

# Conclusions and recommendations of the National Audit Office

## Organisation of service channels and support for the use of digital services

The purpose of the audit was to provide information on how public authorities organise access to their services for customers who are unable to use digital services or who need support for using digital services. The audit topic was based particularly on the objective set out in the Government Programme of Prime Minister Orpo according to which Finland will gradually shift to making digital services the primary channel for accessing the services of public authorities.

## Digital services are highlighted in the development of service channels

Based on the audit findings, the role of digital services in all service use varies for the time being considerably between different authorities. In wellbeing services counties, in particular, the share of digital services is still relatively small, whereas some central government actors provide almost all their services over a digital channel. Therefore, the objective of the Government Programme related to digital services as the primary channel means changes of very different degrees for different organisations. Based on the audit, more efforts are put in the development of digital services than in other service channels.

In the first phase, the authorities have started to implement the Government Programme's objective to prioritise digital services by reducing the amount of paper mail they send as much as possible and by switching over to digital communication channels in their official communications. This approach is justified particularly by the savings that can be achieved. However, the service provision of public authorities includes much more than just messages sent by them on paper or electronically. Therefore, the development of service channels should also be examined more extensively, especially from the perspective of service needs. In the development, it should be assessed which service channels are the most efficient in which context and plan services on that basis.

A special observation made in the audit was that the availability and quality of digital services are essential aspects in the assessment of the provision and equity of services within social and health services. The Ministry of Social Affairs and Health assesses regularly whether the services are provided in an equitable manner. The National Audit Office is of the opinion that in these assessments, attention should be paid to the availability and accessibility of services in different channels.

## Alternatives to digital services will also be needed in the future

It was found in the audit that there will clearly also be a need for non-digital service channels in the future. Although an increasing proportion of services can be digitalised, not everyone will ever use digital services. There can be many different reasons for this, and the ability to use digital services can vary in different situations. Therefore, it is important to also ensure the availability and development of alternative service channels.

There are sometimes shortcomings in the accessibility of service channels, even though the accessibility of web services, for example, is regulated on the EU level. The assessment and development of accessibility have largely been based on sensory disabilities and have hardly considered any other possible barriers to the use of digital services. For example, the requirement for clear language would be important for many special groups. In addition, different user groups should be involved in the development of services and at least in their testing. The audit also highlighted the need for an identification tool that is independent of banking codes. Safe and easy-to-use identification tools should be equally available to everyone who is expected and required to use the authorities' digital services.

The central government's services requiring a visit will be gathered at joint service points in the ongoing service and premises network reform project. The project supports the promotion of digital services by ensuring that customers can also interact with public authorities at customer service points if it is not possible for them to use other service channels. The first service points implemented have faced practical challenges due to different authorities' different opening hours, for example. Lessons should be learned from the experiences gained to ensure that the concept of joint service points operates as well as possible for both customers and the staff. Particularly the role of joint service advisers has been found to be important in the experiments carried out at the service points.

## Digital support should be part of the service development

Digital support is support related to both the service use and the devices needed in it. Close friends and relatives are the largest group providing digital support, and organisations also play an important role in providing it. Public authorities are obliged to provide support for the use of their own services, and digital support is often part of other service counselling. However, providing general advice on the use of devices is not part of the tasks of public authorities.

Regional digital support networks have been built and developed since 2016 in projects coordinated by the Ministry of Finance. However, following the completion of separate projects and the support included in them, the regional networks have mostly faded away, and no one is currently responsible for the regional coordination of digital support. According to the audit findings, regional networks would nevertheless be important for the development of equitable provision and accessibility of digital support. The National Audit Office is of the opinion that the regional coordination responsibility for digital support should be linked to the ongoing service and premises network reform. While it is not

appropriate that the public authorities provide all digital support themselves, they should nevertheless ensure that digital support of different kinds is available when necessary. Clarifying the regional coordination responsibility for digital support would also enable the role of the Digital and Population Data Services Agency as the national coordinator of digital support to be targeted more efficiently than before.

Overall, the National Audit Office is of the opinion that support related to digital services and their use should be considered when the services are developed and not only afterwards when the service models have already been fixed. Well organised and easily available digital support can help to achieve the objective related to digital services as the primary service channel and enable as many people as possible to use digital services.

## Recommendations of the National Audit Office

1. The Ministry of Finance defines the regional coordination responsibility for digital support in connection with the ongoing service and premises network reform.
2. The Ministry of Finance develops the concept of joint customer service and shared premises based on the experiences gained from the sites implemented.
3. The Ministry of Finance promotes the availability of identification tools that are independent of banking codes for all customer groups of the digital services of public authorities.
4. When promoting the priority of digital services, the Ministry of Finance pays attention to ensuring that the support required by digital services is taken into consideration in the development of the services of public authorities.
5. The Ministry of Social Affairs and Health pays attention to the availability and accessibility of health and social services in different service channels when assessing whether the services have been implemented in an equitable manner.