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**enclosure(s):**  
**Subject:** Rli Work Programme for 2020-2021

Dear Ms Van Nieuwenhuizen,

The Council for the Environment and Infrastructure (Rli) has on several occasions discussed possible topics for its 2020-2021 work programme in recent months. During its deliberations, the Council considered issues raised by the ministries and in our discussions with you and your colleagues. In the coming years, the Council's aim is to help accelerate the necessary transitions in the wider domain of the physical human environment. Because the associated challenges are closely intertwined, most of the Council's advisory reports will transcend the boundaries of the four ministries responsible for the physical domain.

A number of the topics addressed in prior work programmes will continue in 2020:

- Hazardous substances (work programme for 2019-2020)
- Healthy soils (work programme for 2019-2020)
- Digitisation (work programme for 2018-2019)
- Conference on inclusive transitions (work programme for 2019-2020)

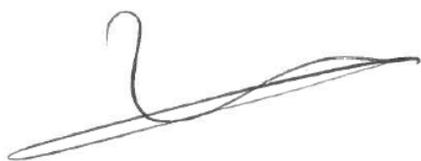
The 'stranded assets' advisory topic from the 2019-2020 work programme was discontinued after a preliminary study revealed that, for the time being, there are ample prospects for converting rather than disposing of assets in most economic sectors.

The Council proposes selecting five new topics for its 2020-2021 programme. We explain them briefly in this letter:

- The social city
- International accessibility of the Netherlands by rail
- Peat meadows: the Green Heart case study
- Biodiversity recovery in public spaces
- The hydrogen economy



Yours sincerely,  
Council for the Environment and Infrastructure

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Jan Jaap de Graeff  
Chair

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Ron Hillebrand  
General Secretary



## Advisory topics for 2020-2021

For information purposes, we have identified the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) addressed by each topic.

### 1. The social city



In 2006, the then Council for Housing, Spatial Planning and the Environment concluded that urban renewal projects had too often lost sight of local residents' desire to move up the socio-economic ladder. Projects were mainly geared towards upgrading physical aspects. In its advisory report, the Council concluded that social and economic opportunities were being overlooked as a result. Even today, there appears to be little interest in exploring socio-spatial, cultural, economic and societal perspectives on urban life. For example, government policy on urban areas and on urban and village regeneration has been phased out.

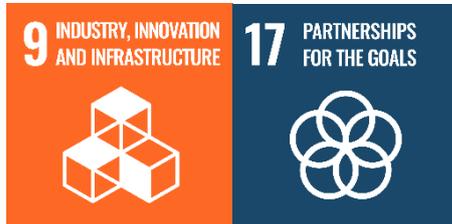
More recently, there are growing signs that urban areas are not faring well. Segregation and ghettoization loom, quality of life and safety are deteriorating in neighbourhoods that have a large stock of social housing, and some urban districts are at risk of becoming unaffordable for certain categories of households, creating serious impediments to diversity and mixed-income neighbourhoods.

Cities no longer have the rigorous tools to influence the composition of local populations, however, or to tackle economic segregation. The reform of the Housing Act (2015) has also curtailed the scope afforded to housing corporations. We are currently on the eve of the next major urban renewal exercise, in part because we need to 'wean ourselves off natural gas'. Unlike the period in which the national government pursued an urban policy and made an investment fund available for urban renewal, cities now must make do without the direct help of the national government. And while the national government's City Deals and Agenda City policies are contributing to urban transition and innovation processes, they scarcely ever address existing socio-spatial planning and societal challenges.

Is there a need to revisit a broader perspective on the city, the city as a platform for social progress where everyone participates, the city as a socio-cultural incubator, the city as a meeting place, the diverse and inclusive city? How would such a city benefit society? How does this idea fit in with the new Environment and Planning Act and which additional instruments should the authorities have at their disposal?



## 2. International accessibility of the Netherlands by rail (an EU advisory report)



The railways are regarded as a component of sustainable mobility. The Netherlands has a well-functioning domestic railway network but, with a few exceptions, rail services to and from other countries leave much to be desired. Travel times are too long, connections are poor, it is difficult to purchase tickets and they cost too much. But it is precisely international rail services that have the potential to replace short-haul flights within Europe, and therefore to yield major climate gains.

Despite the open EU market, the railways lag behind when it comes to providing passengers with fast, competitive services between the continent's major hubs. What, precisely, is impeding this? Are there gaps in infrastructure, organisational issues, or a lack of guidance and cooperation at EU level?

What is necessary to raise the Netherlands' international accessibility by rail to a significantly higher level? As this issue has a pronounced international dimension, the Council is exploring the possibility of collaborating with its sister councils in the EU. If collaboration is successful, the advisory report could also be addressed to the European Union, as this is likely to have more added value than a national report.

## 3. Peat meadows: the Green Heart case study



The 'Green Heart' has been an important structuring factor in Dutch national spatial planning policy. It describes an area of farmland and open landscapes bounded by the Netherlands' four largest cities: Amsterdam, Utrecht, Rotterdam and The Hague, known collectively as the 'Randstad'. As spatial planning policy was decentralised, the national government became less interested in the Green Heart area. Nevertheless, its importance for the economy and prosperity of the Randstad is undiminished and the policy challenges are in fact greater than ever.

The pressure of urbanisation in the Randstad is dovetailing with problems facing the agricultural sector, including the very prominent issue of peat oxidation. Combined with the increasing urban sprawl in the area, peat oxidation (a result of dewatering and drainage) in the Green Heart and the associated subsidence of the soil and emissions of carbon dioxide are impinging on the interests of farmers, local residents, and road and water management authorities.

For a long time, soil subsidence was seen primarily as a technical problem requiring a technical solution: taking action on the groundwater level. It is now becoming clear that this viewpoint is too



limited: it is a problem that touches on many aspects of society, both in rural and urban areas (soil, landscape, water management, infrastructure, building management). Is it possible to take an integrated, regional approach that links peat oxidation, the challenges facing farmers and the problem of urbanisation? One of the difficulties is that no one clearly 'owns' the problem, partly due to the process of policy decentralisation. What is the role of national government with regard to the future of the Green Heart? And what can other parties do (provincial authorities, water boards, municipal authorities, businesses, local residents)?

#### 4. Biodiversity recovery in public spaces



In 2018, farmers' organisations, food supply chain partners, researchers, nature and environmental organisations and a financial institution drafted the *Delta Plan for Biodiversity Recovery*. The plan is meant to reverse the loss of biodiversity in the Netherlands. Besides setting out routes for nature and agriculture, the Delta Plan also identifies a 'public spaces route', addressing the design and management of new and existing infrastructure, business parks, water management structures and other public spaces not currently contributing sufficiently to biodiversity.

Public spaces typically serve many different purposes. They are spaces in which we live, seek relaxation and leisure activities, and work, and where we build transport and energy infrastructure, set aside land for nature and wildlife, combat climate change, and so on.

How do we ensure that there is leeway for all these uses in public space, with one use not being at the expense of another, and that biodiversity can recover there? Which roadmap is needed to create an integrated solution for public space? The framers of *the Delta Plan for Biodiversity Recovery* deliberately chose to exclude politicians. Nevertheless, government will have to ensure that the various societal uses are given their due in public space. What is government's job in that regard?

#### 5. The hydrogen economy



Hydrogen can be used as a feed stock for industry as well as an energy carrier in mobility (where batteries fall short), in the built environment (where a high level of insulation is impossible) and in industry (for high temperature heat). It can also play an important role in the energy supply system (and in balancing that system) because it can be stored and transported easily. The 'surplus' electricity generated by wind farms can be used for hydrogen production, for example. Besides such 'surplus' electricity, hydrogen can also be made from biomass gasification or as a product of a carbon capture and storage process.



The Netherlands has a firm foothold in the hydrogen sector and there is tremendous potential for its use here. The Dutch high-tech chemical and petrochemical industries already use hydrogen on a massive scale. The Netherlands' focus on natural gas has given it the necessary expertise and infrastructure.

Further expansion will require the Dutch to make a number of strategic choices, however. Its use in mobility will require a hydrogen grid and refuelling stations – in short, an infrastructure over and above the one being constructed for electric vehicles. Is synergy or coordination possible or even necessary here? Will we use the natural gas infrastructure to supply hydrogen to the built environment, and what will it take to make that happen? Who will be responsible for building and funding the hydrogen infrastructure? Since this infrastructure is of public interest, what will the relationship be between public and private activities? Who will bear the unprofitable portion of investment in the hydrogen economy until its use reaches critical mass? Now that the first steps have been taken towards building a large-scale hydrogen production facility, can Rotterdam become an international hydrogen hub? Will coordination within the North-West European market be advantageous, and how will the Netherlands taking a pro-active role in hydrogen affect the 'European Energy Union'? Major hydrogen programmes have already been announced (see, for example, the 'draft national climate agreement'), but there are numerous strategic choices ahead. An Rli advisory report, which would be independent of any existing interests, can play a role in this matter.

