, with as little red tape as possible. In this context we will pay particular attention to people who have not yet boarded the digital train. There will be no room for excessive regulations and navel-gazing.

Politicians too must move with the times. Citizens will have a greater say in local elections. We will abolish compulsory voting, as well as the list vote. And we will give citizens more influence over the election of the mayor.

### **Institutional context**

*In a long historical process and thanks to the efforts of several generations, Flanders has developed into a federated state of the Kingdom of Belgium and a part of the European Union. It is a democratic and social constitutional state and forms a nation with its own language and culture, with a democratic political tradition and with respect for individual freedom, local autonomy, private initiative and associations. It has set up in its legal order a system of rights and obligations and a basic structure for living together in solidarity, in an effort to offer everyone living in Flanders a dignified existence.*

*In view of the major societal challenges, it is necessary to address the institutional obstacles and to develop decision-making that reconciles efficiency with democratic principles. The Government of Flanders invites the Flemish Parliament to start a thorough reflection on the desired state structure and gives it the necessary freedom and space to give it concrete form. Within the current legal and constitutional framework, the Government of Flanders will meanwhile ensure that the existing competences are fleshed out to the maximum extent possible and that, if consultations were to fail, all legal instruments would be used when other authorities infringe upon our areas of competence or endanger our interests.*