

THE REFORM OF RESCUE SERVICES

The main task in the reform of rescue services is to shift responsibility for arranging rescue services from individual municipalities to rescue districts. The goal is to create the preconditions for a rescue system which is as efficient and economical as possible.

The reform was launched in autumn 2000 on the basis of problems and development needs brought to light by Rapporteur Pekka Myllyniemi. The number of rescue districts was reduced from about 30 to 22 by the time the proposal reached the Government, which approved the proposal on 7 March 2002. The municipalities were required to conclude agreements covering joint rescue services by 31 December 2002. Joint rescue services must begin by 1 January 2004.

The reform of rescue services includes six projects. The present audit focused on the first two of these, which concern the formation of districts and the reform of legislation.

The first main question in the audit was whether the reform of rescue services has proceeded in line with objectives and on schedule. The answer to this question is yes, with certain reservations.

The Department for Rescue Services at the Ministry of the Interior has played a key role in the reform of rescue services. Since the beginning of 2002 the focus in forming districts has shifted to the district level according to plan.

Planning work and the creation of a management system would have been easier if legislation had been drafted and had come into force earlier. Projects should have been scheduled so that the reform of legislation would have preceded other projects. Preparations should also have started sooner. Likewise training should have been reformed earlier to ensure the recruitment of qualified personnel.

The planning appropriation which was proposed by the rapporteur was not budgeted for this purpose. In the absence of full-time planners, planning has taken a lot of time on the part of fire officers in particular.

The network tool which was established to promote district preparations and project information has facilitated the progress and monitoring of preparations at the district level.

The state provincial offices feel that they have been excluded almost completely in the reform of rescue services. The state provincial offices' expertise was not put to use as planned. According to the state provincial offices, the municipalities have also wanted to take care of tasks without direct supervision by state administration.

The most critical statements regarding the district division recommended by the Ministry of the Interior's working group came from the Province of Lapland. Criticism was also presented in Ostrobothnia and Uusimaa. After statements were received an expert group appointed by the Ministry of the Interior suggested revisions in the district division. The Ministry of the Interior presented its proposal on the basis of this work.

The final district division deviated from the original criteria in some respects. The calculation principles used as criteria were not explicit. The terms used in evaluating economy also varied, which hampered comparisons and made it more difficult to demonstrate the applicability of criteria.

The audit indicated that regional viewpoints and statements were taken into consideration in different projects in key respects. They also had a guiding influence on the process of implementing projects. The audit also indicated that project management was reasonably good in terms of organization, decision-making and information. The first two projects proceeded more or less on schedule. The legislative reform is still going on with the drafting of legislation regarding technical requirements for equipment and the fire safety of products.

The second main question in the audit was how well operational and economic threats or risks presented at the district level have been avoided in planning and launching the reform of rescue services and what operational and economic benefits can be achieved through the reform.

District preparers believe that the biggest risks in the reform of the rescue system concern the availability of quali-

fied personnel, differences in pay systems and the adequacy of operational funds.

The state provincial offices believe that the biggest risks concern the weakening of civil defence and preparedness, the reduction of small municipalities' possibilities to influence decisions and the threatening of the principle of municipal self-government. District preparers downplay these risks.

The rise in costs for which the municipalities are responsible and the unclear role of the state provincial offices are considered bigger threats by district preparers than by the state provincial offices.

Municipal rescue services' operating costs are generally increased by urban residential patterns and the concentration of industry. Joining urban municipalities may result in more expensive districts, since operating and net costs per inhabitant are already above average in these municipalities.

The shift to rescue districts may also increase small rural municipalities' costs per inhabitant. The costs of rural municipalities' rescue services are below the national average, but the longer distances in the new districts pose safety risks and preparing for these may increase costs per inhabitant.

The most important benefits which the reform is expected to achieve concern economy and personnel. District preparers expect the systematic procurement of equipment and the reorganization of planning and monitoring to produce economic benefits. Personnel are expected to benefit from an increase in competence through training, recruitment and specialization as well as a reduction in work loads.

After the system has been fully launched, the achievement of economy should be evaluated using reliable measuring methods. Measuring and confirming the qualitative improvements which the reform is intended to achieve also requires the development of gauges.

The third main question in the audit was how the reform will change the organization of rescue services, the division of labour and financial responsibility between rescue districts and the state. The state will spend over 40 million

euros on rescue services in 2003. This is about 10% of public spending in this category.

According to district preparers, the ministry should remain responsible for overseeing rescue services and preparing legislation. The state should also take care of training. The state's total withdrawal from rescue districts' costs was perceived as a threat at the district level. Maintaining state funds was considered extremely important.

According to the new Act and Decree on Rescue Services, the tasks of the Ministry of the Interior and the state provincial offices will remain largely unchanged. The division of labour between the state provincial offices and the advisory board on rescue services and their respective tasks have not been defined clearly enough in new legislation, however.

In the opinion of the state provincial offices, their role as regional actors and coordinators in emergency conditions and special situations will become more prominent in the future. District preparers expected the state provincial offices to play a minor role in rescue services after the reform. There is apparently a need to clarify the division of labour between rescue districts and the state provincial offices and to specify result objectives in the state provincial offices' result agreements and the monitoring of their achievement.

Municipalities' costs will depend mainly on the selected service level and the division of costs within districts, so the achievement of financial objectives and effectiveness cannot be estimated accurately at this stage. Arranging joint rescue services involves costs which individual municipalities have not had to bear up to now. The reform is expected to solve many problems which would be difficult economically for individual municipalities to address, however.