

PRESS RELEASE

March 2024

Report to the Flemish Parliament

Basic accessibility in public transport

At the request of the Flemish Parliament, the Court of Audit examined the policy preparation, regulations and implementation of the basic accessibility decree. Flemish Government wanted to replace supply-driven basic mobility with a demand-driven transport model with different transport layers, including customized transport. The Court of Audit ruled that the complexity of this transition has been underestimated, resulting in less than transparent and fragmented regulations and a delayed rollout. Policy changes limited mode-neutral mobility management. The demand-driven model is also at odds with budget limitations, which raises questions about the feasibility of the desired modal shift. Integration of transport layers and, especially, effectiveness of tailor-made transport, have not yet been realized in practice, nor guaranteed.

Basic accessibility

With basic accessibility, on January 1, 2021 the Flemish Government wanted to introduce a demand-driven transport model with four layers: the train network, the core network, the supplementary network and customized transport. However, the switch from basic mobility to basic accessibility has been postponed several times and is now being rolled out in phases. At the request of the Flemish Parliament, the Court of Audit has examined the policy preparation, regulations and the elaboration of the basic accessibility decree as far as public passenger transport is concerned.

Policy preparation

A thorough evaluation of basic mobility was not forthcoming, even though the Flemish Government had set this as a starting point. Basic accessibility decree objectives are mainly based on a 2015 concept note. They are not clearly formulated and there are no clear links to the environmental framework, the fight against transport poverty or climate objectives. Some relatively expensive pilot projects tested the concepts of basic accessibility, but yielded only limited results.

Drafting regulations and implementation process

With the basic accessibility decree, Flemish Government wanted to regulate mobility policy in Flanders in an integrated manner, opting for a framework decree, which came into effect without implementation decisions. A preliminary schedule of regulations to be drawn up was created in 2019, but this quickly turned out to be inadequate. Moreover, the decree has been amended several times. Together with the fragmented implementation decisions delivery, this led to a less than transparent regulatory framework and therefore to legal uncertainty. In the summer of 2022, Flemish Government decided to replace the desired one-off, large-scale, complete rollout of the decree, including a new, layered transport network, with a phased rollout starting January 2023.

Management and planning

The basic accessibility decree initially provided for mobility planning at three levels: Flemish, regional and local. However, the focus of mobility planning gradually shifted from the

Flemish to the regional level. Only about two years after the start of drawing up the regional mobility plans was the Flemish mobility vision introduced, which has only a limited guiding force. Preparation of these regional plans was also delayed. The preliminary designs currently lack measurable objectives, which makes monitoring difficult. In order to be able to start the new public transport network rollout, public transport plans were drawn up.

By mid-2018, fifteen Flemish transport regions were established, which had to draw up and monitor regional mobility plans. The lack of legal personality limits transport regional council effectiveness. These councils also rely heavily on external consultancy firm guidance, entailing significant costs and creating dependency risks.

Shifting important management tasks from the mode-neutral Mobility department to the public transportation company The Line makes developing a truly integrated mobility network across the different modes even more difficult.

Exploitation

At the end of 2020, following a benchmark, Flemish Government again appointed The Line as internal operator for the core network and supplementary network for ten years. The Line designs these networks in collaboration with the transport regions and engineering firms. The Line is now also responsible for a large part of the operationalization of the exploitation of customized transport. According to the Flemish Government, budget-neutral exploitation was the starting point: the transition from basic mobility to basic accessibility should not entail additional exploitation costs. In 2019, The Line calculated using a refined model that basic accessibility entailed an additional operational cost. According to the Court of Audit, budget neutrality implies that the demand is limited and thus conflicts with the principle of a demand-driven transport model and the intended increase in demand following the modal shift. Budget neutrality also creates a risk of blind spots in the network (transport poverty).

The Line initially anticipated a passenger gain of 7.5% through the introduction of basic accessibility, but the Court of Audit considers it uncertain that this number will be achieved and warns that the financing of basic accessibility may come under pressure. The Line's calculations show that the cost of operating basic accessibility for the core network and supplementary network increased by 21.6% compared to 2019, mainly due to indexation mechanisms and price level increases.

The desired, thorough rate and ticket integration also failed to materialize because Flemish Government has not yet approved a rates framework and because the rate policy is divided among sixteen actors.

Mobility center and infrastructure adjustments

Flemish Government decided to set up a mobility centre, which must, among other things, collect, plan and distribute transport requests to one or more transporters, and operationalize and coordinate tailor-made transport. It took more than two years before its development could start and the mobility centre, which has since been renamed Hoppin Centre, would only be operational as of January 2024, two years after the originally planned date, and then with as yet minimal operation.

Combi-mobility, the travel behaviour in which people combine different means of transport, is one of the basic accessibility objectives. The realization of high-quality and recognizable mobile points (later renamed hoppin points) is important to facilitate and stimulate transition between transport modes. However, this realization is proving difficult: by the end of August 2023, only 4% of the planned hoppin points had been realized. The objective of achieving 1,000 hoppin points by the end of the legislature therefore seems unattainable.

Response of the minister

The Flemish ministers believe the report's conclusions largely correspond to their policy vision and inspire their future approach. They also indicated that some of the

recommendations are already being implemented in the context of the new strategic plan for assistance and services to detainees 2020-2025. Other matters are under construction and some adjustments have yet to be initiated. The ministers did, however, remark on some of the Court of Audit's comments about the import and network model. They fear wrong conclusions may be drawn out of the effect evaluation, despite the Court's nuances.

Response from the minister

The Flemish Minister of Mobility responded that she largely agreed with the report. She recognized the importance of learning lessons from the past and taking them into account in subsequent major reform projects. The minister also points to the doubling of resources for customized transport, which, in her opinion, cannot be said to mean that basic accessibility creates transport poverty. She broadly agreed with the Court of Audit's conclusions and recommendations and will implement these recommendations where possible and appropriate.

Information for the press

The Court of Audit exerts an external control on the financial operations of the Federal State, the Communities, the Regions and the provinces. It contributes to improving public governance by transmitting to the parliamentary assemblies, to the managers and to the audited services any useful and reliable information resulting from a contradictory examination. As a collateral body of the Parliament, the Court performs its missions independently of the authorities it controls.

The audit report on the *Basic accessibility in public transport* has been sent to the Flemish Parliament. The full version and this press release can be found on the Court's website: www.courtofaudit.be.