

# The Feeling at Home survey 2021

*Do internationals living in the Amsterdam area feel at home?*



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# Introduction

ICAP Amsterdam was founded in 2016 to build a bridge between the international community and government and civic organisations.

To do this, ICAP has established an independent forum to represent and reflect the views of the international community on issues which have an impact on the Netherlands' attractiveness as a place to live in and do business.

In 2021, IN Amsterdam commissioned ICAP to carry out a new survey asking if internationals felt at home in the Netherlands, and reflect on what some of the problems were, in feeling at home.

# Background

ICAP research has already established that around half of the Amsterdam Metropolitan Area's international residents have no plans to leave the Netherlands. ICAP has also shown that the majority send their children to Dutch schools and are keen to buy their own homes.

But what other issues are important when it comes to feeling at home?

IN Amsterdam asked ICAP to find out more about how the international community integrates into wider Dutch society and to develop suggestions for new initiatives and ideas.

The research uses both anecdotal and empirical evidence - statistics gathered via a survey plus comments.

The aim of the research was twofold:

- To find out more about what internationals consider to be important to feeling at home and any pitfalls they may encounter
- To make recommendations about future strategy and initiatives which could ease the problems experienced by internationals in integrating into the Netherlands based on ideas from the community itself.

# Methodology

The research was commissioned to find out if the Amsterdam Metropolitan Area's international community feels at home in the Netherlands and what issues they deal with in really integrating into Dutch society.

The aim was to produce relevant statistics and a wealth of actual experiences which city officials can use to remove or reduce bottlenecks, manage expectations and shape education policy in the future.

The questions were drawn up by ICAP with input from officials at IN Amsterdam.

We approached over 15 groups, websites and other organisations with strong links to the international community and asked them to circulate the survey's website link.

We also circulated the survey to the ICAP mailing list of over 3,000 people, and sent one reminder.

A number of organisations were also approached personally by ICAP board members.

# Methodology (cont.)

The survey was based on multiple choice and open questions.

In total, over 3,800 people responded to the survey, of whom 1,743 are resident in the Amsterdam Metropolitan area, including 1,194 in the city itself. More than 600 people living in the AMA answered the open questions, resulting in a wealth of personal experiences to provide a qualitative aspect to the research.\*

We also compared the AMA responses with those in the Netherlands as a whole, with people who have lived in the Netherlands for three to five years, people with children, people who don't speak Dutch and several other categories to look for any relevant differences.

The questionnaires were completed on a voluntary basis without incentives.

\*We have not attempted to define 'international community'. Instead the survey was promoted via websites and organisations which focus on 'expats' or have a large number of foreign employees.

More information via <http://icapnl.com/>

# *The general picture - the best & the worst*

A general impression of the benefits and disadvantages to living in the Netherlands

# The best and the worst

Feeling at home is a difficult concept to tackle because everyone's opinion reflects where they come from, and what they expect of the country and their relocation.

To try and to get an overall picture, we decided to ask the the respondents what they considered the best and worst aspects of living in the Netherlands and to look for common threads.

The respondents were asked about what they most and least appreciated about the Netherlands and in many cases, what was considered good by some, was less appreciated by others.

Take taxes, for instance: some saw why they are high, where they go and how high taxes makes things work, while others just thought they were too high, period.

Many said they appreciated Dutch directness and the straightforward approach to administrative procedures, while others said they could be difficult to comprehend/accept and could be restrictive.

Nature and green spaces also brought different perspectives. For some there is a wide abundance to enjoy, for others, not enough.

And, when it comes to Dutch people appreciation and un-appreciation for the 'straightforwardness' of locals was a constant, theme. There was appreciation for friendliness, yet, some respondents noted the lack of it when to came to trying to become friends with the Dutch.

# The best and the worst continued

While there is little to be done about a 'lack of mountains' or the weather, we were able to draw some general conclusions.

- People appreciate the friendliness of Dutch people, though do say getting to know Dutch properly can be a complicated and long process.
- There is appreciation for social security, how things are organised, public transport, tolerance, equal rights, green spaces and nature, cycling culture, standard of living and safety, and the overall work:life balance.
- Particular attention was also given to the fact that it is possible to do a lot without speaking Dutch and that English is widely spoken
- Many commented on the lack of customer service throughout society - from national and local government as well as the hospitality industry.
- The lack of choice in stores, early closing hours or widespread use of diaries often surprised, and frustrated respondents. They also commented on what they saw as a lack of curiosity about foreigners among Dutch people

With this in mind, we set out to look in more detail at how respondents have come to feel at home, why those who don't are having difficulties, and what can be learned from their experiences.

# *About the Respondents*

In this section we look at the demographics of the survey respondents

# Main points

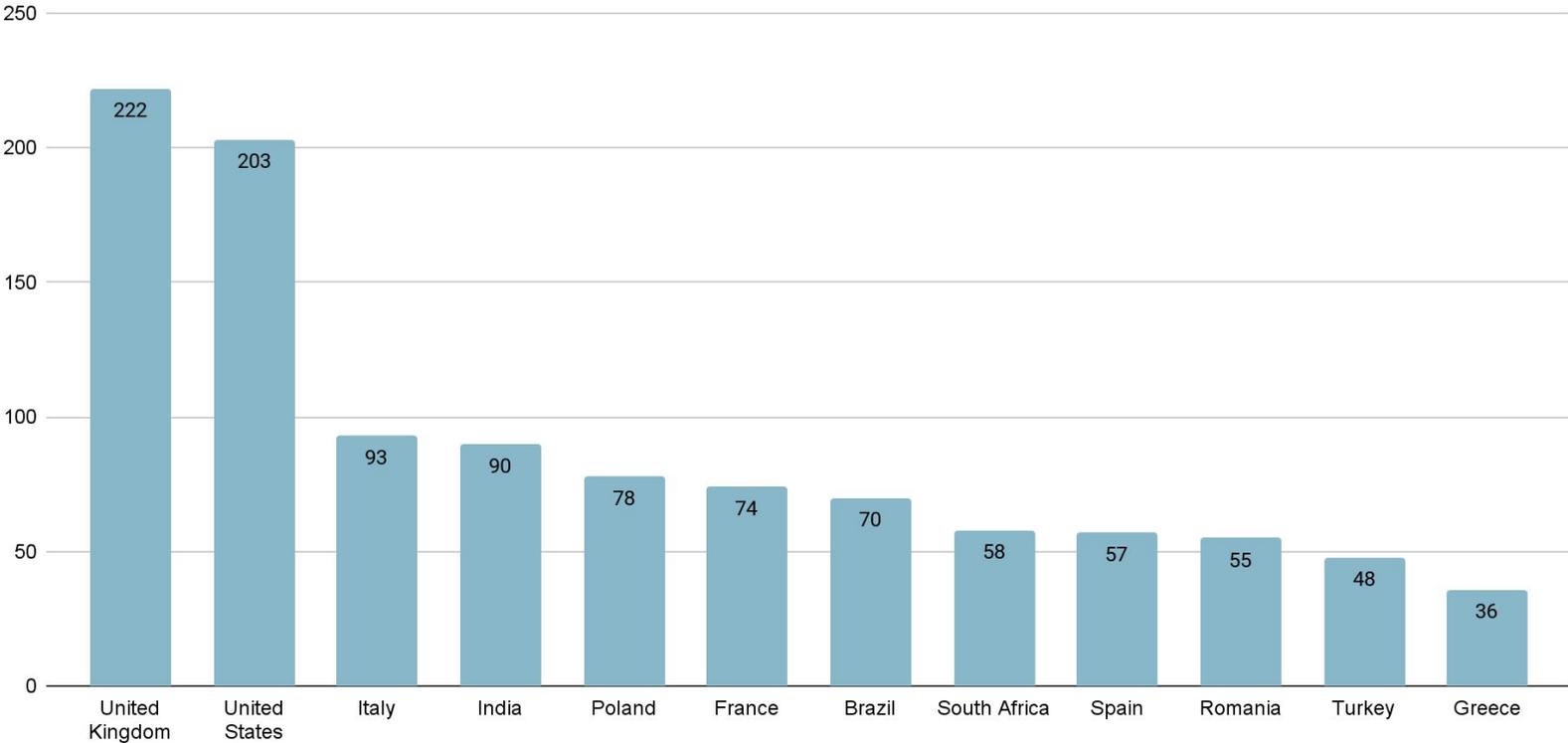
In total, 3,802 people filled in the survey, of whom 1,743 lived in the Amsterdam Metropolitan Area (AMA).

Of the AMA respondents:

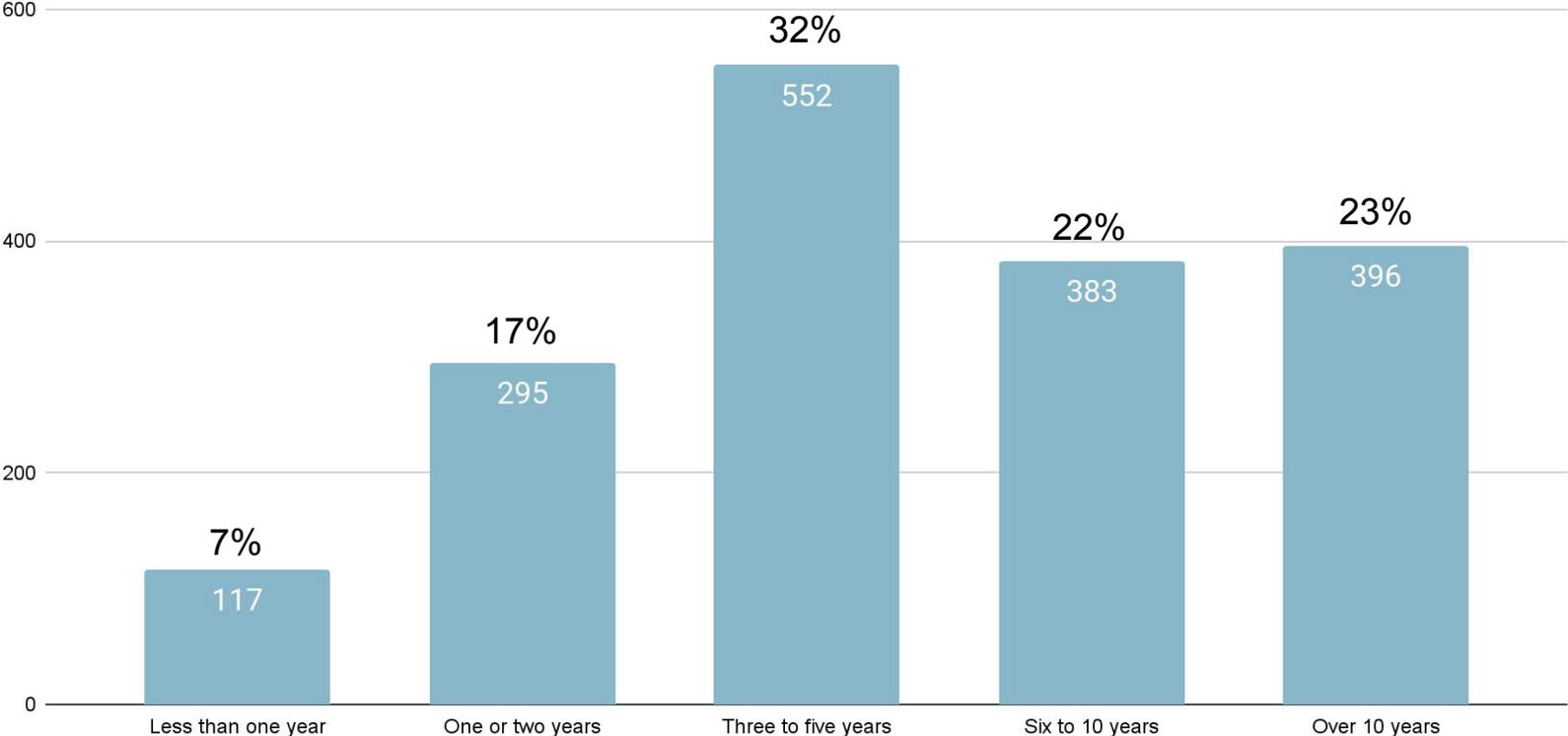
- 24% have been in the Netherlands for less than three years while 45% have lived in the city for over five years
- Almost 7 in 10 AMA respondents live in Amsterdam, followed by Haarlem, Amstelveen, Hilversum, Almere and Hoofddorp
- 4% will stay in in the area for another year, 25% will stay up to five years and the rest will live here for at least five more years or have no plans to leave
- Just over 70% of respondents lives with a partner, while 30% have children and 22% live alone
- The largest group of AMA respondents come from Britain (13%), followed by USA (12%), then India, Poland and Italy on around 5%. This is very much in line with the national results

# WHERE ARE YOU FROM?

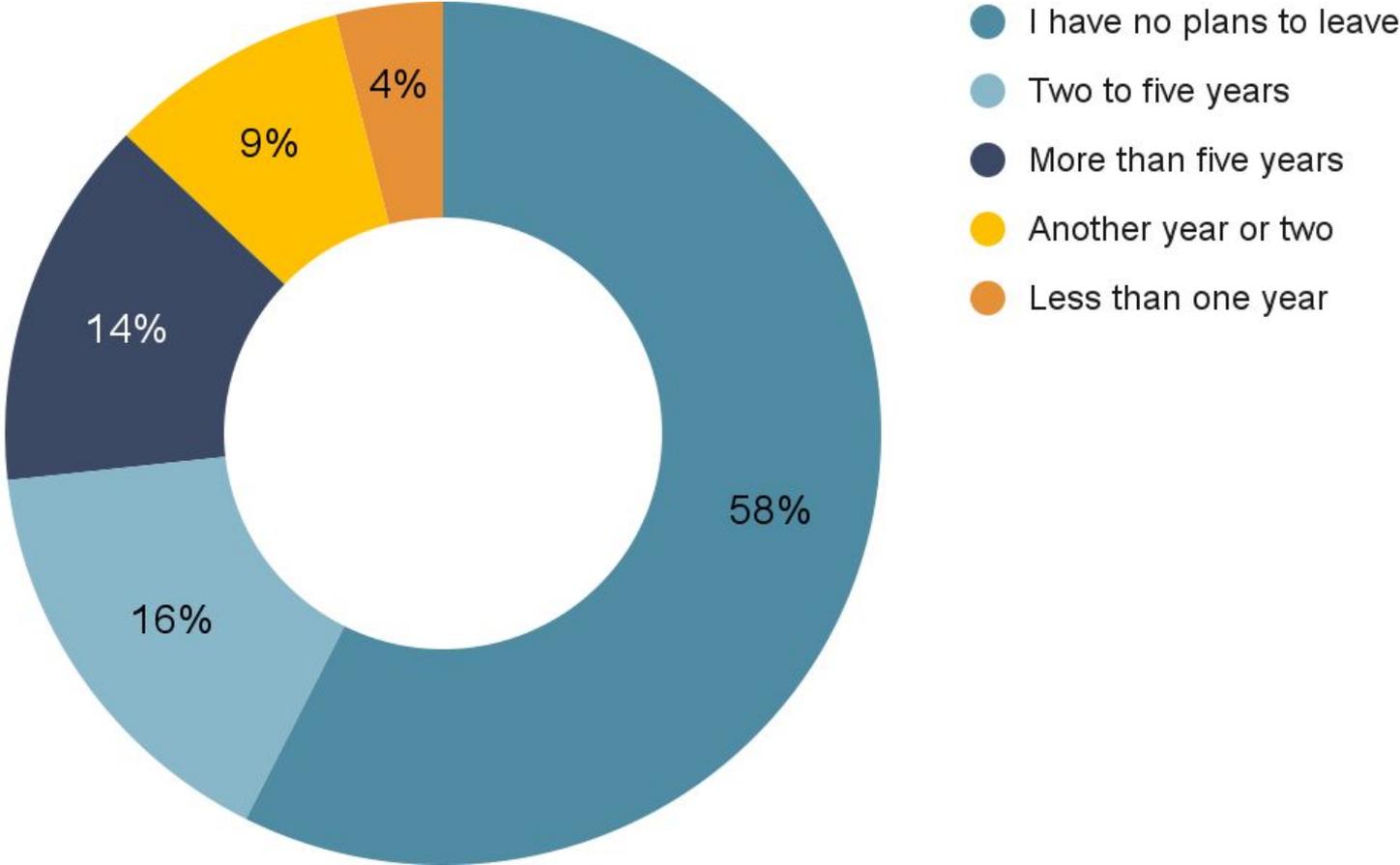
Total respondents 1,763



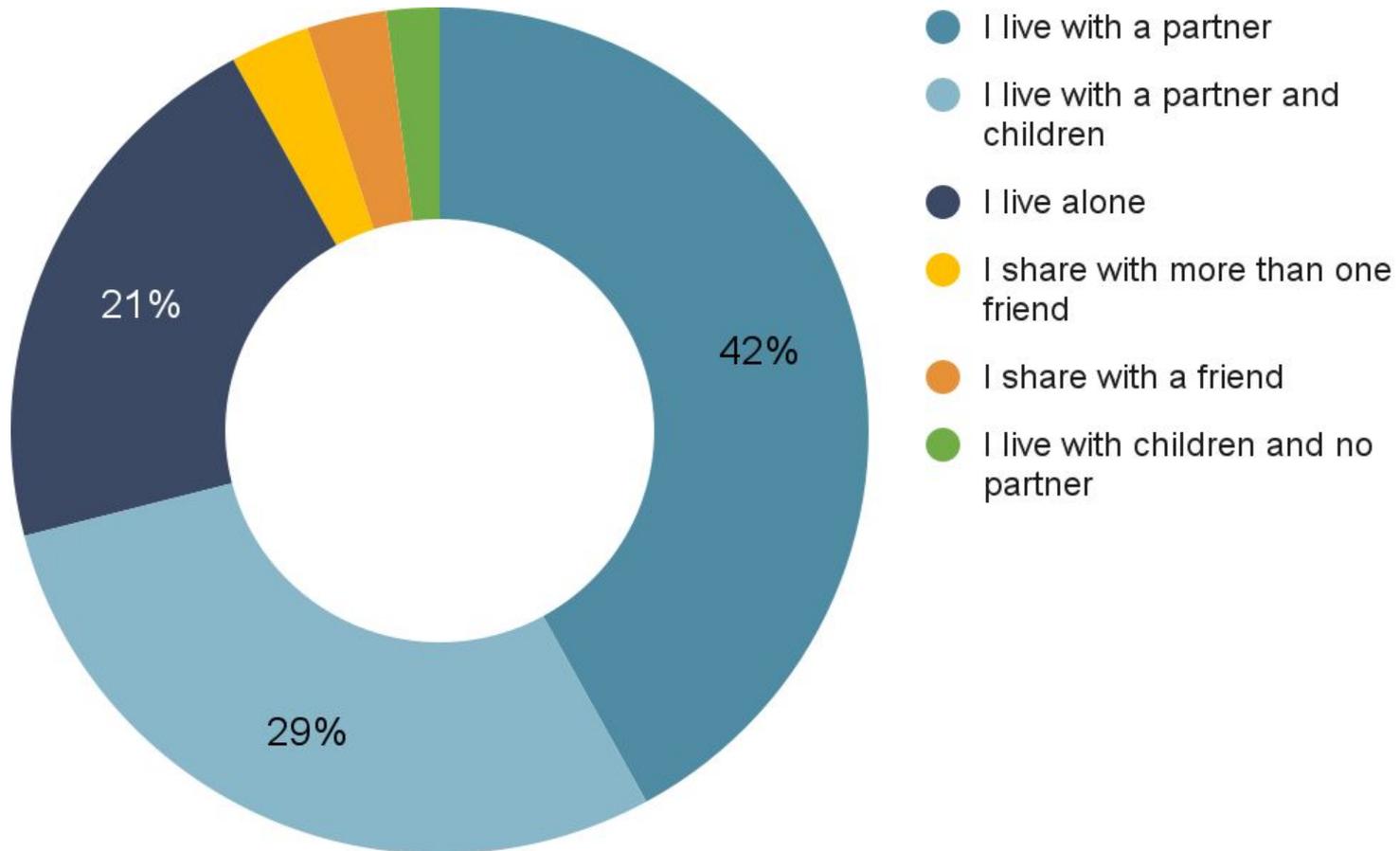
# HOW LONG HAVE YOU BEEN IN THE NETHERLANDS?



# HOW LONG ARE YOU PLANNING TO STAY IN THE NETHERLANDS?



Which of these best describes your living situation?



# *Living in the Netherlands*

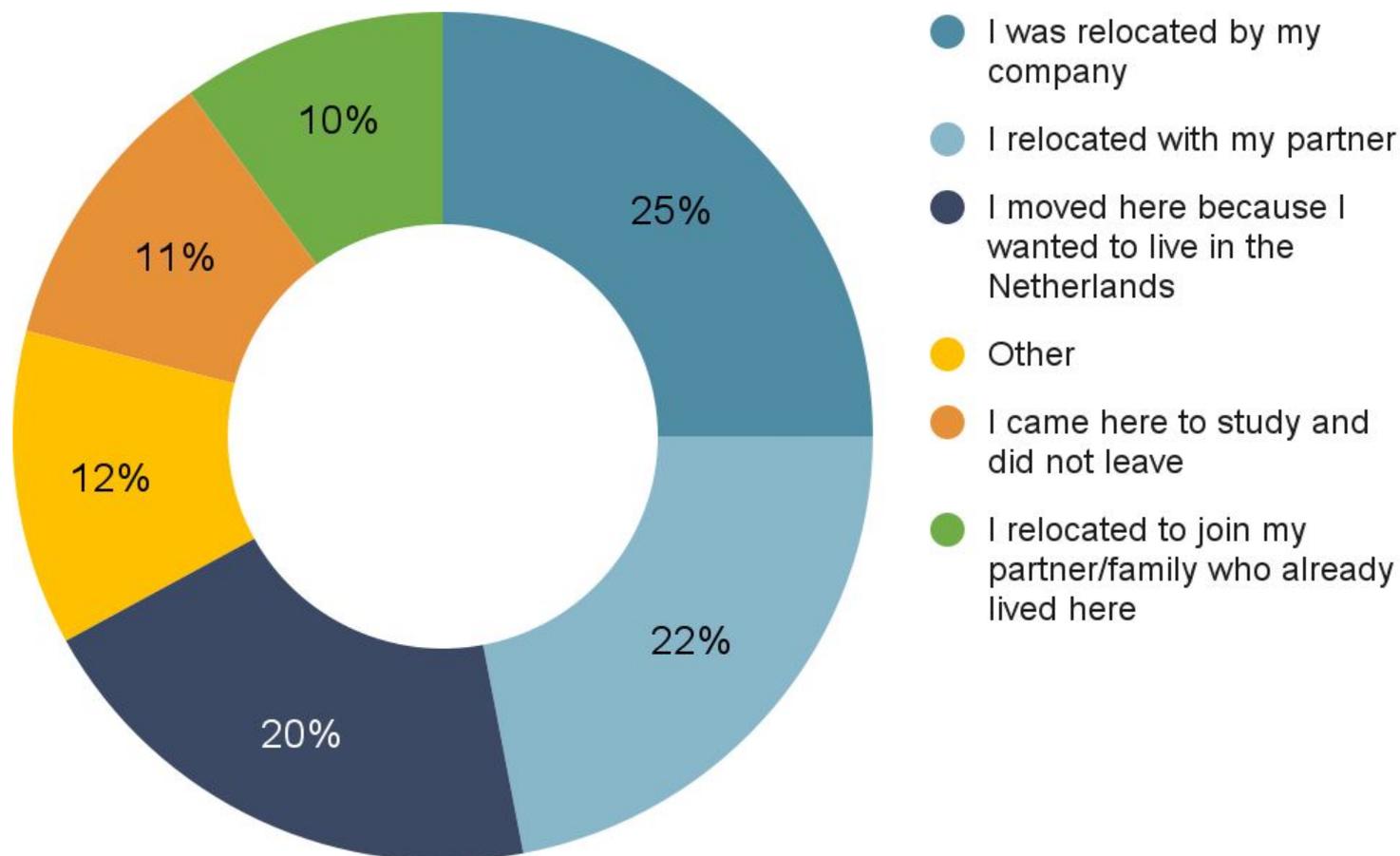
In this section we look at the AMA respondents' lives in the Amsterdam area

# Key Findings

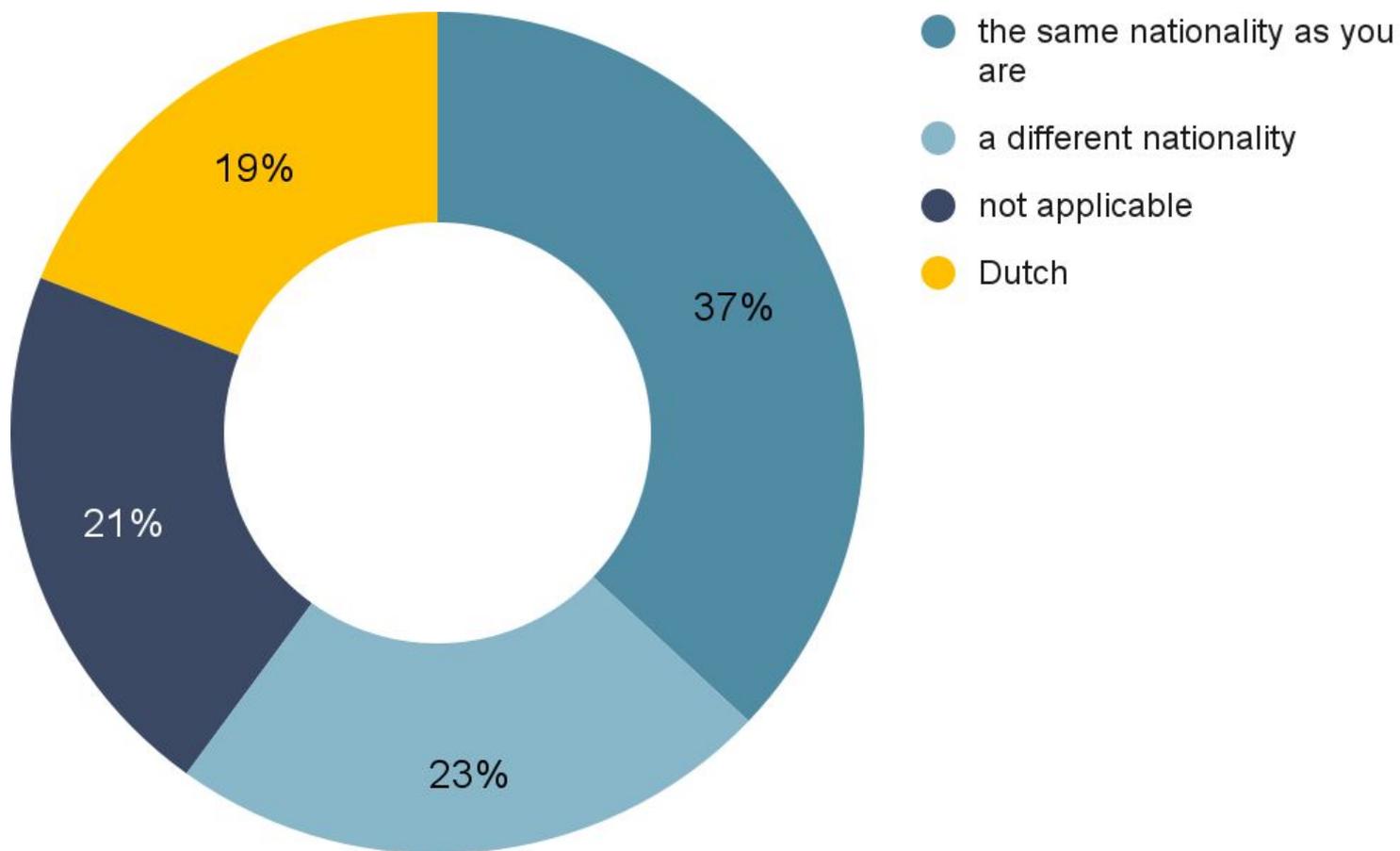
- One in four Amsterdam area respondents was relocated to the Netherlands by their company, while one in five just wanted to live here
- Almost six in 10 AMA respondents speak some Dutch and 8% speak it fluently. Just 11% have no plans to learn.
- 19% of AMA respondents with a partner were married to or lived with a Dutch national while 37% had a partner of the same nationality as their own
- 47% work for an international company and 23% for a Dutch firm. Around 11% did not work through choice, or for another reason
- Over eight in 10 worked (or volunteered) for a company or organisation where English was the primary language
- 27% of AMA respondents had either completed or were going through an official 'inburgering' programme because they were required to do so by law.\*

*\*EU nationals and people in the Netherlands under the highly-skilled migrants scheme are not required to go through the inburgering process.*

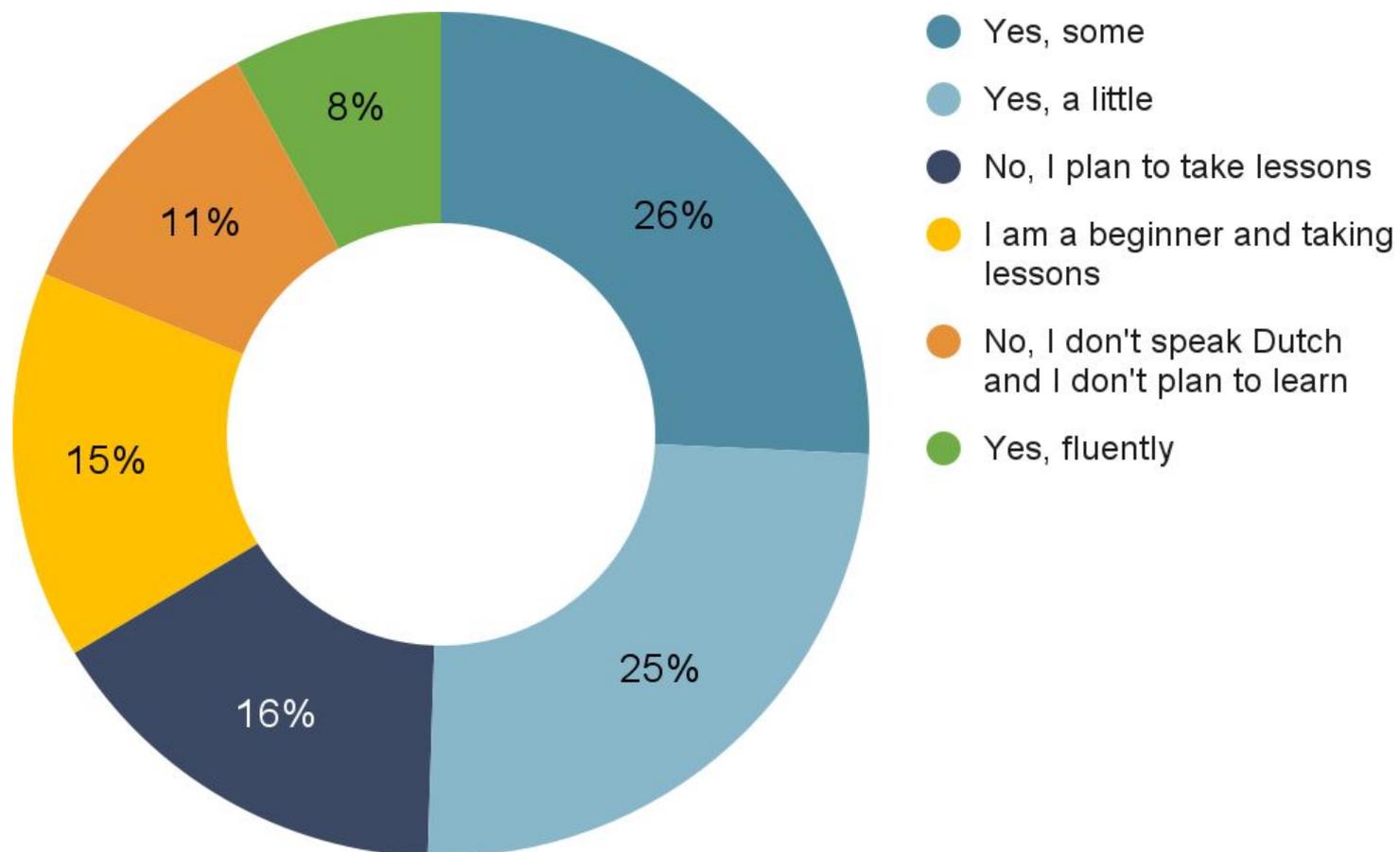
## How did you end up in the Netherlands?



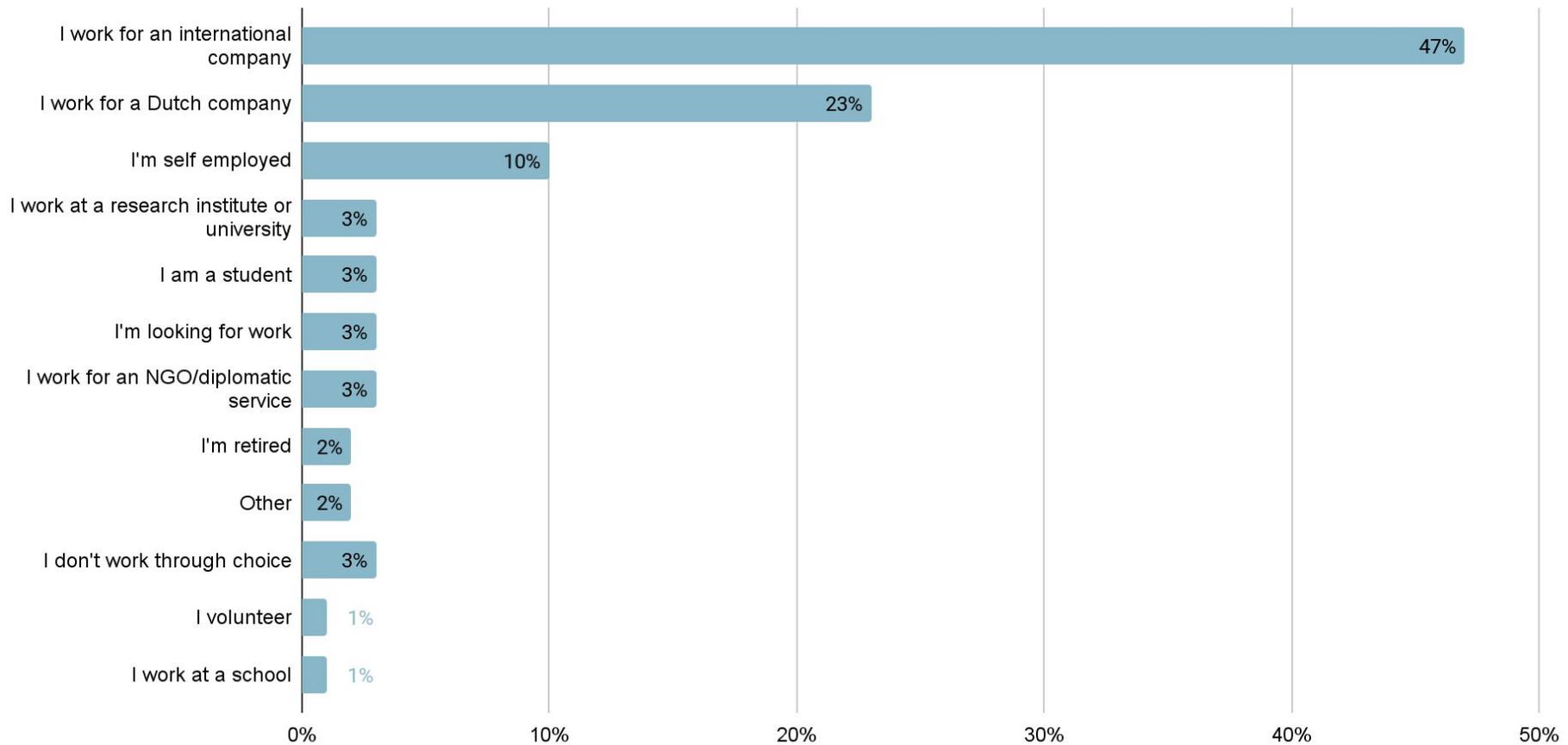
If you have a partner are they the same nationality as you are?



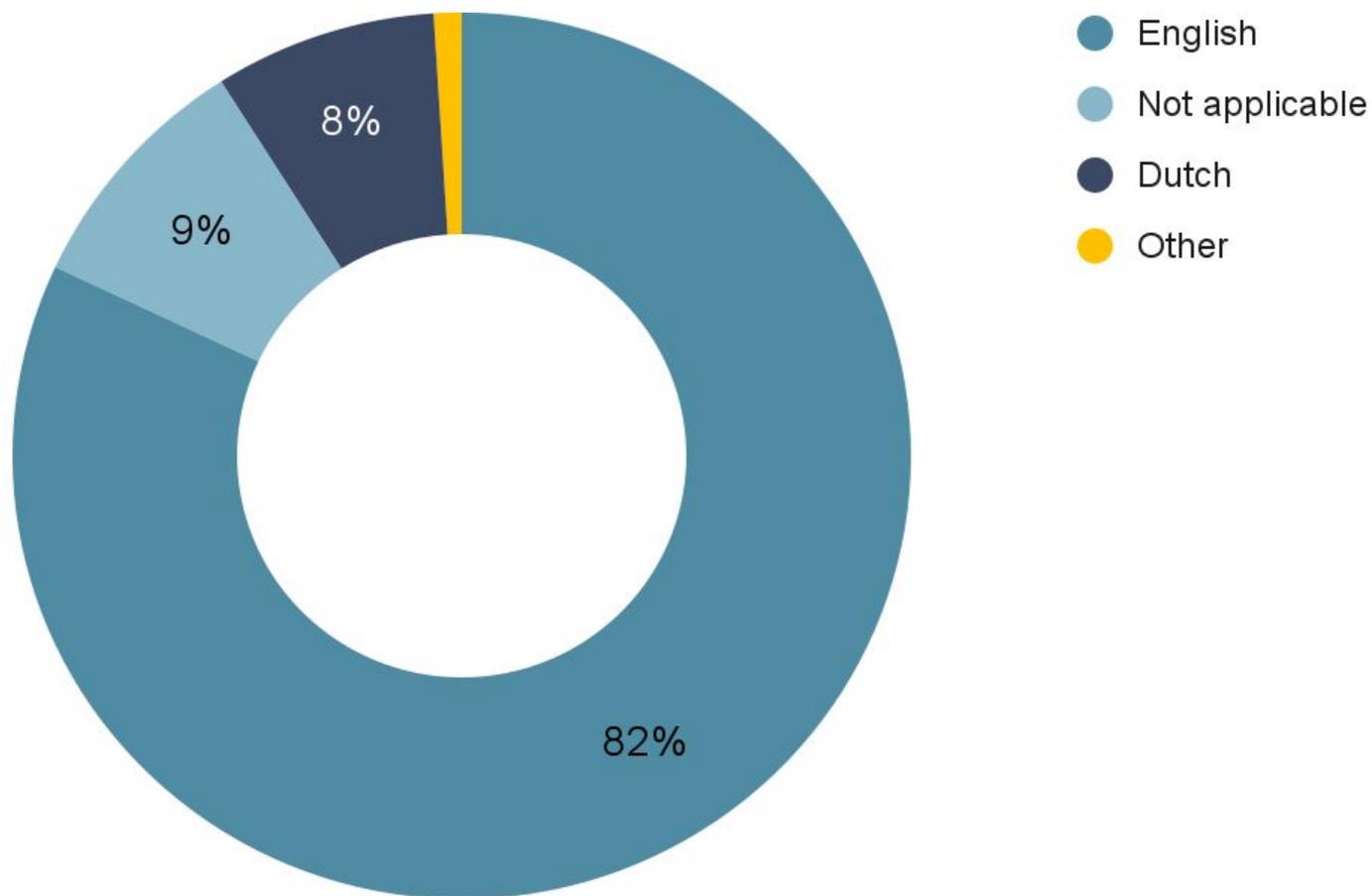
## Do you speak Dutch?



## What do you do? Work, volunteer etc?



If you have a paid job or volunteer, what is the primary language of your place of work?



# Inburgering: what the respondents say

Just over one in four (27%) of the respondents were going through an *inburgering* course or had already done so. EU nationals and people in the Netherlands under the highly skilled migrants scheme do not have to do so, but *inburgering* is a part of the naturalisation process to become Dutch.

The system changed in January 2022, and local authorities have now been given responsibility for the process, which should remove many of the criticisms voiced by respondents. Nevertheless, the comments contain lessons for the future, in particular about the need to take the background of participants into account when devising the courses and to be careful to avoid subtle racism and preconceptions.

- “It explains the Dutch culture and basics of the language, but we need to learn a lot more to be able to socially integrate.”
- “The tests are very geared to teaching people of non western backgrounds how to live the Dutch lifestyle, to a point where it is a bit insulting (slightly racist). The process is also more complicated than it needs to be. The websites and information are not clear. It was a lot of trial and error.”
- “Patronising, bureaucratic, old-fashioned and tedious. It is an embarrassment to the Netherlands and to Dutch culture.”
- “I learned more Dutch from an initial speed class and from day to day living in the months/years after the inburgering course. The course lumps too many learning levels and needs into one group and it creates a sub-culture of expats which makes integration and interaction with the Dutch harder.”

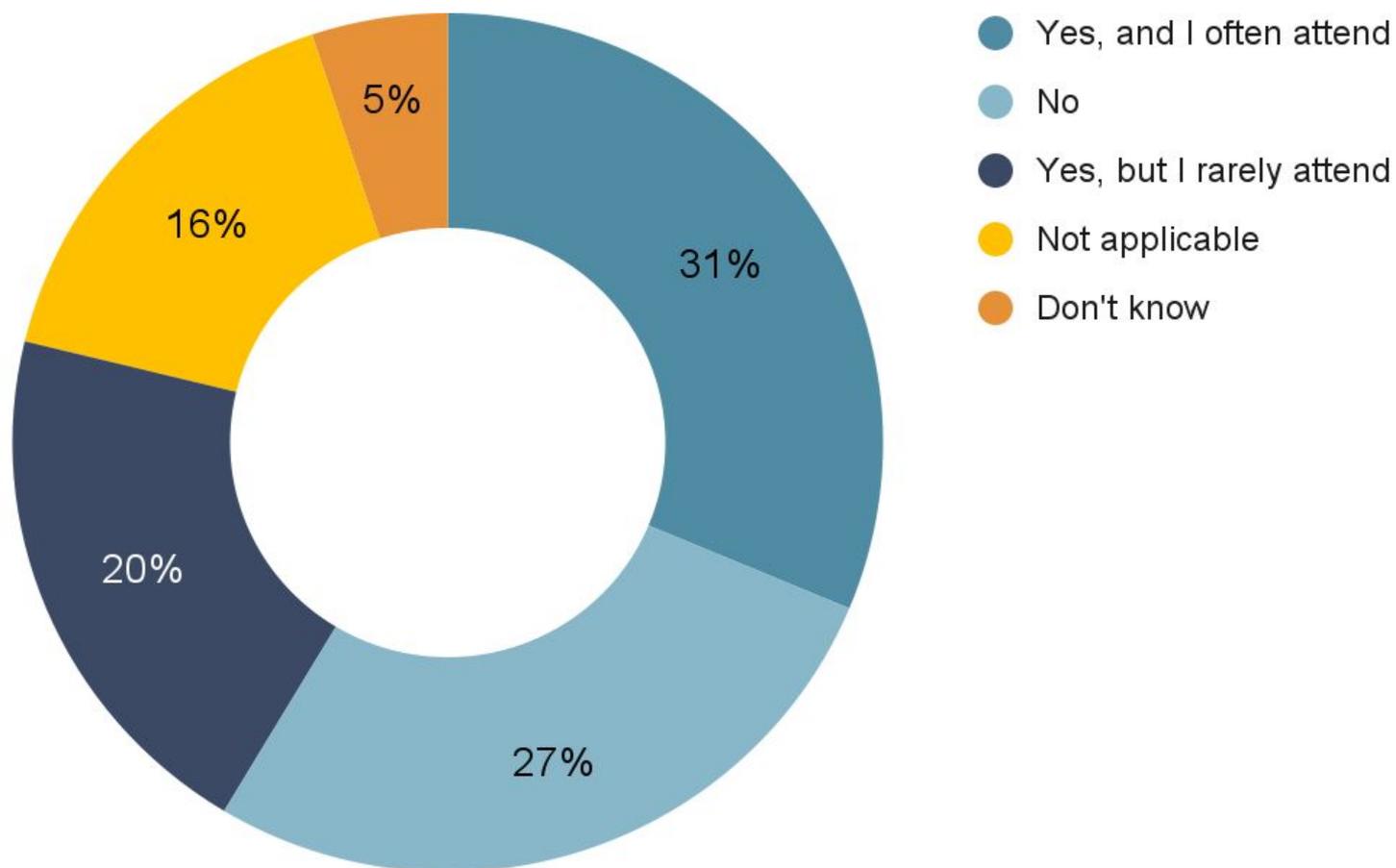
# *Having a social life*

In this section we look at friendships and socialising

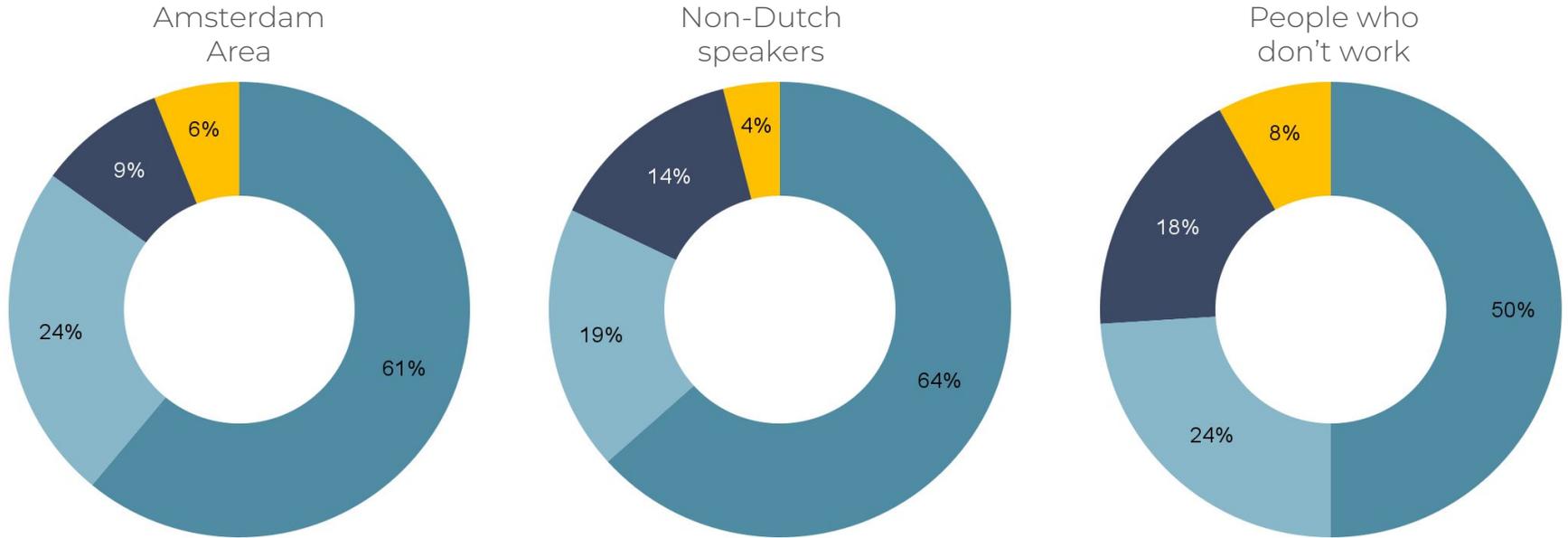
# Key Findings

- 31% of respondents said their employer organised social activities and they often attended, but 27% said their company never did so
- 50% said they had made a few good friends in the Netherlands but 32% said they had not. People who did not speak Dutch were less likely to have made friends.
- 61% mainly socialised with other internationals, but 9% said they had no social life to speak of
- People who did not speak Dutch or have a job were more likely to say they did not have a social life
- 56% said they saw their family once or twice a year, but 3% had no family to visit
- 56% said they had made friends through work and 39% had met their friends through other friends. 17% made friends through talking to their neighbours

If you work, does your company or volunteer organisation organise social activities?



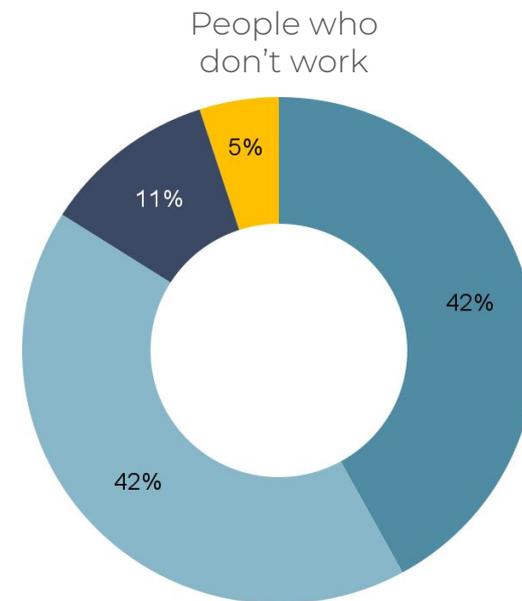
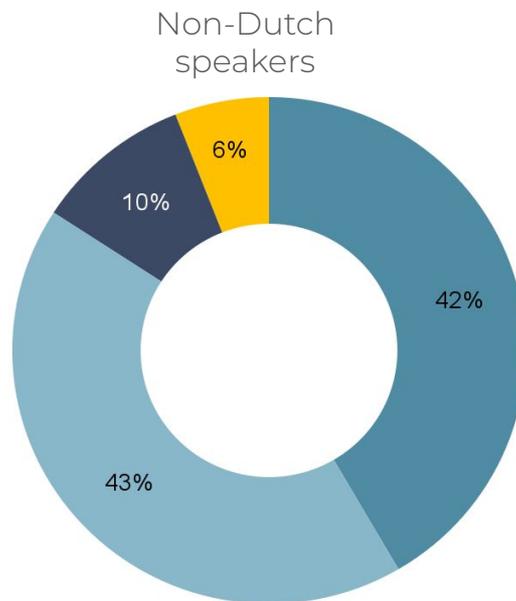
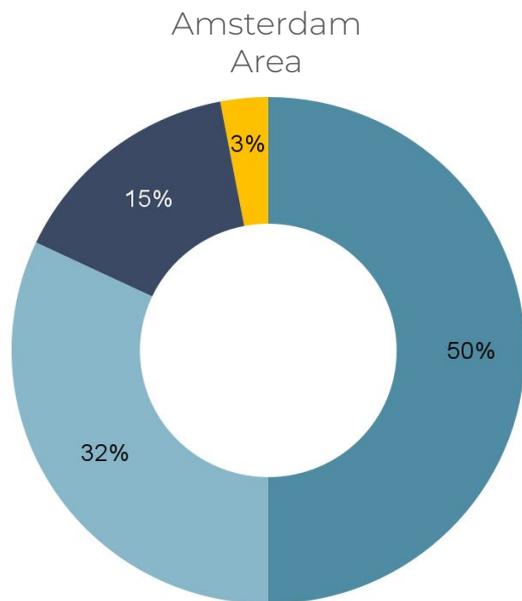
## Who do you socialise with?



- Mainly other internationals
- A 50/50 mix
- I don't have a social life
- Mainly Dutch

People who did not speak Dutch or have a job were more likely to say they did not have a social life than those who speak the language

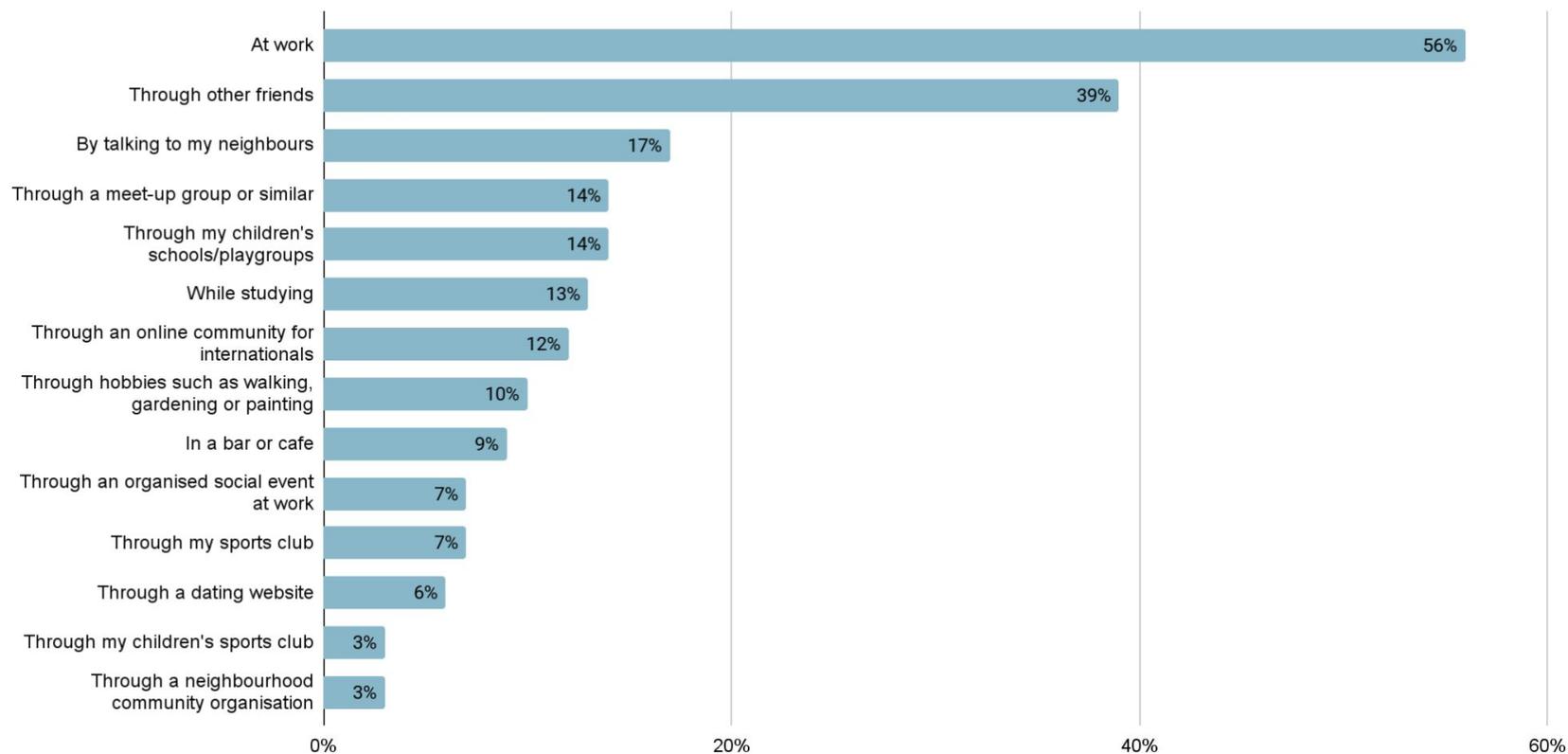
## Would you say you have made good friends in the Netherlands?



- Yes, a few
- No, not really
- Yes, many
- I have not been here long enough

People who did not speak Dutch or have a job were more likely to say they had not made any good friends than those who speak the language

## How did you meet your friends?\*



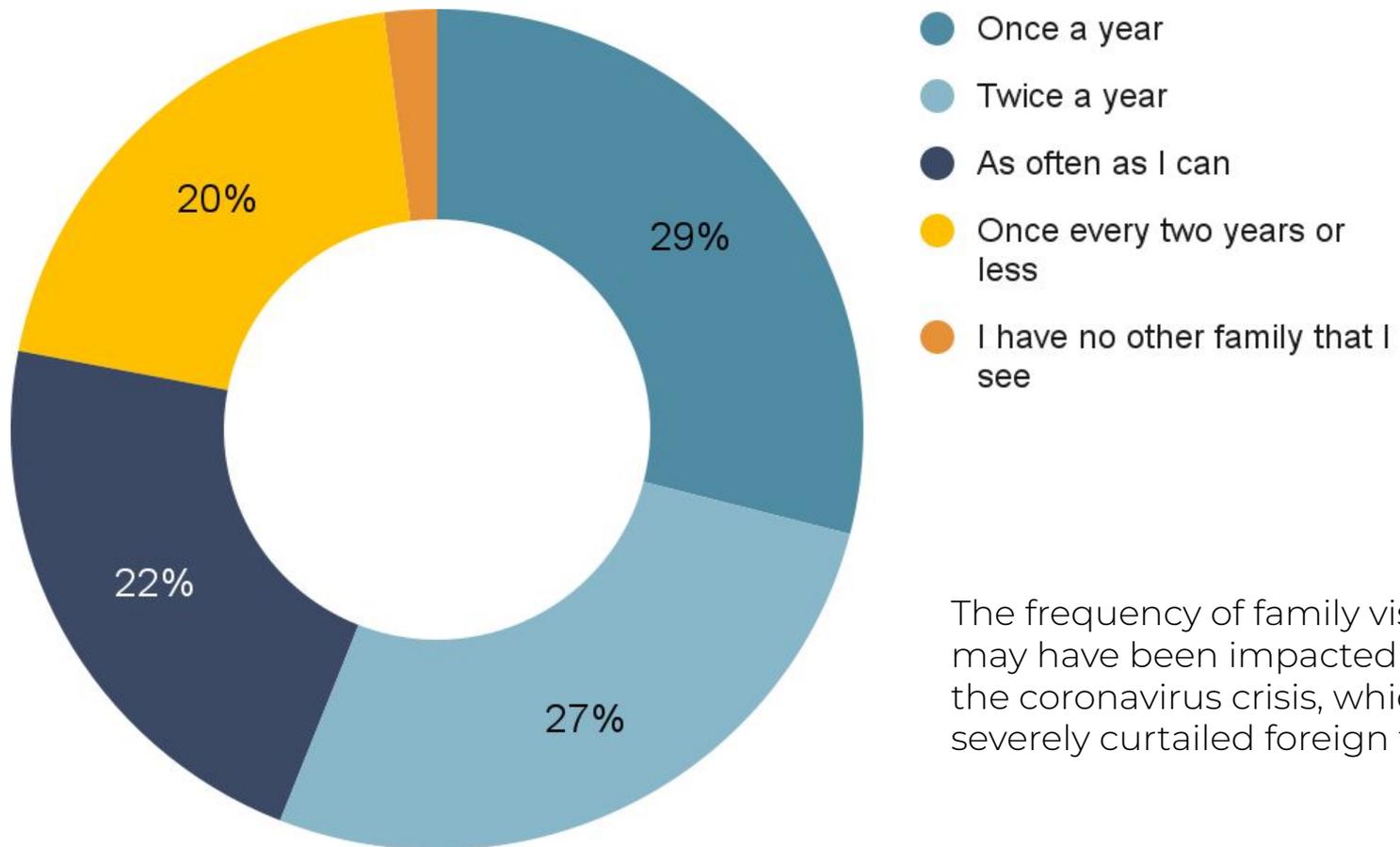
\* Respondents were asked to choose as many options as they liked

# Making friends

Respondents were asked what advice they would give new arrivals about making friends. Many of the comments referred to the importance of speaking Dutch, others to the 'closed' nature of Dutch society where the locals don't appear to need new friends.

- "I didn't start to feel at home until I switched to a job I liked and started taking Dutch classes."
- "Reach out to neighbours."
- "Be proactive in suggesting meetups but be mindful that Dutch people tend to plan well in advance with their diaries."
- "It's hard to make Dutch friends as the culture can be quite cold. But persevere with learning Dutch and you will have incredible friends for life."
- "For the Dutch: don't push it too much, if they like you this will go naturally. To meet internationals, join groups and clubs, attend a sports club. If you want a mixed group, make sure to also participate in Dutch sports clubs."
- "I couldn't understand why the Dutch were so open, and yet, they never included me in their plans with other friends. Once you understand, it all clicks and you learn not to take it personally."

## How often do you see your close family?



The frequency of family visits may have been impacted on by the coronavirus crisis, which has severely curtailed foreign travel.

# *Discrimination*

The international community's experience of discrimination in the Netherlands

# Key Findings

The respondents were asked if they felt they had been discriminated against because they were not Dutch.

- Of the AMA respondents, 47% said yes occasionally, 19% said often and 33% said not at all.
- There was no significant difference in these results between people who lived in Amsterdam or outside the big cities, or between those who spoke Dutch and those who did not, or between those who had a job or people who not lived in the Netherlands for long.

We also compared experiences of discrimination among Amsterdam area residents with people from India and from Eastern Europe, because of signals in the media and other surveys which suggest that they may face more problems. We found:

- Indian nationals (227 respondents) were no more or less likely to experience discrimination than the survey average.
- However, 54% of respondents from central and eastern Europe (464) said they had occasionally faced discrimination, which is higher than the AMA figure of 47%.

# Experiences of discrimination

The respondents were asked to explain what happened in the most recent incident. We analysed the comments to determine what the main issue was - such as language, nationality, housing etc.

In total, 601 comments made by AMA residents related directly to the question.

- The biggest category - 174 experiences - related specifically to people's origins, with 34 people reporting being told to 'go back to your own country'.
- Names, colour of skin and 'just being foreign' were specifically mentioned.
- 138 experiences revolved around language - mainly people feeling excluded because either they did not speak Dutch or that people did not make allowances for their poor level of Dutch.
- Several people reported being told by complete strangers to stop speaking their own language with friends.
- 99 people reported being treated differently by service providers because they were foreign. Several specifically mentioned the healthcare sector and their *gemeente*.
- 57 experiences related to housing, and several international students in particular referred to being told they were not welcome in student houses
- Work accounted for 72 of the comments. Many of these concerned people feeling they had not been given a job or were passed over for promotion because they were not Dutch or did not speak Dutch, even though English was the language of their company

# What people said:

- “I was told to go back to my own country because I spoke another language on the street.”
- “I’m from the UK but with ethnic looks and name. People only open up once I speak English with a British accent. I’m also one of the few whose ID is checked on trains.”
- “The usual, someone moaning about foreigners coming to the country and pushing up housing prices”.
- “I have a few hateful neighbours who tend to blame me for the changes Amsterdam is undergoing.”
- “We call it the expat price. When we ask for a quote from any Dutch company (contractors, plumbers, glass, kitchens, etc) that does not have set prices and that we need to negotiate with, foreigners always get quoted the higher price than the average Dutch person. We know this because, we have asked our Dutch friend or neighbour to get a quote for the same thing and the price is always lower to begin with.”
- “I have had people tell me to 'Go back to China' or that I cannot eat their dog.”
- “The 'only Dutch' housing adverts are a problem and rent prices are generally higher for expats.”
- “In the hospital the other day the doctor took forever to help me and was talking about me behind my back because he assumed I couldn't understand Dutch.”

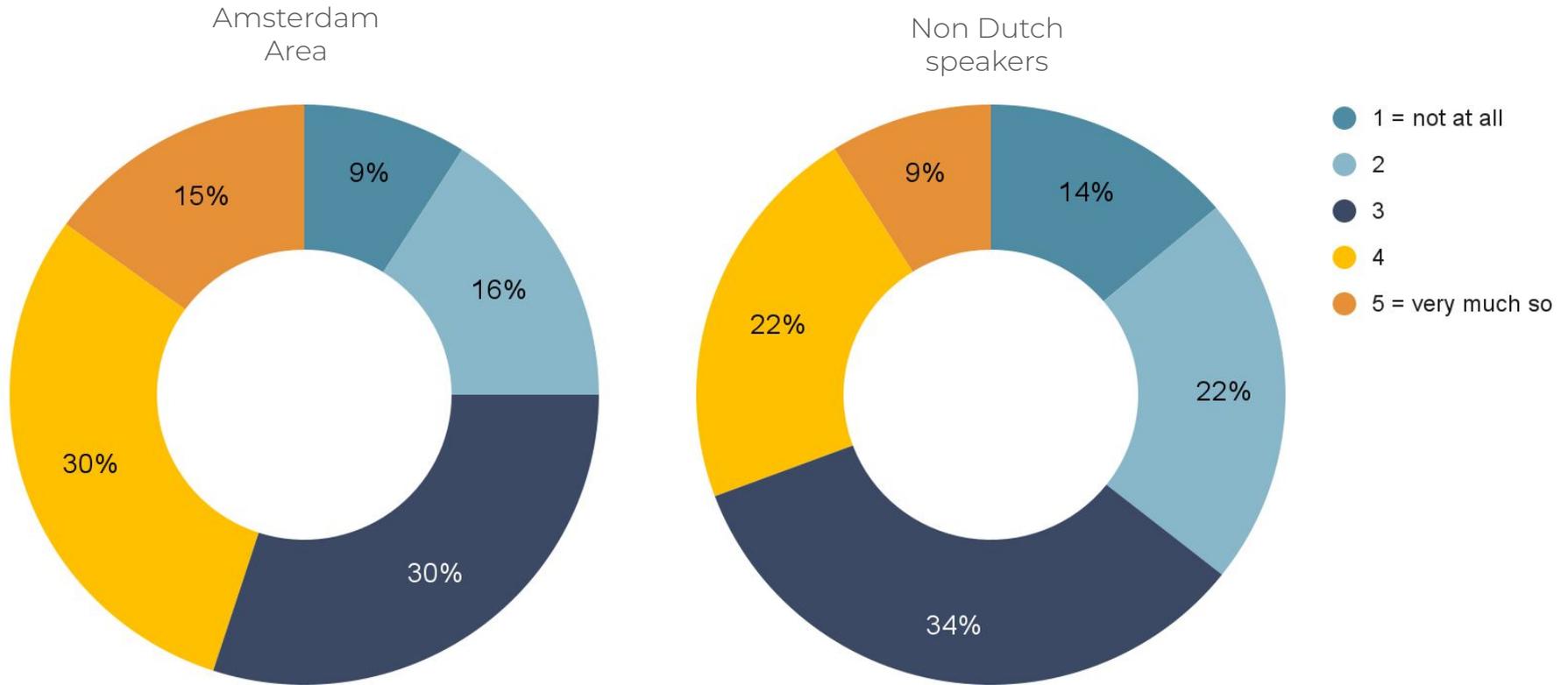
# *Feeling at home*

In this section we look at if people feel at home and what they consider to be important in settling in

# Key Findings

- 45% of AMA respondents said they felt very or fairly at home in the Netherlands but 25% did not feel at home at all, or only slightly. Almost three in 10 respondents felt at home very quickly. These results are broadly in line with the national picture.
- People who did not speak Dutch were much less likely to feel at home: Only 30% said they felt at home and 36% said they did not.
- 69% consider having friendly neighbours an important aspect of feeling at home. 65% say knowing where to get help if you need it is key, and 56% say speaking Dutch
- 55% say it has been easy to find out about cultural activities and 63% would be interested in organised cultural activities with other internationals
- 60% of AMA respondents had a Museumkaart, compared with 53% of all respondents
- 55% will definitely or probably vote in the local elections next March but 15% don't know if they are allowed to

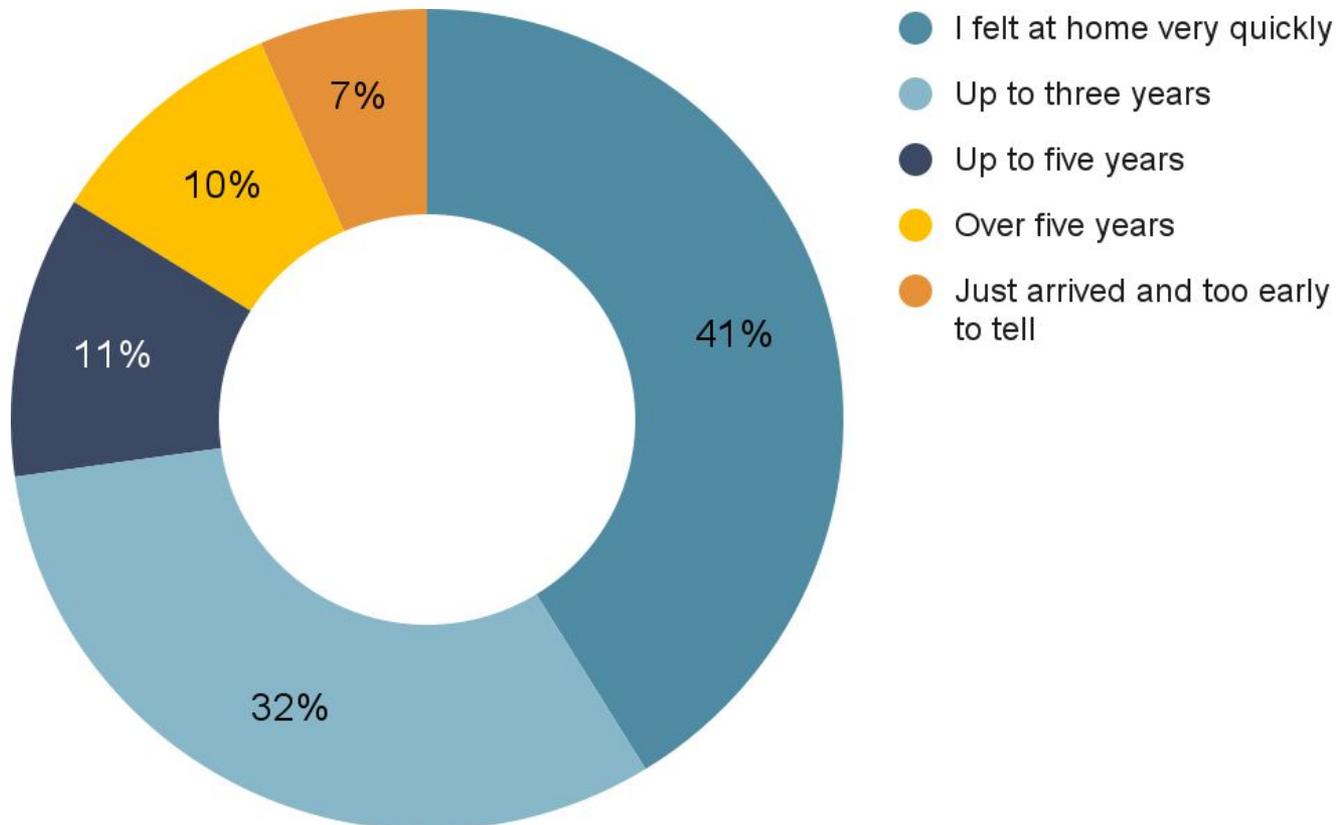
## Do you feel at home in the Netherlands?



In general 45% of people in the Amsterdam area felt fairly or very at home but people who do not speak Dutch are less likely to do so.

## How long did it take you to feel at home?

Some 25% of respondents said they did not feel at home at all, or only marginally. Of those who said they felt at home, 73% did so within three years or less.



# What the respondents say about feeling at home

The respondents were asked to explain why they felt or did not feel at home in the Netherlands:

- “It's not like at home. But we are trying to adjust.”
- “The NL is a super easy country to live in. Nothing to argue there. Basic things work really well. However after a while you start realizing, that the Dutch are not really as welcoming, open minded or innovative as they sell internationally (generalization of course).”
- “I like living here but learning Dutch is so difficult and I never need it, so I do not feel integrated. My kids are perfectly trilingual so feel at home just fine.”
- “Universities here are very good at helping internationals to settle. The comparatively abundant free time helped me to get to know the city too.”
- “It took some time to adjust to the culture changes and not knowing Dutch made things hard at the start. Once I started learning the language, I felt more at home.”
- “It takes time to adjust, learn the language, meet people and create networks, friendships, set a new life, all from the beginning.”
- “My confidence and self esteem was at a low because of the language barrier.”

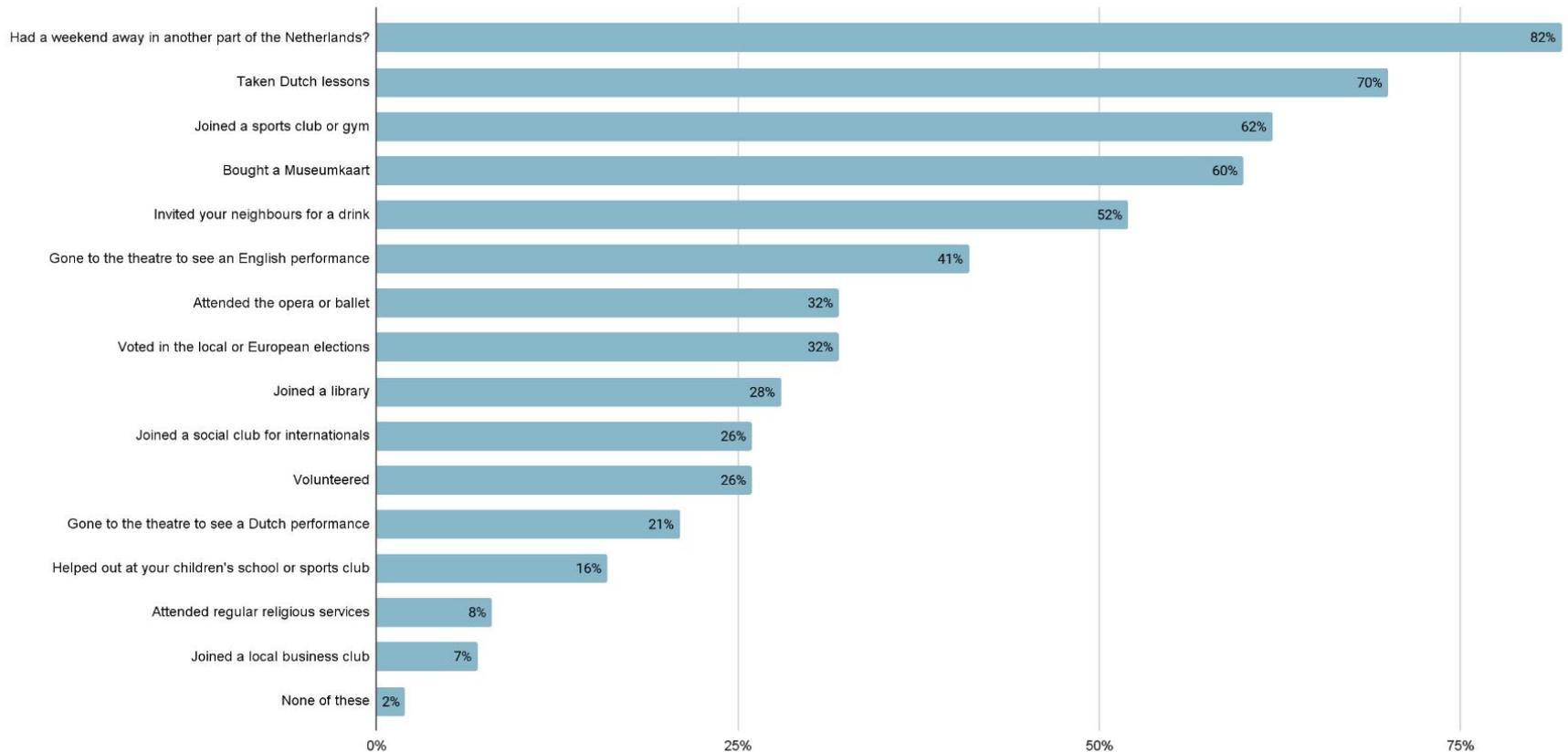
# What the respondents say about feeling at home

- “Personally I feel like a long term tourist here, the country is great, there are no problems, everything functions quite smoothly, but you just never become part of the society and remain to live in an international bubble.”
- “It did take me some time to establish a solid social network, but eventually with this is place, there is always something easy & fun to get up to with your friends in NL.”
- “I felt completely at home in NL when my husband and I bought a house.”
- “People are not very different from where I come from (north-east Italy).”
- “Most of the time you're made feel a different attitude and approach to you because you're a foreigner. A lot of the time feels like expats are being exploited and money sucked.”
- “I will start to feel at home once I learn the language and get to know most of the habits.”
- “Cost of living is so high. I cannot get a job in my field as my qualifications and experience do not mean anything here. Very difficult to make friends. Feelings of isolation and homesickness.”
- “The place suits me mentality-wise and it's also very open to anyone that respects the society around them.”
- “I made lots of Dutch friends, was present in my local community and liked where I lived.”

# What the respondents say about feeling at home

- “When I arrived in 2009, people were friendly, open and curious about foreigners. With the time this attitude drastically changed, but by now I can speak the language, know my way around, I am informed about social and political issues that no one considers me a 'kut expat'. But if I would have landed today in Schiphol, I do not think I would have felt so welcome as I did in 2009.”
- “We had very welcoming Neighbours, we were welcomed by the local community and made to feel at home very quickly.”
- “I've met very sweet people that treated me like I belong. Overall it's a very friendly and welcoming place, to my feeling, and that helps a lot.”
- “People are polite, it's safe and I like living here.”
- “I just arrived, but from the time I've been here, people has always been kind and helpful.”
- “I still feel culture differences with my home country, it is quite difficult to meet Dutch people as they usually do not tend to go to international event (in my experience).”
- “Even adjusting the weather conditions takes time, I was consciously following my own behaviour and my body's reactions. And after my 3rd year, NL started to feel like home.”

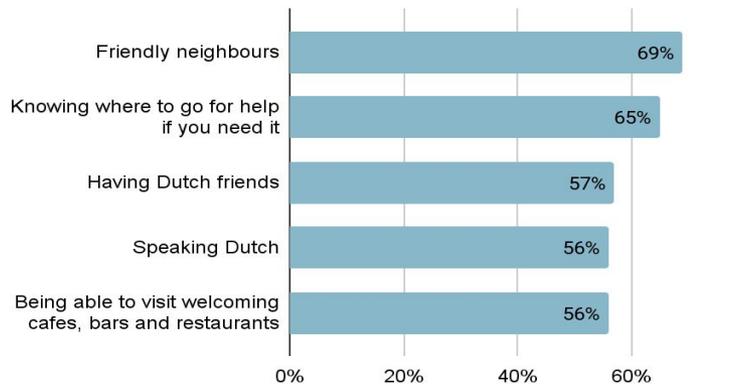
## Have you ever done any of the following since you moved here?\*



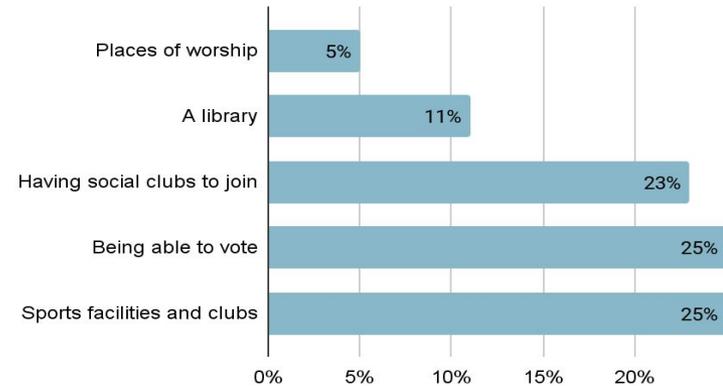
\* Respondents were asked to choose as many options as they liked

# Which of the following do you think are most important in feeling at home?\*

Top five ways to feel at home

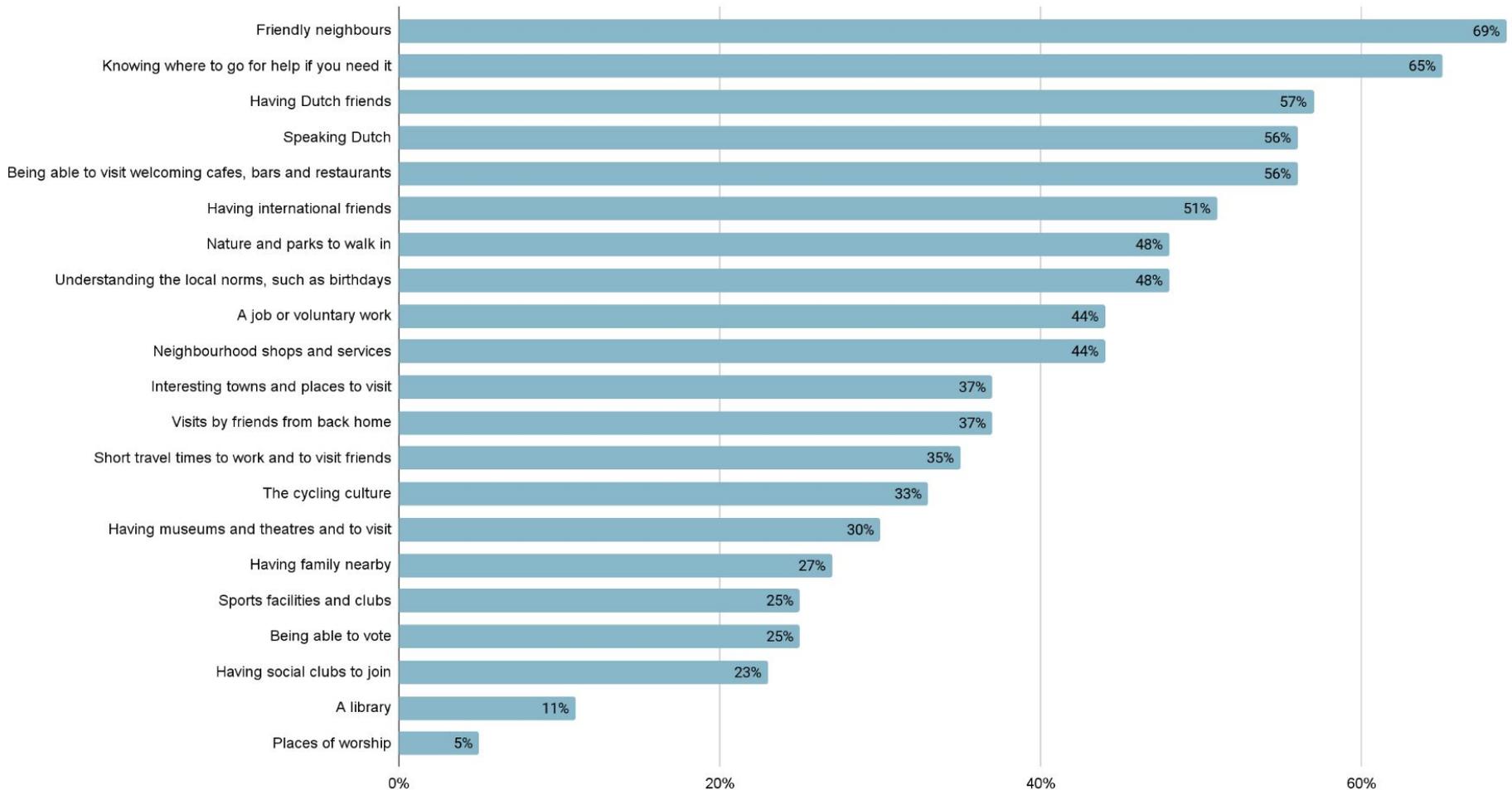


Least essential to feeling at home



\*For the full list, see page 45

## Which of the following do you think are most important in feeling at home?\*



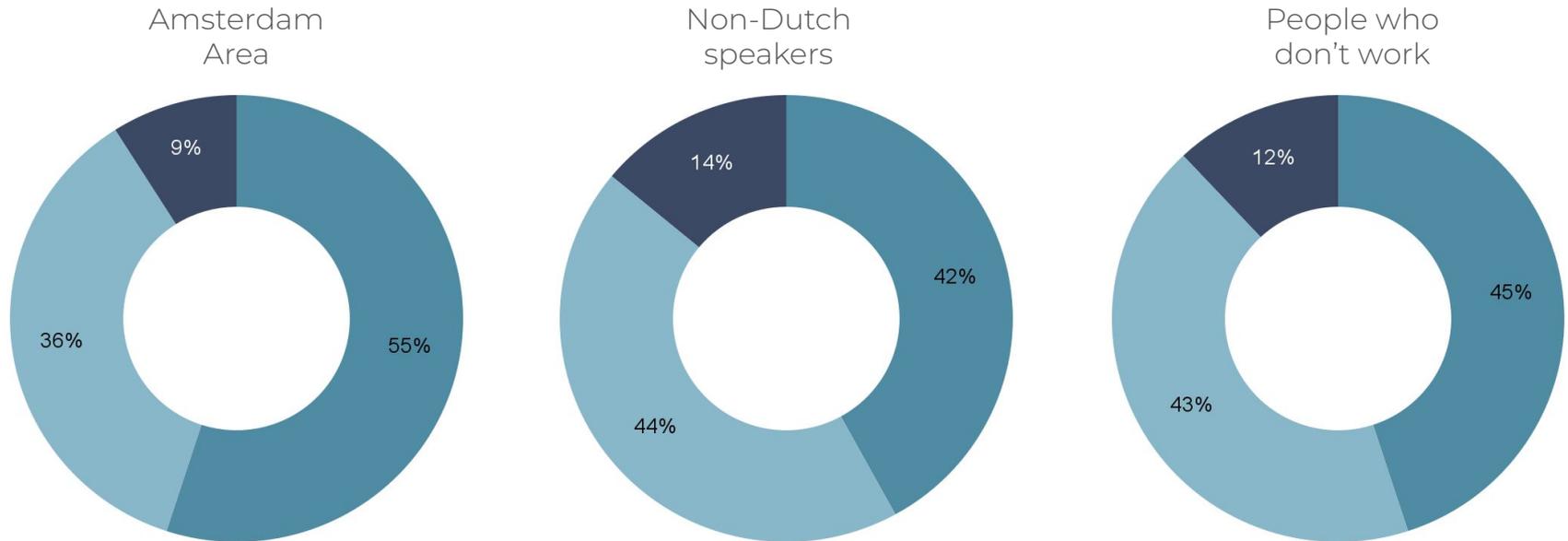
\* Respondents were asked to choose as many options as they liked.

# What advice would you give others about settling in?

The respondents were asked to make suggestions which may help new arrivals feel at home more quickly

- “Similar to any language/culture, if you know Dutch language and culture, integration becomes very easy and its helps in both ways.”
- “It is important to connect with your neighbours. When we moved in, we delivered a bar of chocolate and a hand-written note to introduce ourselves (and apologise for the building noise). This really helped for people to feel like we wanted to be part of the community.”
- “Make an effort to adapt to the culture and society. The country and people will not adapt to you.”
- “Don't limit yourself to your own nationality. Make friends with expats from other countries. Also, realize it make take awhile for you to make friends with other Dutch people. However, Dutch who have travelled extensively, worked in int'l settings, etc. will be far friendlier than those who are very insulated.”
- “Become interested, ask questions and make mistakes with speaking Dutch badly. If you try, people around you will help you and this helps with integration.”
- “Just be yourself. For the people who cannot accept that, they are not the kind of friends you want anyway.”

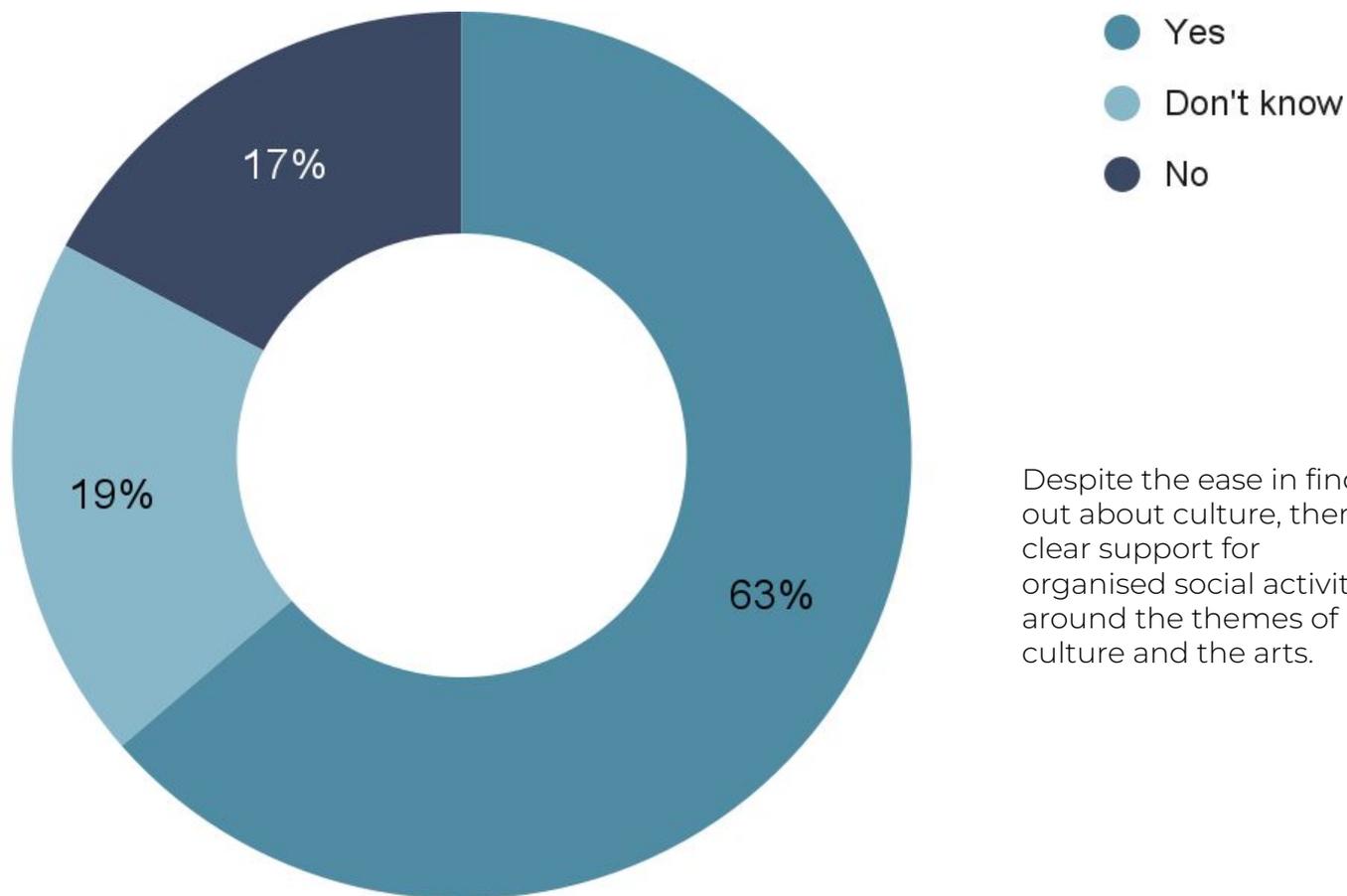
## Has it been easy to find out about cultural activities in the Netherlands?



- Yes
- No
- I'm not really interested

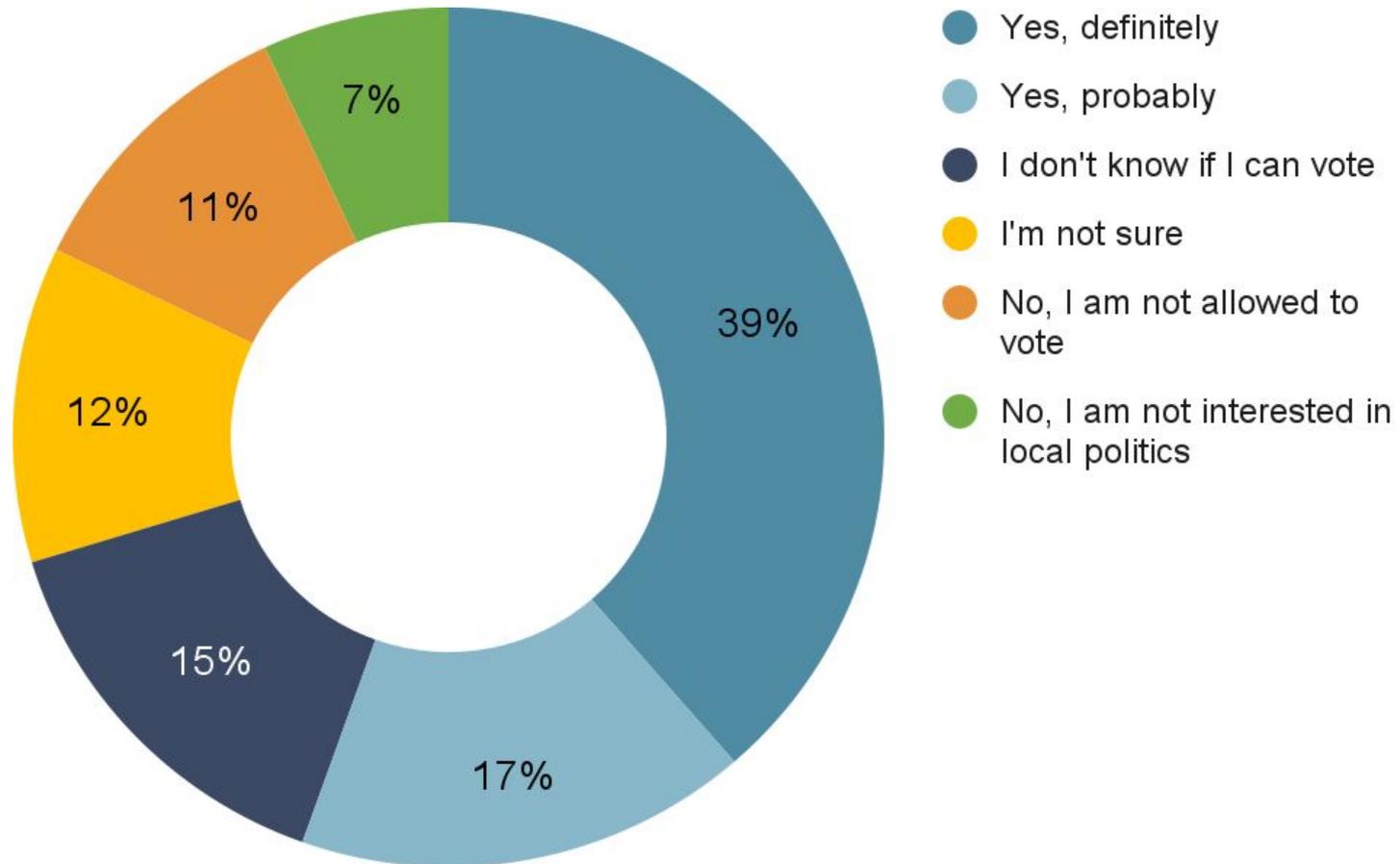
In general, people living in the Amsterdam area said it was easy to find out about cultural activities. They are also more likely than the wider international population to have a museum card.

Would you be interested in attending special cultural activities with extras?



Despite the ease in finding out about culture, there is clear support for organised social activities around the themes of culture and the arts.

## Will you vote in the local elections?



# What can local authorities do to help?

The respondents were asked what local councils and expat centres could do to help new arrivals feel at home. Many of the suggestions revolved around learning Dutch and about managing expectations better, through the provision of information for new arrivals. Several respondents were not aware of the existence of 'expat centres'.

One prevailing complaint was the lack of awareness among locals about what internationals contribute to the local economy and complaints that they are taking away jobs and housing.

- “Make it easier and free for foreigners to study Dutch.”
- “Create more English speaking social activities.”
- “Encouragement of expat friendly groups, social activities, sports clubs that advertise for expats , but the spoken language is Dutch and the group will help the foreign speaker - but do not switch to English.”
- “Pair expats with volunteer Dutch to learn the basics of the language and show them their habits and lifestyle.”
- “Stop using the word ‘expat’”

# What can local authorities do to help?

- “Communicate things better to all expats. IN Amsterdam does a great job for people that register via them, but the rest might get lost in the process and never learn about the opportunities.”
- “Be more honest about the importance of learning Dutch and not overblow this notion of ‘a huge international community where everyone is welcome’ because it makes integration seem easier than it actually is.”
- “Local authorities should tap into the expat/immigrant communities already here to work with those just arriving. There should be a mix of Dutch and immigrant people that new arrivals can interact with from the start.”
- “Get the English and Dutch speaking communities together for a purpose and enthuse them.”
- “Pair expats with volunteer Dutch to learn the basics of the language and show them their habits and lifestyle.”
- “Bring clarity to the Dutch on how foreigners help the Dutch economy. I have heard judgmental comments about us getting the locals’ jobs.”

# *Conclusions & Recommendations*

# Conclusions

- Language is a key issue, both in feeling at home, in work (even in English environments) and in feeling accepted. As most internationals move to the Netherlands either for good, or for long periods, this is even more important to stress to new arrivals
- Speaking Dutch is also important for careers, given that even in companies where English is the main language, Dutch is often required, or at least desirable.
- Good neighbours help people both feel settled and in finding new friends. People with children are also more likely to feel at home
- Internationals tend to socialise with other foreigners, but not necessarily through choice. Many would like to have more Dutch friends but struggle to make them
- A clear majority would be interested in attending special events organised around cultural activities
- Discrimination is a general problem many internationals face, no matter where they come from.

# Recommendations

While the conclusions which can be drawn from the survey touch on issues which local authorities are not responsible for, the recommendations outlined here focus on what local officials can do to help new arrivals adjust to the Netherlands more quickly. Some may also be relevant to employers.

- New arrivals should be more actively encouraged to learn Dutch, if they are going to be in the Netherlands for more than a couple of years. City marketing should place less emphasis on the fact 'everyone in Amsterdam speaks English' and more on the added benefits of speaking the local language.
- The earlier ICAP survey on partners and work found that Dutch is a plus in terms of career opportunities, even in companies where English is the main language. This needs to be restated. Companies too have role to play in encouraging their staff to learn the language.
- Given that knowing where to go when things go wrong is widely considered to be important to feeling at home, efforts should be made to improve awareness of the city's ombudsman, the national ombudsman, Stichting Woon for rental housing problems, Kifid for financial service issues etc so that internationals with problems know where to go to get help. The profile of IN Amsterdam as a source of help could also be improved.
- Efforts need to be made to encourage internationals to participate in Dutch society, through neighbourhood and community initiatives etc. For example, city officials could compile a list of all community online groups and provide this to new arrivals.
- Make council subsidies available to volunteer or other projects which aim to connect the native Dutch to the international community such as a buddy system or Dutch conversation groups.

# Recommendations

- Efforts should be made to ensure internationals know about their voting rights in local and EU elections - being able to vote implies commitment and feeling settled.
- Amsterdam and the wider region could also have a role in highlight the importance of internationals to the region's economy in terms of both contributions and tax payments.
- Misconceptions about the international community should be tackled - by, for example, pointing out that landlords not 'expats' are responsible for high rents. This is an area where both the mayor and *wethouders* can have a role, despite the political sensitivities.
- When 'explaining' things to international community, greater care needs to be taken to point out the underlying cultural reasons for how things work here. Often the focus is on the obvious - and not the subconscious reasons for things. For example, parents are expected to be fairly involved in their children's school lives because of the 1.5 breadwinner model, which most families follow. Explained against this perspective, it makes more sense.
- Reference was often made to the value of 'good neighbours' - however, it is worth noting that the onus for meeting neighbours, culturally, lies with the international. Explain it is up to international to make first move to say hello to the people next door.
- As part of this, more could be done to improve the understanding of who internationals are and where some of their difficulties lie in getting to know Dutch people. Many of the comments in the survey reflect the poor (or incorrect) understanding of what internationals are doing here, ignoring the fact that more often than not, they WANT to integrate further, feel more at home, get to know the locals.

# About Stichting ICAP

ICAP is an initiative put together by long-standing members of the international community to act as an independent bridge between the international community itself and government and civic organisations.

In particular, we aim to establish an independent forum which represents and reflects the views of the international community on issues which have an impact on the city's attractiveness as a place to live in and do business.

The city regularly scores very highly in international comparisons – facts which officials are keen to promote whenever possible. However, these glowing reports do not always reflect the reality on the ground. And Amsterdam lacks a broad framework for communicating with and receiving input/feedback from the international community and assessing its diverse needs and concerns. ICAP aims to change this.

[www.icapnl.org](http://www.icapnl.org)