

Flemish Parliament Act of 6 July 2012 on local cultural policy

Public libraries in the Flemish Community

Vlaamse overheid



Public libraries in the Flemish Community



The pursuit of a sustainable and qualitative policy is the recurring theme throughout the regulations on subsidisation and operation of public libraries in Flanders. The first strict and very regulating legislation resulted in a strong professionalisation of the sector. Today, strict standards are no longer imposed, but local authorities have the freedom to shape their own local policy within the framework of the Flemish objectives.

This brochure provides an introduction to the local cultural policy of the Flemish authorities, and in particular to the policy on public libraries. The division of competences in Belgium and the library policy in the past will be discussed; afterwards, the present policy and the Flemish Parliament Act on Libraries will be commented. Finally, we will sketch a profile of the Flemish library sector.

Culture, a Flemish competence

In the federal state of Belgium, the different Communities and Regions have a large autonomy. Like Germany is made up of Länder and Switzerland has cantons, Belgium has constitutional components known as Regions and Communities.

Together, the Flemish Region and the Flemish Community have a Flemish Parliament and a Government of Flanders. Flanders, with Brussels as its capital, has its own legislative and executive powers including broad and exclusive domestic and international responsibilities which are equivalent to the federal level.

Cultural policy and its implementation are an exclusively Flemish competence. The Flemish authorities can issue laws to that effect, called Flemish Parliament Acts and can conclude international treaties independently. The operation and subsidisation of public libraries is embedded in the Flemish Parliament Act of 6 July 2012 on Local Cultural Policy.

From laying down standards to inspiring

For decades, public libraries have been fulfilling a major social role in Flanders. Therefore, it seems evident that these institutions receive public support. A first public incentive was given through the Destrée law in 1921, with the aim of subsidising and ordering people's libraries, put together within a system of public libraries. Gradually, public libraries were given a broader meaning of provision of information, focussing, among other things,



“ More freedom to shape local cultural policy tailored to local needs. ”

on target groups, knowledge sharing, lifelong learning, reading promotion, etc.

As the library's social role was growing, the authorities acknowledged the need for a further professionalisation of the sector by creating a new legal basis in the 1970s. Obligations were imposed on municipalities and provinces with regard to the organisation and funding of public libraries.¹ The result of this strict standardisation was the extension of a large library network and a strong professionalisation of the sector that the present public libraries are still taking advantage of.

In the 1990s, the idea gained ground that municipalities had to be able to take autonomous decisions and that they were responsible for their cultural policy. On 13 July 2001, this led to the

Flemish Parliament Act on the promotion of a qualitative and integrated local cultural policy, which regulated much less itself, but which allowed the municipalities to translate their plans into a policy plan themselves and to define the manner in which they intend to do it. A subsidy was allocated for a cultural policy coordinator who drew up a strategic and integrated cultural policy plan for the municipal cultural policy, the library and the cultural centre, as an instrument for local authorities. Library operations were thus not regulated and subsidised separately any more, but they were embedded in the new Flemish Parliament Act.

The Flemish Parliament Act of 6 July 2012 on local cultural policy is going a step further. Local administrations still get more freedom to shape local cultural policy tailored to local needs.

¹ Flemish Parliament Act on the Dutch-language Public Library Operations of 1978.

Local cultural policy today

In 2011, administrative regulations changed considerably in Flanders. The Flemish authorities develop the strategic principles, translate them into 'Flemish policy priorities' and give operational autonomy to local authorities in order to flesh them out and to receive subsidies. The abolition of the separate sectoral policy plans, including the cultural policy plan and the obligation to work beyond sector areas and to draw up an integrated multi-annual plan is an important part of this administrative reform for local administrations.²

Flemish Parliament Act of 6 July 2012 on Local Cultural Policy

As a result of the administrative reform, several sectoral Flemish Parliament Acts have been amended or replaced, among which the Flemish Parliament Act of 13 July 2001 on the promotion of a qualitative and integrated local cultural policy.

The Flemish Parliament Act of 6 July 2012 on local cultural policy will come into force on 1 January 2014 and gives even more responsibilities and freedom to local administrations to flesh out the policy tailored to local needs.

² For ten Flemish policy domains, sector regulations have been developed which provide cooperation initiatives between the Flemish and local authorities: urban policy, municipal development co-operation, local social economy, local social policy, integration policy, cultural policy, youth policy, sports policy, cultural heritage policy and local complementary education policy.

Municipalities seeking to develop a local cultural policy and to subscribe to the Flemish policy priorities commit themselves to pursuing a qualitative and sustainable local cultural policy, to organising a low-threshold library and to establishing a cultural centre. Flanders holds on to a strategy of an integrated cultural policy, whereby public libraries gear their activities to the other cultural actors in the municipality.

For public libraries in particular, municipalities should operate a library which

- stimulates cultural education and reading motivation;
- focuses on the promotion of e-inclusion among target groups that are difficult to reach and on the increase of information literacy and media literacy;
- invests in an adapted service provision for the disabled and for target groups that are difficult to reach in the cultural, educational and socio-economic field;
- promotes cooperation with education institutions.





A great change in this context is that from now on objectives and effects will be focused on. There are no conditions any more as to the nature of the resources to be deployed, such as making printed materials available in the library, or with regard to the library's workforce and staff.

In order to be eligible for a subsidy, public libraries have to fulfil a number of basic requirements.

- 1° focus on social challenges such as digitisation of society;
- 2° make available an independent and multiform provision of information, which is composed in a large and careful way, tailored to the needs of the target group and in a non-commercial environment;
- 3° offer an on line catalogue from a library system;
- 4° make consultation of all information carriers and public lending of materials and files as easily accessible as possible, in particular for target groups that are difficult to reach and for people with a low income;
- 5° guarantee an optimal public service provision at customer-friendly opening hours;
- 6° spend at least 75% of the fixed budget of the resources reserved for the purchase of printed materials, on an annual basis, to Dutch-language publications;
- 7° with a view to monitoring, and next to the annual accounts approved by the Municipal Council, make available at least once a year policy relevant data on the public library, in the form and in accordance with the procedure defined by the Government of Flanders.



Subsidies for public libraries

Municipalities have the freedom to shape their own local policy within the Flemish objectives and they receive subsidies for subscribing to them. Municipalities or partnerships of municipalities which have already been subsidised under the 2001 Flemish Parliament Act on local cultural policy, keep their subsidy for the coming policy period (2013-2018).

A municipality which participates for the first time shall be entitled to 6.5 euro per inhabitant per year. Municipalities with less than 10,000 inhabitants receive a lumpsum subsidy of 56,000 euro per year. Municipalities or partnerships of municipalities participating with their public library in the development of a common, user friendly and recognisable digital search environment for Flanders, are given an annual subsidy of 0.17 euro per inhabitant.

Brussels-Capital, large cities and provinces

For the bilingual area of Brussels-Capital and for the metropolitan areas of Antwerp and Ghent, a separate regulation has been developed for the support of their local library policy. The provinces and the Flemish Community Commission also play a role in the library policy.³ The provinces have the autonomy and the responsibility to implement their own provincial policy to support library operations. As far as this fleshing out is concerned, the Flemish Parliament Act sets out that attention must be paid to the specific role of the provinces in the scale increase of library operations, through the development of provincial library systems and the promotion of structural partnerships between municipalities. The provincial library systems are indeed an essential and crucial link for the further development of the digital library within the Flemish Community.

³ The Flemish Community Commission (VGC) is the basis for the Flemish Community in the Brussels Capital Region and is competent for cultural, educational and person-related matters (welfare and health). For these community matters, the Flemish Community Commission has the competence of organising body.

Support from the Flemish authorities

In addition to financial resources, the Flemish authorities provide support by offering a broader framework in order to allow the municipalities to harmonize their library operations. Some examples:

- Organisation and financing of supralocal research on policy-relevant themes.
- Development of a data registration system (Bios2) which offers the municipalities the possibility to follow up and to analyse their own operations. At the same time, they can also benchmark against other, comparable municipalities. At the supralocal level, trends and evolutions are followed up, so that the Flemish policy with regard to libraries can be adjusted and adapted if necessary.
- Organisation of tasks by a number of organisations at supralocal level: the organisation of a library and youth book week, projects, seminars and trainings, the support and development of the digital library in Flanders ...

Organisations with a specific task

Under the Flemish Parliament Act, the Flemish authorities support a number of organisations for the implementation of specific tasks for the public library policy, in order to support local libraries.

Bibnet vzw: project organisation for the support and development of the digital library in Flanders.

Blindenzorg Licht en Liefde vzw: production centre for the development of reading matter in adapted reading forms (Braille books, listening books and magazines).

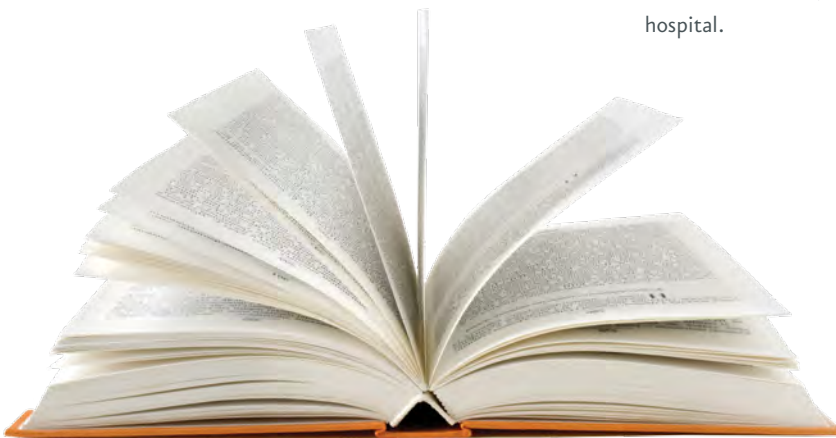
LOCUS vzw: support centre for the local cultural policy.

Luisterpuntbibliotheek vzw: special library for people with a reading disorder.

Transkript vzw: production centre for the development of reading matter in adapted reading forms (Braille books, listening books and magazines).

VVBAD vzw: Flemish Association for Library, Archives and Documentation Centres, a non-profit organisation for professionals active in libraries, archives and documentation centres in Flanders.

Zorgbib Rode Kruis-Vlaanderen vzw: special library for the long-term ill and people staying in a retirement home, a rest and nursing home or a hospital.

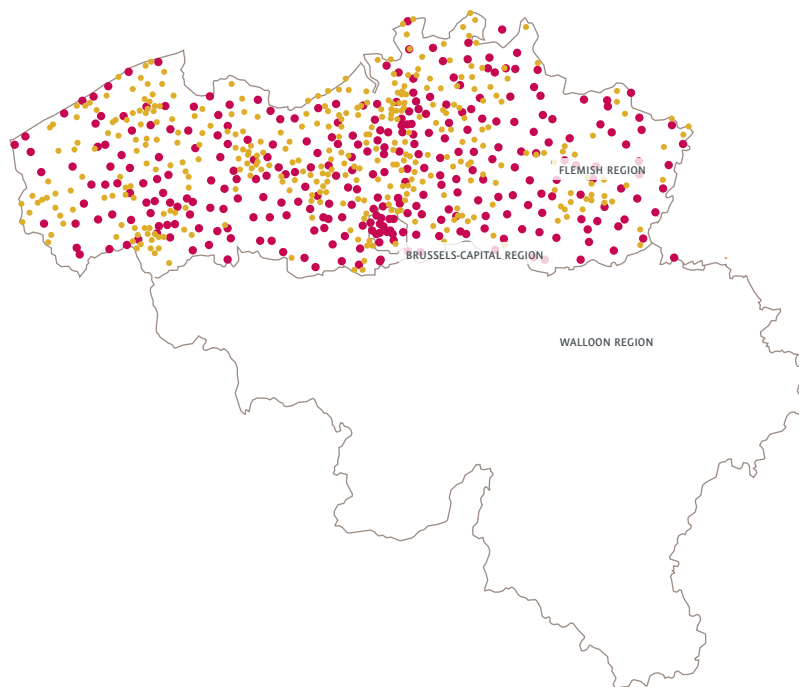


Profile of the Flemish library sector

Every municipality has its library

In Flanders and the Brussels-Capital Region, almost every municipality has its public library. Most municipalities have their own municipal public library, however, some municipalities are working together to jointly operate a public library.

There are 312 subsidised public libraries in total. In approximately 50% of the municipalities, there are still other library points, next to the main library, 382 in total. All over Flanders and Brussels, there are 694 library locations.



- main libraries in Flanders
- service points in Flanders



Digitisation

As a result of the growing importance of digital media in our society, libraries will also attune their operations to this. Every library has several PCs with internet connection. For the time being, only 1 out of 3 libraries also offers wireless internet in the library.

Staff

Approximately 3,500 people are working for local public libraries in municipalities in Flanders and Brussels.

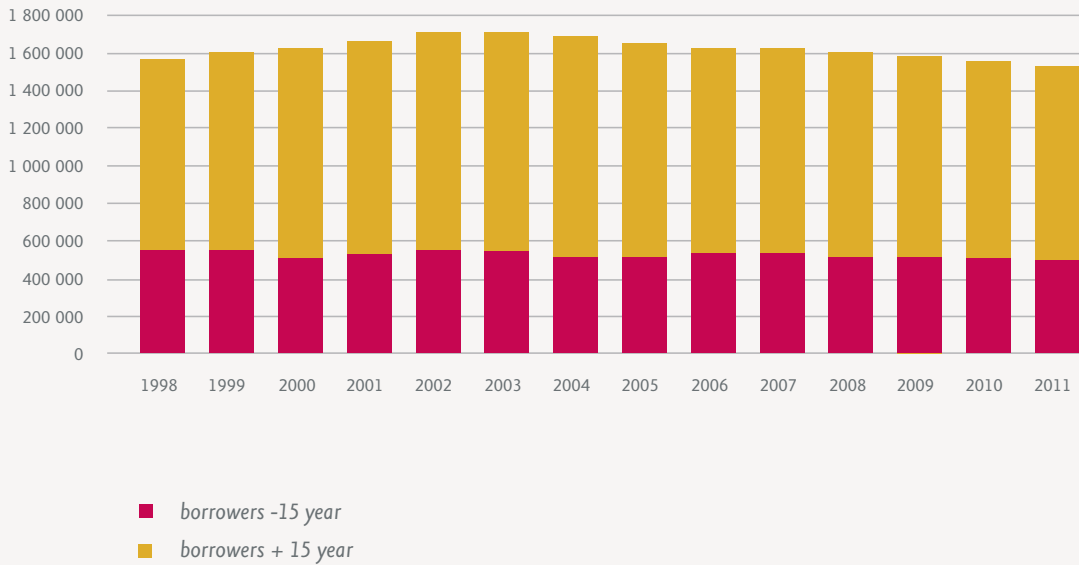
More than three quarters of them are women. Many members of staff do not work full-time, only part-time.

Turned into full-time equivalents, 2,500 full-time equivalents are working in the library sector. Furthermore, there are of course also staff members of the provinces, Flemish authorities, support centres and non-profit organizations who are working for the library sector.

Users

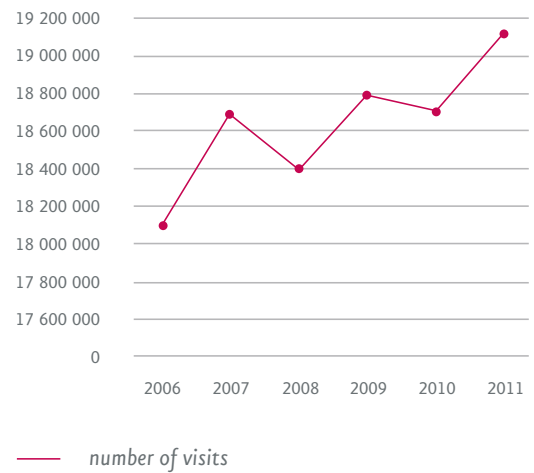
> Graphic 1: Evolution of borrowers

In 2011, there were 1.54 million borrowers. This means that approximately 1 out of 4 Flemish people borrowed a book in a public library at least once a week. Especially Flemish people under 15 years visit libraries, for more than 44% of young people are borrowers in a public library.



> Graphic 2: Evolution of visits

In addition to people who visit a library to borrow library materials, libraries also receive many other visitors (reading newspapers/magazines, surfing the internet, participating in activities, visiting exhibitions ...). In 2011 there were over 19 million library visits.



Collection

> Graphic 3: Evolution of collections



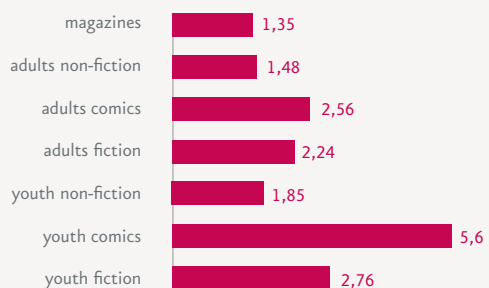
All libraries together possess 22.2 million printed materials and 3.8 million audio-visual materials, about 26 million items in total. There is a shift in the total share of audio-visual materials in the total collection from 8% in 1998 to 14% in 2011.

Over the years, the total number of lendings has slightly increased: from 49.9 million in 1998 to 53.7 million in 2011. This is an increase of more than 7%. The increase in the total number of lendings is mainly due to increased lendings of audio-visual materials.

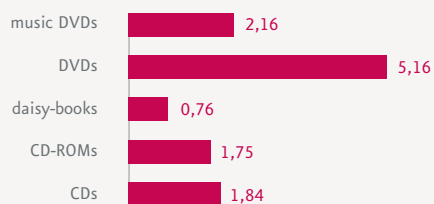
Statistically speaking, every item in all library collections is lent out 2.5 times a year on average. Comics for young people and DVDs are the items that are most often lent out.



> Graphic 4: Use of printed materials



> Graphic 5: Use of audio-visual materials



Use = number of lendings compared to possession



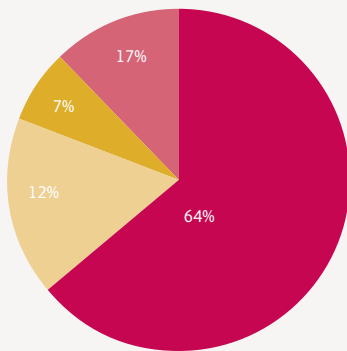
Financial

Total expenditures of public libraries amount to more than 200 million euros. About half of this amount is financed by the cities and municipalities themselves.

The Flemish authorities pay 54.7 million euros a year to the municipalities for the support of their library operation and the provinces also make a contribution.

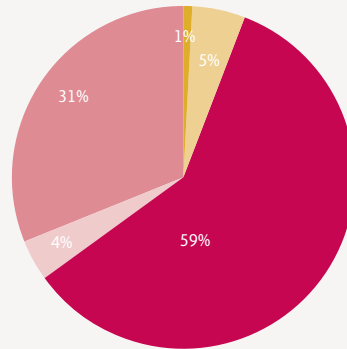
The users themselves will contribute approximately 10 million euros, by paying membership fees and lending fees.

> Graphic 6: Expenditures



- staff
- infrastructure
- ICT & operations
- collection

> Graphic 7: Revenues



- cities & municipalities
- Flemish authorities
- provinces
- users
- other

Contact

Local cultural policy is being implemented by the Agency for Socio-Cultural Work for Youth and Adults.

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