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Social and economic environment

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Europe's coastal zones are characterised by a rapidly growing population and a population density that is on average 10% higher than in the hinterland areas. Moreover, these regions are also subject to an increasing development of infrastructure and economic activities (*The changing faces of Europe's coastal areas*, EEA 2006, *Balancing the future of Europe's coasts*, EEA 2013, *Eurostat 2017*). Hence, coastal zones are regions with a unique identity and specific challenges. However, the coastal area itself is not homogeneous. On the one hand, there is the distinction between coastal municipalities and hinterland municipalities. But also within the coastal municipalities, there's a distinction between the coastal belt (districts located against the sea) and the more remote districts. While the districts along the coastal belt have a metropolitan character, the more remote districts more often have the characteristics of the hinterland municipalities within the coastal area.

The Belgian coast is characterised by a typical social environment with, *inter alia*, an increased population density, a large ageing population and a high number of second residences. Real estate prices can vary considerably between coastal municipalities, but also within the same coastal municipality between the coastal belt and the areas with a more rural character (*Stedelijk systeem kust 2017*). In addition, from an economic point of view, the coast is also a specific region with, on the one hand, large economic gates (two seaports and an international airport) and, on the other hand, increased unemployment, seasonal employment and a limited number of high-quality jobs for the higher educated (*Breyne et al. 2007*, *Maelfait et al. 2012*). In this theme text, the Belgian coastal area is compared in the first place to the province of West Flanders. In the publications mentioned below, the figures are also benchmarked within larger geographic areas such as the Flemish Region.

11.1 Policy context

In Belgium, policy on the economic environment involves both federal and Flemish actors. At the federal level, there are the federal public services *FPS Employment, Labour and Social Dialogue* and *FPS Economy, SMEs, Self-Employed and Energy* (see the federal policy statements *Werk 2014* and *Economie en consumenten 2014*). In addition, there are the Flemish policy domains of *Work and Social Economy* and *Economy, Science and Innovation* (see the Flemish policy memorandums *Sociale economie 2014-2019* and *Werk, Economie, Wetenschap en Innovatie 2014-2019*).

At the Flemish level, housing policy and spatial planning belong to the policy domain Town and Country Planning, Housing Policy and Immovable Heritage (*RWO*) (see the Flemish policy documents *Omgeving 2014-2019* and *Wonen 2014-2019*). Since 1 April 2017, the policy domains of Environment, Nature and Energy (LNE) and Spatial Planning, Housing Policy and Immovable Heritage (*RWO*) have formed a new policy domain: the Environment Department (*OMG*). Other Flemish policy domains such as Welfare, Public Health and Family (*WVG*), Education and Training (*OV*), Culture, Youth, Sport and Media (*CJSM*) and Mobility and Public Works (*MOW*) also play an important role in the social and/or economic environment.

The province of West Flanders (e.g. *Streekhuis Kust*, *De Provincie aan de Kust. Beleidsbrief Kust 2011*) and the municipalities are involved with the conversion of economic policy, housing policy and spatial planning (see below). The legal framework for spatial planning can be found in the *Codex Coastal Zone, theme Spatial Planning*. In addition, local legislation for coastal residents is also listed (*Codex Coastal Zone, theme Local legislation*).

The Environment Department has launched a territorial development programme (*T.OP*) for the coastal area and has signed a cooperation agreement with the province of West Flanders, with the aim for an action-oriented programme for the spatial development of the coastal area in the short and medium term for themes such as urban reconversion, salinisation and spatial quality. On the basis of stakeholder consultation, the core team continues to work on 4 sites that apply to the coastal area: 'Seawall and urban areas', 'The dune belt', 'The polders' and 'The accessible Westhoek'. Each of the sites has a central theme and focuses on solid projects or on knowledge gathering and sharing. Within the 'Seawall and urban areas' site, the general focus is on densification in accessible places and on providing a range of residential options for different types of inhabitants (families, the elderly, etc.). The site will also look at how the built-up area can contribute to robust coastal protection (see also theme **Safety against flooding**). The 'dune belt' site, on the other hand, focuses on the possible optimisation of the connectivity between the different dune areas (mainly western coastal area). In the 'polders' site, particular attention is paid to the role and place of water in the landscape and in all possible forms of use. In 'accessible Westhoek', it is examined how spatial development can be linked to the mobility policy.

11.2 Spatial use

The current spatial use has been and still is determined by the regional plans drafted by the federal government. A regional spatial plan corresponded approximately to one or more districts, where the space was arranged into

areas where housing and facilities could grow further, where (commercial) activity could be accommodated, where camping sites were provided in recreational areas, where areas were protected as nature reserves, as well as where agricultural areas were given their place. A destination on a regional spatial plan could be further refined by the municipality in special urban plans (BPAs). This was especially the case for buildable areas. As a result, there are currently differences between the various coastal municipalities concerning the actual implementation, such as the heights and densities of apartment blocks.

The planning system was changed by the new Flemish decree on town and country planning (decree of 18 May 1999). The destinations in a regional plan remain valid until they are replaced by a new destination via a spatial implementation plan (SIP). Such SIPs can be elaborated up by municipalities, provinces or the Flemish Region. The establishment of a SIP is the implementation of a spatial vision, which is described in a spatial structure plan. There are three spatial structure plans: the Spatial Structure Plan for Flanders (*RSV*), the West Flanders Spatial Structure Plan (*PRS-WV*) and the municipal structural plans. These spatial visions determine the future of the use of space. The Regional Plans, SIPs and BPAs can be consulted on the following website: www.giswest.be/gewestplan-rups-internet. In 2016, the communication and participation process took place following the revision of the PRS-WV.

In the *RSV*, the coast is indicated as an urban network and a tourist-recreational network. This means that a coherent urban policy must be pursued for the coast, with opportunities for further tourism-recreational activities. This will give the regional urban area of Ostend (consisting of parts of Middelkerke, Ostend, Bredene and Oudenburg) the role to meet new housing and business needs. In addition, Ostend and Zeebrugge have been designated as economic gateways, allowing further development of the ports of Zeebrugge and Ostend, as well as Ostend-Bruges International Airport. The development of these gates is laid down in regional spatial implementation plans (RSIPs). The Flemish Region also anchors the large, contiguous nature areas in RSIPs such as the Zwin, the beaches between seaside resorts on the west coast, etc. The *RSV* and the RSIPs can be consulted at: www.ruimtelijkeordening.be. Parallel to the further implementation of the Spatial Structure Plan, the Government of Flanders approved the 'White Paper Policy Plan for Spatial Planning' in Flanders on 30 November 2016 (*Witboek Beleidsplan Ruimte Vlaanderen 2017*). In the White Paper, the Government of Flanders formulates objectives, spatial development principles and activities that will form the basis for transforming Flanders' space. A draft BRV (*Beleidsplan Ruimte Vlaanderen*) is currently being prepared. Once the draft BRV has been approved, a public consultation is planned.

The *PRS-WV* refines the spatial planning in the coastal area, giving each coastal municipality opportunities for further development. This needs to be concretised by the municipalities in municipal structural plans and translated into municipal spatial implementation plans. The province determines the possibilities regarding constructions on the beach and dike by means of provincial spatial implementation plans. The PRS and SIPs are available at www.west-vlaanderen.be/ruimtelijkeordening.

11.3 Current state

11.3.1 Social environment

THE COAST AND ITS INHABITANTS

On 1 January 2019, the coastal region¹ numbered 424,989 inhabitants (coastal municipalities: 338,767; hinterland municipalities: 86,222). This is 35.5% of the total population in West Flanders (Rijksregister 2019, processed by provincies.incijfers.be). In the period 2000-2019, the population in the coastal area increased by 6.3% (figure 1), an increase comparable to the increase in the surrounding coastal areas around the North Sea (*The changing faces of Europe's coastal areas, EEA 2006, Balancing the future of Europe's coasts, EEA 2013*).

Population increase is higher in the coastal municipalities (+6.8%) than in the hinterland municipalities (+4.2%) (figure 1). From a coastal zone perspective, the population increase is comparable to West Flanders (+5.8%), but lower than the Flemish level (+10.6%). However these numbers conceal high regional differences in growth rate (Rijksregister 2019, processed by provincies.incijfers.be).

Statistics Flanders presented new population projections at the beginning of 2018 (figure 2). The projections suggest a further population increase in the coastal area, although rather limited, +2% in the coastal municipalities and +1% in the hinterland municipalities.

¹ The coastal area comprises 10 coastal municipalities (Blankenberge, Bruges, Knokke-Heist, Bredene, De Haan, Middelkerke, Ostend, De Panne, Koksijde and Nieuwpoort) and 9 hinterland municipalities (Damme, Jabbeke, Zuienkerke, Diksmuide, Lo-Reninge, Gistel, Oudenburg, Alveringem and Veurne).

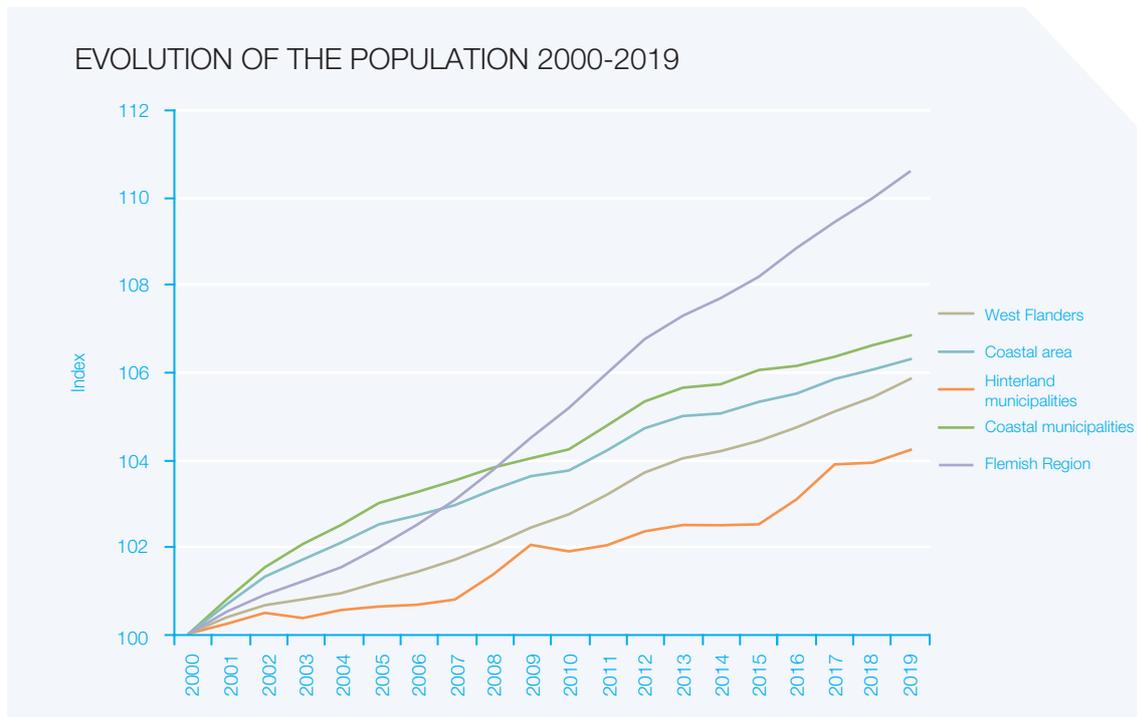


Figure 1. The relative evolution (%) of the population in the coastal area (coastal and hinterland municipalities), the province of West Flanders and the Flemish Region in the period 2000-2019 (Source: Rijksregister, 1 January 2019, processed by provincies.incijfers.be).

The Belgian coast as well as the Dutch and parts of the Northern French Coast constitute the North Sea coastal area with the highest population density (*The changing faces of Europe's coastal areas*, EEA 2006, *Balancing the future of Europe's coasts*, EEA 2013). In the coastal zones of the Netherlands and Belgium, even regions with more than 1,000 inhabitants per km² are recorded (*North Sea Region climate change assessment 2016*). The average population density in the Flemish coastal area is 373 inhabitants per km². This average hides a certain variety: the population density of the coastal municipalities is 706 inhabitants per km², the population density of the hinterland municipalities is 131 inhabitants per km². 80% of the inhabitants of the coastal area live in a coastal municipality (Rijksregister, 1 January 2019, processed by provincies.incijfers.be).

The coastal population has a number of typical characteristics. According to the publication *Grensoverschrijdende atlas: Van Berck tot Brugge, één grens, twee gebieden, één gezamenlijke horizon* (2006), the occupancy profile of the Belgian coast is very similar to that of the French Côte d'Azur. The dejuvenation and ageing population are more pronounced in the Belgian coastal area than in the rest of Flanders and West Flanders (Coudenys 2019 in *Het KustInzicht2019*, *De Klerck 2011*). For example, the population between 0-19 years of age decreases in the entire coastal zone (-13.9%) (2000-2019), while within the same period the population between 64-79 years of age increases sharply by +28.7%. For people aged 80 and over, a doubling is observed in both coastal and hinterland municipalities (figure 3). A total of 148,877 persons aged 60 and over in 2019, representing 35% of the coastal zone population. Furthermore, the structural coefficients tell us something about the composition of the population (table 1). Generally speaking, the coastal zone can be divided into two realities, with the hinterland municipalities following the province's trend rather than the coastal municipalities showing a different trend.

In 2019 the province of West Flanders counted 150 people aged over 60, for every 100 persons between 0 to 19 years of age. For coastal municipalities, this ratio rises to 222. The so-called 'grey pressure' in the coastal municipalities is 78: per 100 persons in the professionally active age range (20-59 years), there are 78 people over the age of 60. The internal ageing (the share of people aged 80+ within the group of 60+) amounts to 30 in the coastal municipalities. This means that the coastal municipalities score slightly lower than the hinterland municipalities and West Flanders. On 1 December 2019, 8 out of 10 coastal municipalities appeared on the list of 20 Belgian municipalities with the oldest population (Source: Rijksregister). Only the municipalities of Bruges and Bredene were not included in this list.

On 1 January 2019, 201.987 households lived in the coastal region (Source: Rijksregister, processed by provincies.incijfers.be). In the period between 2000 and 2019, the number of households increased by 16.6%. The increase in the number of households is higher than the increase in the number of inhabitants.

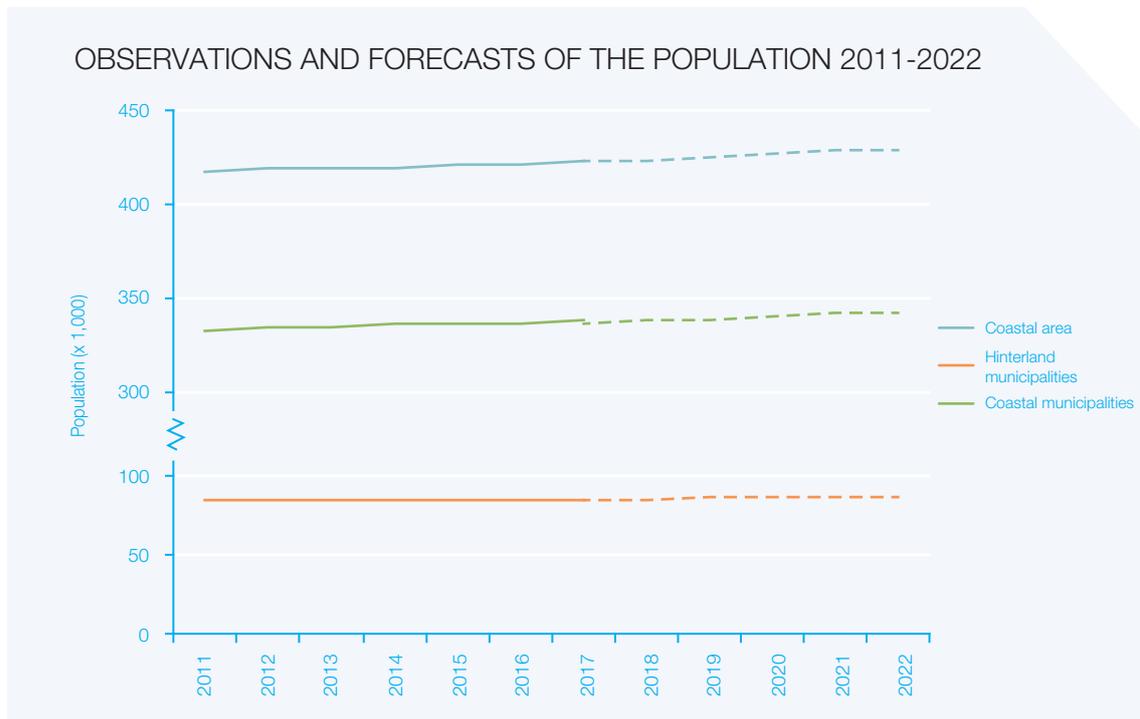


Figure 2. Observations and forecasts of the evolution of the population in coastal municipalities, hinterland municipalities and the coastal area (Source: Studiedienst Vlaamse Regering).

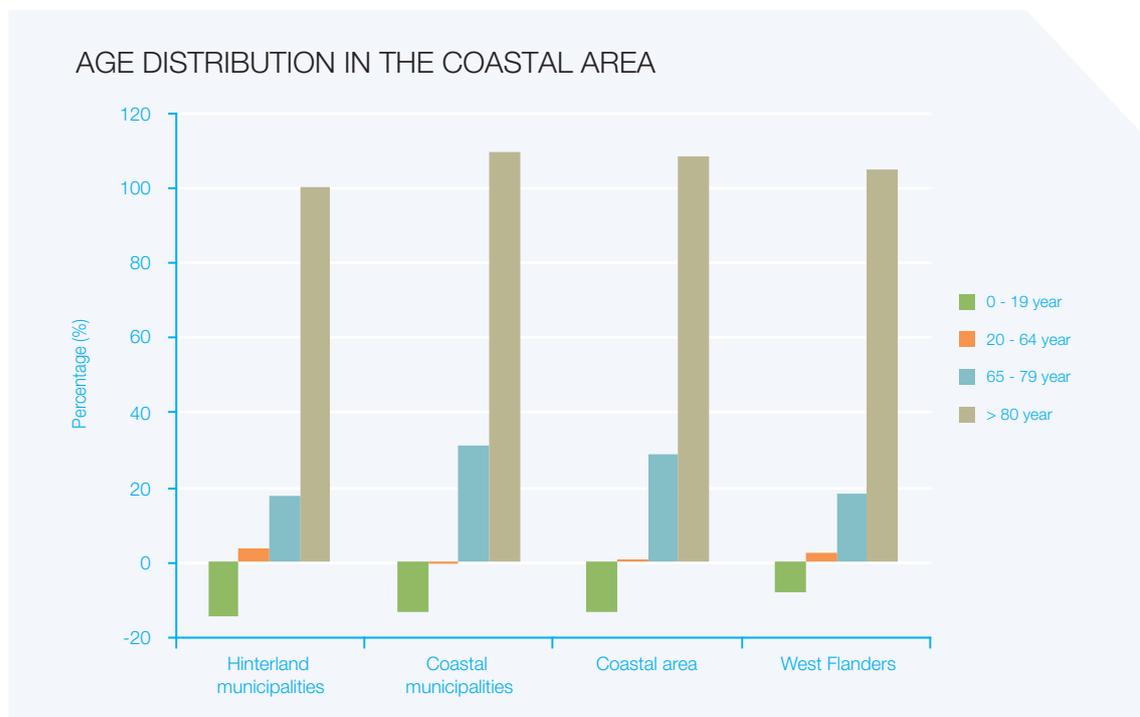


Figure 3. The evolution (%) (2000-2019) of the age distribution (0-19 year, 20-64 year, 65-79 year, 80+ year) of the population in the coastal area and the province of West-Flanders (Source: *Rijksregister*, 1 January 2019, processed by the province of West Flanders).

Table 1. The structural coefficients in the coastal area (coastal municipalities + hinterland municipalities) and the province of West Flanders on 1 January 2017 (Source: rijksregister, processed by the province of West Flanders).

	Structural coefficients			
	Coastal municipalities	Hinterland municipalities	Coastal area	West Flanders
Ageing degree (60+/0-19 year)	213	133	193	146
Grey pressure (60+/20-59 year)	75	53	70	58
Internal ageing (80+/60+)	23	24	23	24
Family care index (80+/50-59 year)	55	44	52	48
Juvenile pressure (0-19 year/20-59 year)	35	40	36	40

Over the past 19 years, the coast has therefore been characterised by a further reduction in family size, with average households becoming smaller. The average family size in the coastal area is 2.10. The municipalities in the hinterland have an average family size of 2.36, while the average family size in the coastal municipalities is 2.04 (<https://provincies.incijfers.be/dashboard>).

When the characteristics of the households are examined in more detail, a distinction can first be made according to the family composition. A household is made up either of a single person or of several adults living together, without children under the age of 20 (family without child), or of one or more adults living with one or more children under the age of 20 (family with children) (figure 4). The latter category also includes single-parent families. Of all households in the coastal area, 38.4% are singles, 43.4% have no children and 18.2% have children (figure 4). The coastal municipalities have on average more single people and fewer families with children than the hinterland municipalities and West Flanders (Rijksregister 1 January 2019, processed by provincies.incijfers.be).

A distinguishing feature of the coastal municipalities is the large proportion of single people (figure 4). This group has increased compared to 2000 (+5.6% in the coastal area, +6.2% in West Flanders) (see above: family dilution) (figure 5). The largest increase in the proportion of people living alone can be observed in the hinterland municipalities (+8.3%).

When we observe the population characteristics, a few indicators reveal the urban character of coastal municipalities: an older population, many people living alone and a higher population density. This urban profile first appeared in the deprivation atlases ([Kesteloot et al. 1996](#), [Kesteloot and Meys 2008](#)) which contained an analysis at neighbourhood level. The neighbourhoods located along the coast show a very different profile than the neighbourhoods behind the coastal strip. The demarcation line between more and less deprived neighbourhoods does not manifest itself at the municipal level. In order to determine the urban profile of the coastal strip and the associated problems, an analysis at the neighbourhood level is necessary.

The deprivation atlas of the province of West Flanders (West Flanders Provincial Council, Data & Analysis Centre, [West Flanders Deprivation Atlas 2017](#)) confirms the urban character of the coastal municipalities and also notes that coastal towns are confronted with a higher than average deprivation ([West Flanders Deprivation Atlas 2017](#)). The most deprived neighbourhoods in West Flanders are found in the municipality of Ostend (20) (figure 6). In the coastal area, 19.7% of all households live in a deprived neighbourhood, which is higher than the average of West Flanders (14.35%). On average, 23% of the families living in coastal municipalities live in deprived neighbourhoods. In the hinterland municipalities, 4% of the families are affected ([West Flanders Deprivation Atlas 2017](#), see also the [Municipal Index Cards – Deprivation](#)).

THE COAST AND ITS INHABITATION

The total surface area of the coastal area is 1,183 km². The coastal municipalities account for 42% of this area, the hinterland municipalities take up 58% (FPS Finance, Land Registry Administration, registration and domains ([AKRRED](#))).

The Belgian coastal area has by far the highest share of built-up surface area of all European countries ([The changing faces of Europe's coastal areas, EEA 2006](#), [Balancing the future of Europe's coasts, EEA 2013](#), [Eurostat 2017](#)). In the publication: [Grensoverschrijdende atlas: Van Berck tot Brugge, één grens, twee gebieden, één gezamenlijke horizon \(2006\)](#) a comparison between the habitation of the Belgian coast and the northern French Côte d'Opale is discussed in more detail. The built-up area in the Belgian coastal area amounts to 239 km². 7% of the built-up area in the coastal

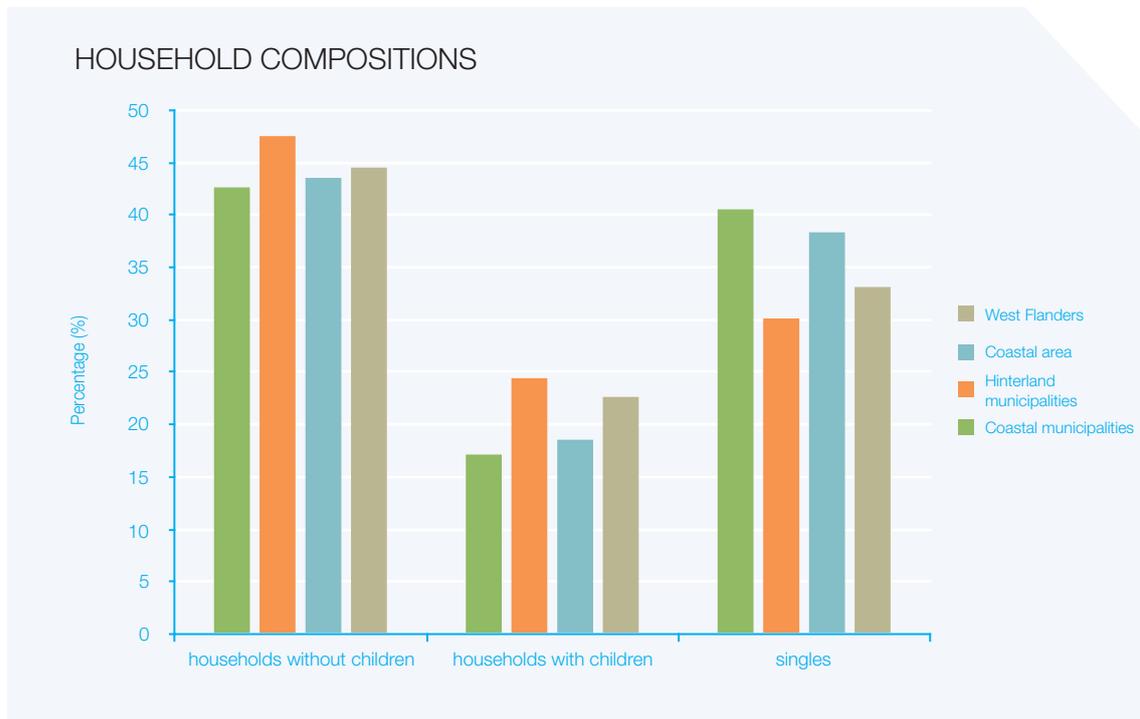


Figure 4. Overview of families without children, with children, and singles in the coastal area (coastal municipalities + hinterland municipalities) and the province of West Flanders (Source: Rijksregister, 1 January 2019, processed by provincies.incijfers.be).

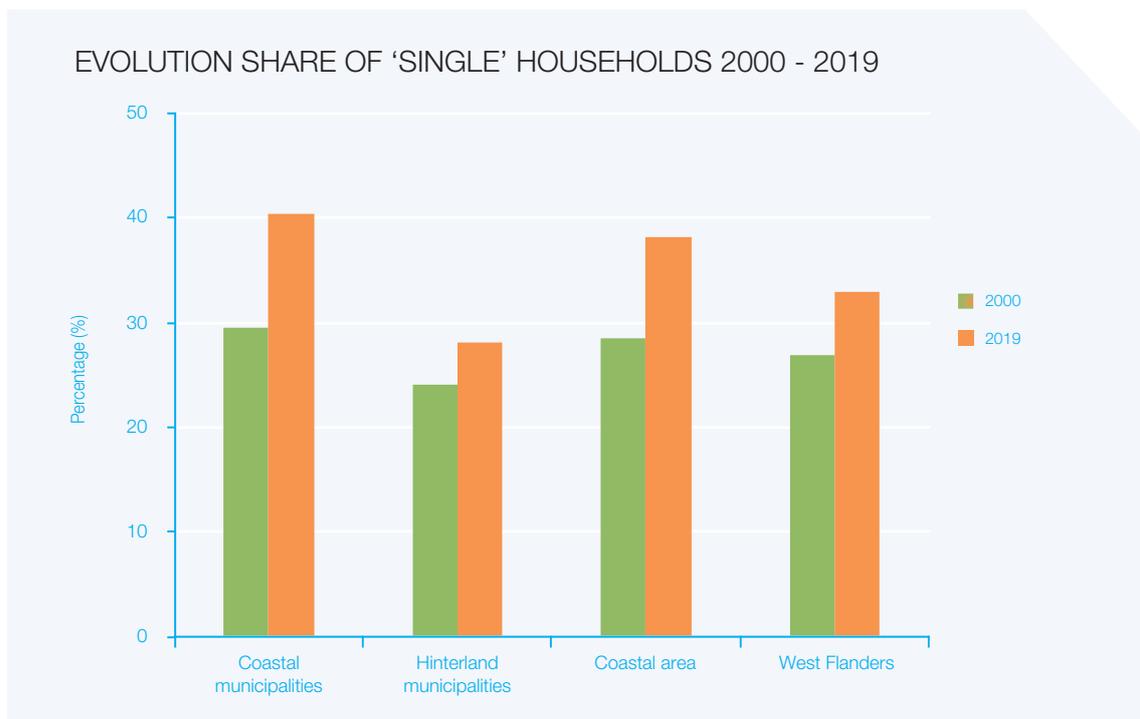


Figure 5. The evolution of singles in the coastal area (coastal municipalities and hinterland municipalities) and in the province of West Flanders in the period between 2000 and 2019 (Source: Rijksregister, 1 January 2019, processed by provincies.incijfers.be).

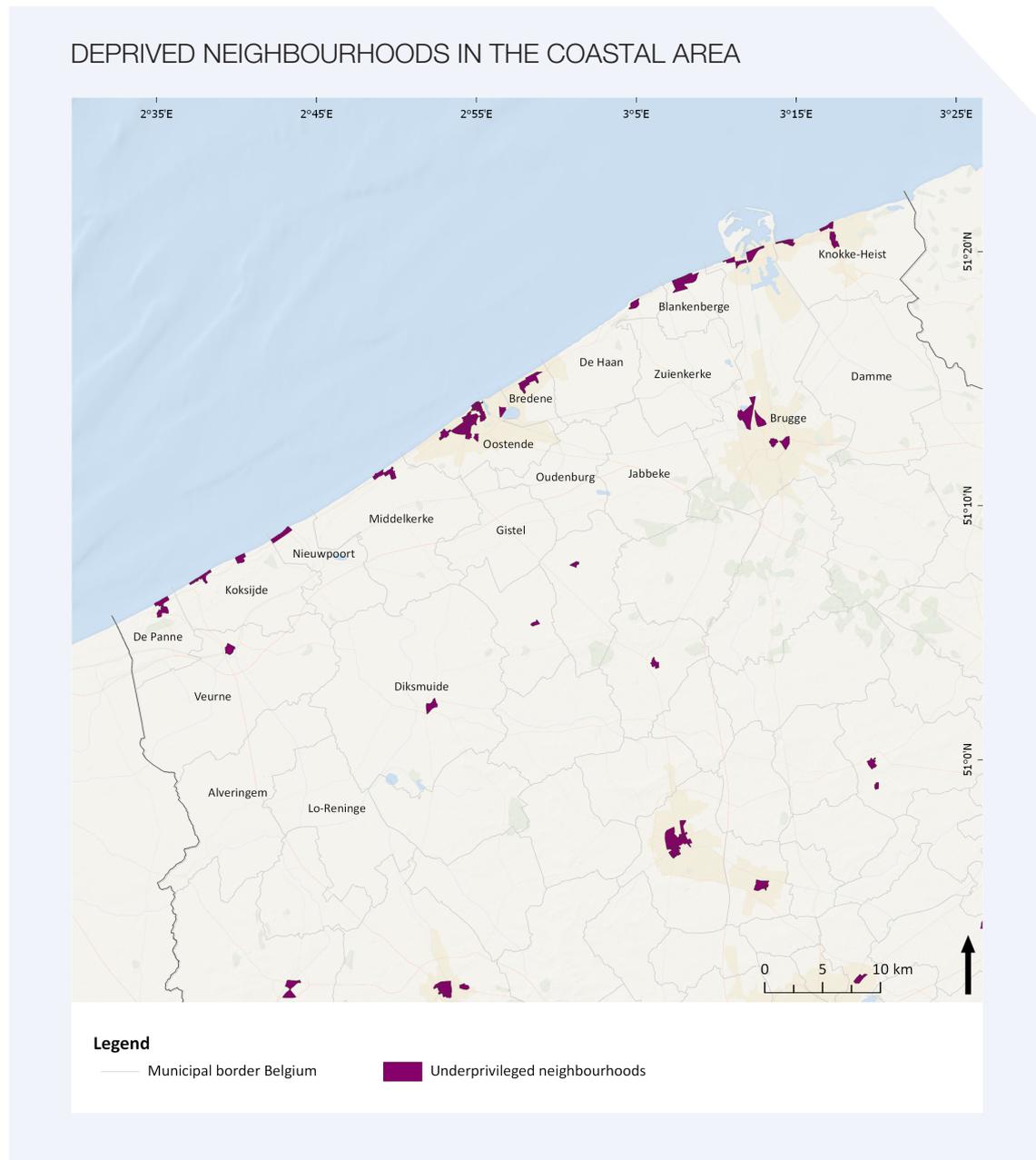


Figure 6. Location of the deprived neighbourhoods in the coastal area (Source: [West Flanders Deprivation Atlas 2017](#)).

area is used for residential purposes. For coastal municipalities, the built-up area as a function of housing amounts to 35% of the built-up area, whereas in hinterland municipalities this is only 4% (Source: FPS Economy, General Directorate of Statistics and Economic Information, based on the land register).

On 1 January 2018, the coastal area had 340,305 housing facilities (table 2). However, there is a big difference in the type of housing. In the coastal municipalities, 52% of the houses are situated in an apartment (block) while in the hinterland municipalities this concerns only 10% of the number of housing units. In the hinterland municipalities, 86% of the housing facilities are ordinary houses (FPS Finance, Land Registry Administration, registration and domains ([AKRRED](#)), processed by [provincies.incijfers.be](#)).

The total number of housing facilities in the coastal municipalities is considerably higher than the number of homes needed for housing its inhabitants. On average, 36% of the housing facilities in the coastal area is not used as a permanent home (figure 7). In other words, housing facilities often serve other functions, such as a second residence, some sort of business activity, and sometimes they remain tenantless houses (Coudenys 2019 in [Het Kust!Nzicht2019](#)).

Table 2. An overview of the housing facilities in the coastal area, divided by hinterland and coastal municipalities (Source: FPS Finance, Land Registry Administration, registration and domains (AKRRED), processed by provincies.incijfers.be as of 01.01.2018).

	Coastal area		Hinterland municipalities		Coastal municipalities	
Total number housing facilities	340,305	100%	40,472	100%	299,833	100%
Residential houses	160,060	47%	34,876	86%	137,381	46%
Commercial premises	7,988	2%	1,429	4%	6,559	2%
Apartments and buildings	172,257	51%	4,167	10%	155,893	52%

The use of housing facilities for purposes other than permanent habitation might have negative consequences for society, such as an increased sense of insecurity and a lack of social cohesion. On the other hand, a large supply of second homes on the coast is one of the basic conditions for the tourism industry (see theme **Tourism and recreation**). Figure 7 clearly shows that a large housing surplus is mainly a coastal phenomenon. The hinterland municipalities have on average only 2% of housing facilities which are used for purposes other than permanent residence.

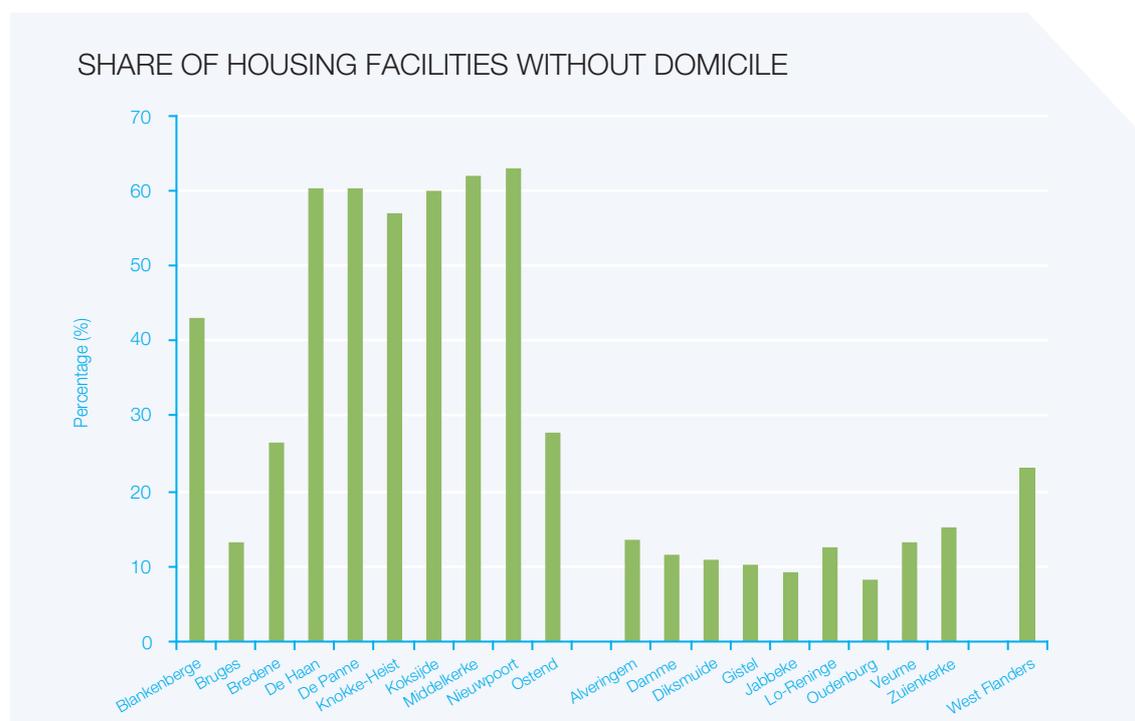


Figure 7. The share of housing facilities without domicile in the coastal area (Source: FPS Finance, Land Registry Administration, registration and domains (AKRRED), processed by provincies.incijfers.be as of 01.01.2016).

11.3.2 Economic environment

THE COAST AND ITS LABOUR MARKET

At the end of 2017 there were 184,011 professionally employed (employees, self-employed and helpers) people between the age of 18 and 64 in the coastal area. As a result, the coastal area reached a share of 34.4% of the total number of employed people in West Flanders. The coastal municipalities counted 120,963 employees whereas the hinterland municipalities counted 21,920 which comes down to 34.1% of the total in West Flanders. In addition, 28,909 self-employed and helpers (excluding those working on a secondary basis) were also active in coastal municipalities and 9,964 in hinterland municipalities. The coastal area hence accounts for 35.3% of the total of self-employees in West Flanders (RSZ, [RESOC-dataset 2019](#)).

The coastal region is characterised by a very weak industrial base. The industry's share of salaried employment was only 12.5% in coastal municipalities at the end of 2017, compared to 22.5% in West Flanders. In the coastal

municipalities no less than 86.3% of the salaried employment is in trade and services, of which tourism and catering constitute a major part. In these sectors, a large proportion of the jobs are seasonal employment. In West Flanders, 73.3% of all employees are active in trade and services (RSZ, [RESOC-dataset 2019](#)).

At the end of 2017, 142,615 inhabitants of the coastal municipalities and 40,914 inhabitants of the hinterland municipalities belonged to the professionally active population (working people and non-working jobseekers) aged between 18 and 64. This means that the coastal region accounts for 33.5% of the total figure for West Flanders. The degree of activity – the ratio of the professionally active population to the total population aged between 18 and 64 – was 76.3% for the coastal area, which is somewhat lower than in West Flanders (77.7%) but regional differences are high. The coastal municipalities for instance reach a degree of activity of over 90%, whilst the hinterland municipalities only register 49.3%. The employment rate – the ratio of the number of working people to the total population aged between 18 and 64 – is also lower in the coastal area (71,0%) than in West Flanders (73.4%) (figure 8; 2017). With an unemployment rate – the number of non-working jobseekers compared to the professionally active population aged between 18 and 64 – of 7.0%, the coastal region did worse than average in West Flanders (5.4%). This is mainly due to coastal municipalities (7.8%); in hinterland municipalities, the unemployment rate (4.1%) was significantly lower (Steunpunt Werk, [RESOC-dataset 2019](#)).

In 2018, there were 11,808 non-working jobseekers in the coastal area, or 42.8% of the total in West Flanders. In addition, there were 800 older unemployed people in the coastal region; this is 47.1% of the total in West Flanders (Steunpunt Werk, [RESOC-dataset 2019](#)). The unemployment pressure – the ratio of the number of non-working and older unemployed people to the current professional active population (18-64 years) – is clearly higher in coastal municipalities (7.2%) than in hinterland municipalities (3.6%) and West Flanders (5.0%) (figure 9) (Steunpunt Werk, VDAB en RVA in [RESOC-dataset 2019](#)).

In 2016, there were only four coastal municipalities (Bruges, Knokke-Heist, Ostend and Nieuwpoort) with a positive commuting balance among employees. In these municipalities, the number of employees coming to work, but residing outside the municipality, exceeds the number of inhabitants working outside of the municipality (Vlaamse Arbeidsrekening, [RESOC-dataset 2019](#)).

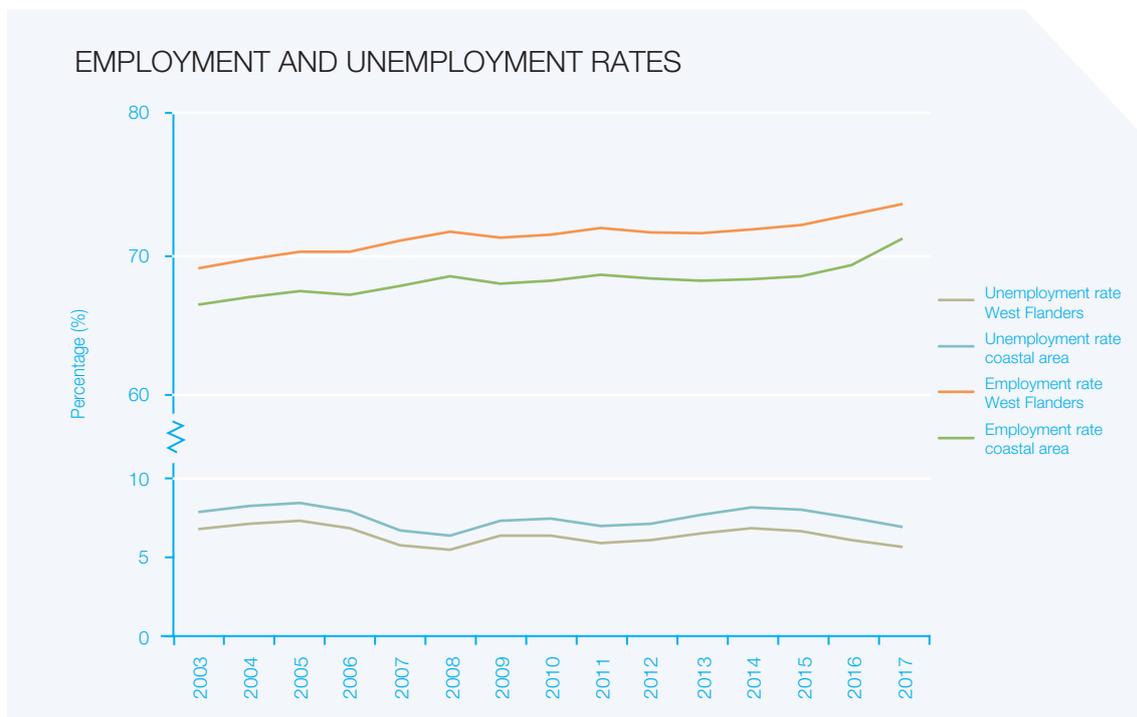


Figure 8. Evolution of the employment and unemployment rate in the coastal area and the province of West Flanders, 2003-2017 (Source: Steunpunt Werk in [RESOC-dataset 2019](#), processed by: Department DSA POM West Flanders).

In the following information sources: [West-Vlaanderen Ontcijferd editie 2016](#), the [Gemeentelijke Steekkaarten](#) and the [RESOC datasets](#), statistics about the labour market are available at the level of municipalities, districts and the province of West Flanders.

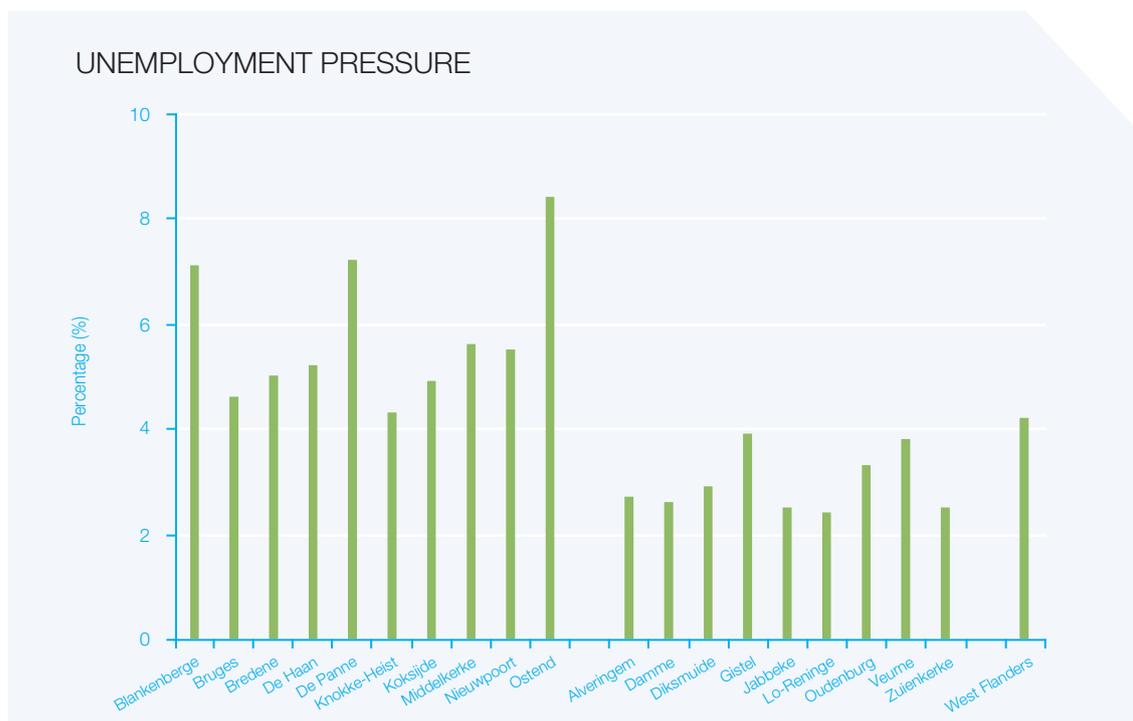


Figure 9. Unemployment pressure in the coastal area, 2018 (Source: Steunpunt Werk, VDAB and RVA in [RESOC-dataset 2019](#), processed by: Department DSA, POM West Flanders).

ENTREPRENEURSHIP AT THE COAST

In 2017, the produced wealth measured on the basis of the gross domestic product (GDP²) per capita, was lower in West Flanders (38,3075) than in the Flemish Region (39,756). Bruges (38,934) is the only coastal region with a GDP per inhabitant higher than the average of West Flanders (INR, [RESOC-dataset 2019](#)). The GDP per capita increased on average 2.2% per annum over the period 2008-2017 in West Flanders, with the strongest gain made in the Ypres district (+3.5%) and the weakest in the Bruges district (+1.9%) (INR, [RESOC-dataset 2019](#)). Because GDP per inhabitant grew more strongly in the period 2006-2015 than in Belgium, West Flanders was able to narrow the gap with Belgium where the gap to Flanders remained just as large. The available income per capita grew faster in West Flanders than in Flanders and Belgium. Here, West Flanders made a catch-up compared to the Flemish Region and widened its gap with Belgium.

With regard to the realised gross value added (GVA)³, the district of Bruges ranks second, after Kortrijk, with a share of 24.2% in the GVA realised in West Flanders in 2017. The remaining coastal districts of Ostend and Veurne account for 10.4% and 4.9% respectively of the total GVA. In 2017, the GVA per employee in West Flanders amounted to 94,796 euro. This means that the province of West Flanders remains well below the Flemish average of 101,595 euro. The coastal districts of Veurne (104,510 and Ostend (101,719) have a GVA per employee that exceeds that of the Flemish average (INR, [RESOC-dataset 2019](#)).

In 2017, the companies with a registered office in West Flanders generated a combined turnover of 95.4 billion euro; this represents 15.4% of the Flemish total ([West-Vlaanderen Ontcijferd](#)). In 2018, there were 41,447 active enterprises in the coastal area, which represents 33.7% of the total in West Flanders. 31,097 of these active enterprises are located in coastal municipalities, 10,380 in hinterland municipalities. In the coastal area, 57.0% of active enterprises can be found in the tertiary⁴ sector and 4.7% in the quaternary⁵ sector. In West Flanders, the share of active companies in these sectors is lower (50.5% in the tertiary sector and 3.6% in the quaternary sector). The share of founded and disappeared enterprises in the tertiary and quaternary sectors is also remarkably higher in the coastal area compared to West Flanders. The economic dynamics of the coastal area are relatively large. Both the foundation ratio (ratio

² The GDP is the market value of all officially recognised final goods and services produced within a country in a given period of time. The GDP per capita is often considered an indicator of a country's standard of living.

³ GVA: the difference between the marketable value of production and the purchased primary resources.

⁴ Service sector: the economic sector in which enterprises want to make profit by selling their goods or services.

⁵ The non-commercial services: e.g. governmental services and services with government funding.

of the number of foundations to the number of active enterprises) (coastal area: 9.0%, coastal municipalities: 9.3%, hinterland municipalities: 8.1%) and the retirement ratio (ratio of the number of shutdowns and bankruptcies to the number of active enterprises) (coastal area: 6.0%, coastal municipalities: 6.4%, hinterland municipalities: 4.6%) were larger in the coastal region than in West Flanders (5.5%) as a whole in 2018. The turbulence ratio (sum of foundation and retirement ratios) is therefore considerably higher in the coastal municipalities (coastal area 15.0%, coastal municipalities 15.7%, hinterland municipalities 12.7%) than in the West Flanders figure (13.9%) (Source: FPS Economy (ASDEI) in [RESOC-dataset 2019](#)). These findings can be attributed entirely to coastal municipalities since the ratios in the hinterland municipalities are always below the total figure for West Flanders. Urban centres tend to record more foundations and also more shutdowns. This is inherent to the possibilities offered by such centres. The higher turbulence on the coast can also be partly explained by the nature of the activities present. Among the pioneers of the start-ups and bankruptcies is after all the hotel and catering industry, which is much more strongly represented in the coastal area than on average in West Flanders. In 2018, for example, there were 4,281 active enterprises in the hotel and catering industry in the coastal area (coastal municipalities: 3,623 active enterprises, hinterland municipalities: 658 active enterprises), accounting for 50.7% of the province of West Flanders. The coastal municipalities alone account for 42.9% of the number of hotel and catering businesses in West Flanders. The number of active enterprises in the hotel and catering industry in relation to all active enterprises accounts for 11.7% in coastal municipalities, 6.3% in hinterland municipalities, 10.3% in the coastal area and 6.9% in West Flanders. In addition, in 2018 there were 4,556 active enterprises in the retail trade in the coastal area (coastal municipalities: 3,665 active enterprises; hinterland municipalities: 891 active enterprises), accounting for 39.3% of the province of West Flanders. The coastal municipalities themselves make up 31.7% of the number of retail businesses in West Flanders (FPS Economy (ADSEI) in [RESOC-dataset 2019](#)).

The coastal area covers 36.2% of the total surface area of West Flanders. On 1 January 2018, the coastal area only constituted 23.4% of the total area used for business activities in West Flanders. In West Flanders 17.7% of the built-up area is used for business activities; in the coastal area this percentage is 14.7%. In coastal municipalities, the proportion of the built-up area that is used for activities is greater than in hinterland municipalities (16.9% compared to 11.3%) (FPS Economy (ADSEI) in [RESOC-dataset 2019](#)).

In 2018, the spatial productivity in the coastal area equalled 42.5. This means that in the coastal area there were 42.5 persons working per hectare of economically occupied land. In the coastal municipalities this number amounted to 52.8, compared to 22.0 in the hinterland municipalities and 31.5 in West Flanders as a whole. These differences are caused by the different morphology and economic structure of these regions. Economic use of space is completely different in urban regions because of a different sectoral structure: on the one hand, relatively less industry and fewer users of large space, and on the other hand, more trade and services with offices and high-rise buildings, as well as more employees per unit of land area. Until 2008, spatial productivity in West Flanders remained at the same level, after which the indicator showed a declining trend. In the other regions, spatial productivity has been on a declining trend since 2006. These decreases are the effect of a growing spatial dispersion of living and working. Commercial sub-urbanisation or migration from the city towards the surrounding countryside, following on the residential sub-urbanisation, has increased sharply in recent years. The Flemish spatial structure plan RSV has not yet been able to curb this trend (Vlaamse Arbeidsrekening and FPS Economy (ADSEI) in [RESOC-dataset 2019](#)).

In the following information sources: [West-Vlaanderen Ontcijferd editie 2016](#), the [Gemeentelijke Steekkaarten](#) and the [RESOC datasets](#), statistics on entrepreneurship are available at municipal, districts and the province of West Flanders.

11.4 Sustainable use

11.4.1 Sustainable living at the coast

On the coast, there are few ingredients present for a balanced, sociologically healthy social environment. The strong ageing and growing increase of 80+, the many single people, the numerous relocations and the strong pressure from tourists and second homes create an unbalanced social and demographic situation. This disrupted social climate appears mostly in the neighbourhoods close to the coast ([Meire and Bracke 2005](#), rijksregister, Coudenys 2012 in [Maelfait et al. 2012](#)).

The ageing of the coastal population creates a skewed demographic mix, which causes a different society model. On the coast, there are proportionally much more elderly people compared to the rest of Flanders. This effect is amplified by the second home owners, of which most are over the age of 45 without children under the age of 18 living at home. 75% of the second home owners are at least 55 years old and live together with their partner. More than half of the owners are (pre-)retired. This means that the ageing population is further increased by approximately 124,500 second

home owners aged over 50 who reside for approximately 82 nights a year in their second home (WES 2008, second homes at the coast, [part 1](#) and [part 2](#)). During the last 10 years, 20,000 inhabitants over 56 years of age settled at the coast ([province of West Flanders 2015](#)). Research commissioned by the province of West Flanders shows that in the next 15 years the coast will reside more individuals over the age of 60; and in 2030 there will be 117,777 inhabitants (51.72%) older than 56. According to the most recent SVR-projections (2015-2030; [Studiedienst Vlaamse Regering](#)), the ageing population and the increase in the number of people aged 65 to 79 and the over-80s on the coast will continue until at least 2030 ([Government of Flanders 2016](#)). In addition, it appears that approximately 40% of the number of homes on the coast are second homes, accounting for approximately 86,000 homes ([province of West Flanders 2015](#)).

The province of West Flanders is actively investing in the coastal ageing programme ([programma Vergrijzing aan de kust](#)), whereby the coast can be regarded as a laboratory for the future ageing of the population in Flanders. For example, the policy document '[Vergrijzing aan de Kust: Lust of last \(2012\)](#)' (province of West Flanders) outlines the situation of the ageing population on the coast, formulating a number of bottlenecks and challenges. The '[Ruimte voor ouderen \(2017\)](#)' inspiration guide provides an overview of the various forms of housing for the elderly and tries to respond to the housing needs of coastal residents in West Flanders. Furthermore, in [Vandekerckhove et al. \(2015\)](#), commissioned by the province of West Flanders, the relocation movements of people older than 80 were analysed for the coast, including the consequences for the housing market and the healthcare sector in the coastal area. The study reveals a number of trends: the retired migrant is insufficiently prepared for ageing, a social network is important and the housing supply on the coast has not been adapted. A number of challenges and recommendations are also formulated: e.g. consider ageing as an asset (e.g. opportunities for voluntary work, economic opportunities, etc.), focus on adapted and self-reliant housing and awareness-raising (see also [De Klerck 2011](#)).

The importance of a personal social network is also discussed in [Meire and Bracke \(2005\)](#). For the many singles and retired migrants at the coast, who have left their social environment, social isolation is a realistic prospect. It is therefore essential to restore and strengthen this social network as much as possible. A study about the livability at the coast ([Meire and Bracke 2005](#)) has revealed that the mutual involvement of residents scores poorly along the coast, especially in the neighbourhoods close to the sea.

A good physical environment and good living conditions are also essential for a sustainable living environment and for the well-being of the residents. The urban profile and the high level of deprivation indicate the many challenges of the coastal area ([Maelfait et al. 2012](#)). In addition, ageing also offers economic opportunities, for example in the care economy or the experience economy (see also: [website POM West Flanders](#)).

11.4.2 Economic development at the coast

In [West Deal](#), the strategic lines of the economic policy of the province of West Flanders were outlined for the period 2013-2018. A number of policy lines are specifically relevant for the coastal area, such as the potential of Ostend as an industrial port for offshore developments, the expansion of the port of Zeebrugge, tourism-related opportunities for the Ostend-Bruges International Airport, etc. 'Factories for the Future' ([Fabrieken voor de Toekomst](#)) is also a concrete application of West Deal, in which the blue energy cluster focuses on wind, wave and tidal energy. In the study [West-Vlaanderen Groeit – Ambitie 2030](#), a study was conducted into the situation of the West Flanders economy and its future prospects. Five future visions and five specific construction sites for West Flanders are formulated, including the economy in the coastal area (blue energy, ports, coastal care economy, etc.).

Via the '[detailhandel Vlaanderen](#)' website of the Knowledge Network Retail Trade, information can be requested for each municipality (including a municipal fact sheet) about the retail trade in Flanders. Also, the new data portal [provincies.incijfers.be](#) can also be used to compile figures, tables, graphs and maps for each selected area classification (e.g. coastal area).

With regard to retail trade, the coastal municipalities have a higher number of commercial buildings in relation to the population compared to the hinterland municipalities. The highest number of commercial properties (per 1,000 inhabitants) is registered in Knokke-Heist (49.76), De Panne (48.83) and Nieuwpoort (47.57) (figure 10). The largest vacancy (unoccupied commercial properties compared to all commercial properties) was found in Bredene (14.0%), De Panne (13.3%) and Blankenberge (13.0%) (figure 10).

In the context of the Marine Strategy Framework Directive (MSFD), a first socio-economic analysis of the use of Belgian marine waters and the costs associated with the degradation of the marine environment was completed in 2012 ([Belgian State 2012](#), [Börger et al. 2016](#)), and an update of this socio-economic analysis was published in 2018 ([Volckaert and Rommens 2018](#)). These studies partly deal with socio-economic developments on the coast, paying

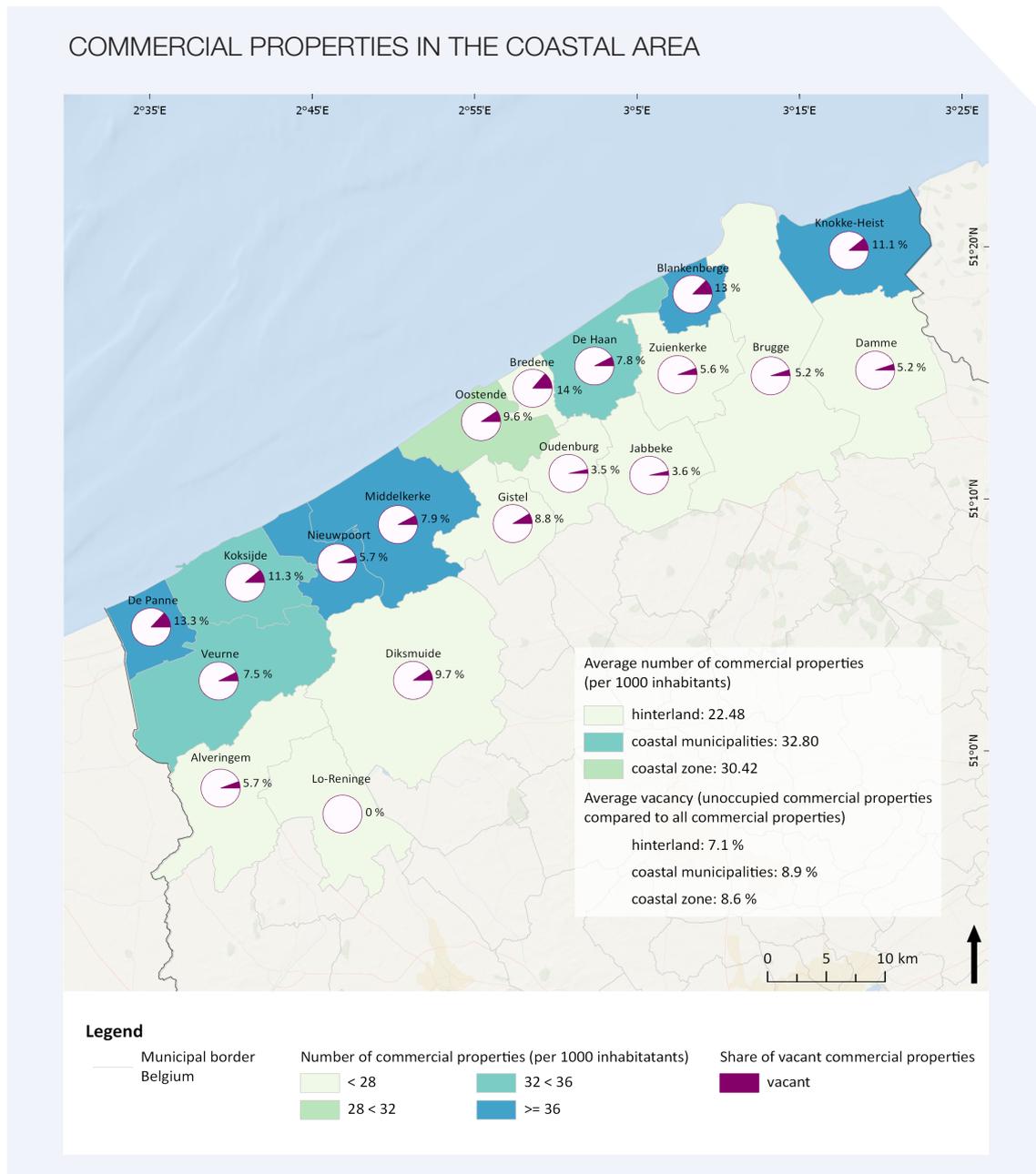


Figure 10. The number of commercial properties per 1,000 inhabitants for each municipality in the coastal area in 2017 and the number of vacant commercial properties compared to all commercial properties per municipality in 2017 (Source: provincies.incijfers.be via province of West Flanders).

attention to the accommodation for tourists on the coast and their expenses (see also themes **Tourism and recreation** and **Nature and environment**).

11.4.3 Urban vision development on the coast

In order to be able to respond to the future challenges of the coastal area, a 'reconversion' of the current urban system is being considered. '*Stedelijk Stysteem Kust*' is a design-based research project into transformations of the built environment in the coastal area, in order to obtain a robust urban system (*Stedelijk Stysteem Kust 2017*). The research is a collaboration between the Team *Vlaams Bouwmeester*, Department Environment (*Ruimte Vlaanderen*), OVAM and the province of West Flanders and forms part of *LABO RUIMTE*, a platform for designing research into spatial-societal issues. For example, apartment buildings along the coast can also provide a sustainable response to the needs of a growing group of senior citizens. With the Integrated Territorial Investment (GTI) *Health Care*

Accelerator, local authorities, healthcare institutions, companies and knowledge institutions are working together to meet this challenge.

The coastal area is a dynamic zone with major challenges in terms of e.g. housing, mobility and work. In the designing study *Metropolitaaan Kustlandschap 2100* about the development possibilities for the coast up to 2100 in the context of a changing climate and socio-economic context, the coastal area was considered as one functionally coherent area, one urban metabolism (*Geldof and De Bock 2014*). The Territorial Development Programme (T.OP) for the coastal area was set up in November 2015 within *Ruimte Vlaanderen* (Department Environment) with the aim of tackling large-scale spatial challenges in the coastal area in cooperation with the province of West Flanders and the municipalities. Urban development issues are elaborated into a supported vision or master plan by a team of experts. This will enable the municipality to put this into practice by means of a spatial implementation plan or by issuing permits. These projects are currently being carried out and the implications for the coast are not yet apparent. In Knokke-Heist, for example, it was investigated how an older district near Heist station could be renovated with an additional package of new houses, without restricting the open character and spacious park structure. In Veurne, research was conducted into how the old station, the square in front of it and the surrounding area can be renovated so that this can remain a well-functioning public transport hub, but at the same time can also offer more quality to local residents. The results of this research will only become visible on the site in the coming years. Similar research is also planned in Middelkerke, Blankenberge and Koksijde in 2018-2019.

There are also vision developments or planning processes that focus partly or entirely on the sea side, such as the *Complex Project Coastal Vision* (development of sustainable measures for long-term coastal protection) and the marine spatial plan (MSP) for the Belgian part of the North Sea (see also themes **Safety against flooding**, **Nature and environment** and **Integrated ocean policy**).

Legislation reference list

Overview of the relevant legislation at the federal and Flemish level. For the consolidated national legislation we refer to the [Belgisch staatsblad](#) and the [Justel-databanken](#).

Belgian and Flemish legislation		
Abbreviation	Title	File number
Decree of 18 May 1999	Decreet houdende de organisatie van ruimtelijke ordening	1999-05-18/33
RD of 23 June 2010	Koninklijk besluit betreffende de mariene strategie voor de Belgische zeegebieden	2010-06-23/05