

Organisation of the fire services in the Netherlands

Local authority management

Traditionally, the fire services in the Netherlands have been the responsibility of local government. Almost all 538 local authorities in the Netherlands have their own fire brigade, the size of which is governed largely by the size of the local authority.

The scope of the fire services' responsibilities has been set down in the 1985 Dutch Fire Services Act (*Brandweerwet*): *"the prevention, containment and extinguishing of fire, the limitation of fire hazard, the prevention and limitation of fire-related accidents and all related activities; the limitation and counteraction of hazards for persons and animals in the event of non-fire related accidents; the containment and management of disasters"*.

The Dutch fire services are involved at all stages of fire security and emergency management. A pro-active aim is to prevent or to avoid hazards at the earliest stages of planning. This preventative policy is aimed at avoiding or containing the spread of fire. An important cornerstone of this policy is formed by the rigorous building regulations and local authority fire safety bye-laws.

During periods when the firefighters are not being deployed, the fire services focus their attention on preventative aspects, such as the servicing of fire-hydrants, easing access to neighbourhoods and building complexes, and the formulation of fire action plans. This enables the fire services to be fully prepared for the outbreak and containment of an emergency. During this phase, training exercises are carried out in the combating of fires, accidents and emergencies and in the use of the right material and equipment.

In the Netherlands there are 26,866 active firefighters employed by the local authorities, of whom 4,593 are employed in full-time service. Full-time firefighters are concentrated primarily in the larger towns and cities and as fire officers in the smaller local authorities. Active recruitment in the last few years has led to a growing number of women (742 firefighters) and ethnic minorities employed with the fire services. In this way, the firefighting community more truly reflects the wider community which they serve.

Training and development of firefighting staff in the Netherlands is extremely demanding. Potential candidates are subject to rigorous physical requirements and the training courses put firefighters under enormous duress. Thanks to the modular system of the training programme, conducted on the basis of state-regulated exams, in theory, it is possible for anyone to achieve a position of any rank within the fire services.

For officer ranks, a programme of higher vocational training is required, which can be followed up by Nibra training course which lasts over one year, under the auspices of the Dutch Institute for Fire and Emergency Prevention. To reach the higher echelons, additional courses in management and the leadership of major operational organisations are compulsory.

Equipment

The basic firefighting unit in the Netherlands is the fire engine. Fire engines carry all the rescue and extinguishing appliances for use in the event of fires and accidents. A fire engine is manned by a crew of six, including the unit commander. The vehicle carries special breathing equipment for all fire crew.

In towns and cities with high-rise buildings, fire engines are also fitted with extension ladders and aerial ladder platforms with a length of between 24 to 37 metres. For major traffic accidents or emergencies, all regions and larger local authorities also have special equipment units which carry all kinds of additional specialist equipment.

For additional requirements, special vehicles can be used, such as foam tenders, water carriers, breathing apparatus support units, diving units, mobile laboratories, incident command units, special hazardous materials incident units, etc. These special units are often constructed as separate containers which can be located near to the site of the incident. On the larger inland waterways and in local authorities which incorporate larger expanses of water, dedicated water-borne crafts may be used, sometimes in combination with port authorities.

Throughout the Netherlands there are around 1,000 fire stations with 1,567 fire engines, 570 additional firefighting units, over 130 extension ladders, 50 aerial ladder platforms, 100 dedicated firefighting vehicles and water-borne crafts, 332 victim support vehicles, 200 apparatus or diving units and an additional 1,000 vehicles. Furthermore, the fire services have 1,500 trailers at their disposal for various purposes and 730 special containers.

Regional cooperation

Local authority fire brigades in the Netherlands collaborate in 39 regional fire service divisions. This means that they are able to carry out specific tasks more efficiently and draw upon sufficient manpower and resources more quickly in the event of major incidents and emergencies. A key task of these regional divisions is to maintain a network of links, including an emergency services centre which deals with all emergency calls in the region. This will alert the relevant crews or stations and maintain links. Emergency fire calls are received by automatic fire alarm systems at each of the centres or via an emergency number. These centres are managed by a large number of police forces, and for each call, details of the location and the required service are made. Direct contact is then made with the relevant incidents room of the fire services, police or ambulance services in the region. At the moment, a joint emergency call system is being developed for all the emergency services and a completely new network of links, where not only voice messages can be exchanged, but images and computer data as well. Implementation of the new system is planned for mid 2005.

The regional fire service divisions also have a role to play in planning firefighting and victim support activities. In general, central purchasing and maintenance of equipment, training of firefighters, formulation of action plans and deployment of procedures and maintaining specialisations in dealing with hazardous substances take place at a regional level.

Another important responsibility of the regional fire service divisions is emergency planning, including the organisation of training courses and programmes. The Ministry of Home Affairs provides the regional fire services with special equipment for dealing with major emergencies.

The National level

The Netherlands is a country which has a tradition of consultation. The famous *poldermodel* (whereby round-table partners negotiate with each other until they reach an agreement) is a Dutch invention. At a national level there are numerous associations and agencies that have an active interest in fire safety. Prominent

players include the Dutch association of fire brigades (NVBK), the Royal Dutch association of fire services (KNBV) and the board of chief fire officers of the regional fire services (CCRB). In turn, they all cooperate in the Dutch federation of fire services (NBF). The fire services and emergency planning directorate at the Dutch Ministry of Home Affairs ensures that policies are drawn up at a national level and plays an important supportive role in the areas of firefighting, emergency planning and crisis management.

Nibra operates as a centre of firefighting expertise and organises training resources and programmes for fire service personnel and all those involved in firefighting and emergency planning.

In addition, there is the national fire service documentation centre (NBDC), the Dutch association of all those concerned with the fire services (VBB), as well as two fire service museums at Hellevoetsluis and Borculo. Furthermore there is the *Stichting Historisch Brandweermaterieel*, a trust which is concerned with the history of the Dutch fire brigades.

Prevention

In the area of prevention, active cooperation exists between the foundation for consumer safety (*Stichting Consument en Veiligheid*), the Dutch institute for conditions of work (NIA) and TNO, the Dutch organisation for applied scientific research in Delft.

Fire-insurance companies have also set up a national centre for prevention which acts as a certification body for burglary prevention and fire safety. In this way, companies can apply for certification for the installation of fire alarm systems, extinguisher systems (including sprinkler systems), smoke regulators, etc.

Likewise, fire-insurance companies in the Netherlands have set up an organisation called *Salvage*, whose services can be called upon by the fire services. This organisation aims to provide direct support to victims of fire damage and to limit (consequential) loss or damages.

On request, specialists from a *Salvage*-affiliated company can be at the scene of an incident within one hour, to contain the extent of the damage even whilst the fire is being put out and to take necessary measures to minimise any further damage as soon as possible. At an early stage, even when the fire is still burning, they are able to decide on immediate measures to limit and prevent further damage. They can set in motion cleaning and mopping-up operations and measures to secure filing systems and computerised data.

As a result of this rapid response, a great deal of consequential damage can be avoided and victims often feel supported by these direct forms of assistance.

The *Monumentenwacht*, a Dutch body responsible for the preservation of listed buildings, is also active in the field of fire prevention. Founded in 1973, the organisation is the largest agency working in the field of the preventative conservation of historic buildings. Every year thousands of listed buildings are inspected structurally by staff of the *Monumentenwacht*. The reports written by the inspectors, in addition to structural recommendations, form the basis for improving fire safety (fire hazards are indicated at an early stage, the need for regular inspection of lighting conductors and installation of sprinkler systems are recommended, etc).

Industrial fire services

Larger airport and port authorities have their own active fire services. Special statutory measures apply in the case of airports and hazardous industries.

Additionally, all larger companies are obliged to operate a Fire and First Aid team which enables specially trained employees to take action in the event of emergencies, such as helping to evacuate buildings and offer First Aid.

The future

Industrial developments and the rapid growth in air, sea and overland traffic will bring about increasing risks for a heavily populated country such as the Netherlands. In order to meet these risks head-on, far-reaching levels of cooperation are required between the fire services and the other emergency services. To an increasing extent, the fire services are involved at the design and planning stages of large-scale construction projects to check on the planned (fire) safety measures. The fire services are also becoming increasingly involved with environmental aspects.

The conclusion is that there is a high level of organisation for training and equipment in the Netherlands, but much still has to be done. There is a great need to carry out exercises in true-to-life settings, since know-how and equipment are useless without regular training. The increasing focus on safety of fire personnel means that proper exercise and practice is vital. Economies of scale, a wider scope of responsibilities and greater cooperation will help ensure the continuation of a professional and transparent organisation and management of public safety.

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