Youth camps and financial assistance to these camps

Executive summary

According to the calculations of the Ministry of Education and Research, about 30,000 young people participate annually in hobby or leisure camps. The government has issued licences to 30 camp operators (companies, non-profit associations and government authorities). Camps subject to a licence, i.e. youth camps, host approximately two thirds of young people visiting camps, mostly in the summer season. The remaining third participate in the numerous so-called "project camps", which are usually short-term and hobby-related and take place all year round. No licence from the government is required for organising project camps.

The purpose of organising camps is not only to provide pleasant activities for free time – the camp should have a certain educational effect on the youth. It is only natural to expect that the camps are safe for young people and that they are well fed there. Most camps are organised well, problems have occurred in project camps, since the organisation of their activities is not regulated.

The purpose of the audit conducted in accordance with the SAO working plan for 2003 was to find out whether the issues related to the organisation of youth camps and the provision of financial assistance (almost 8 million kroons annually) to the camps' activities are adequately and transparently regulated and whether the applicable rules are observed. The attainment of the objectives pursued by organising the camps and the conformity of the current system to the needs were not examined.

The audit was carried out from June to September 2003. The audited entities were the Ministry of Education and Research (hereinafter referred to as "the MER") and the Estonian Youth Work Centre (hereinafter "the EYWC"), which is an agency administered by the MER. The audit covered their activities in 2002 and part of those in 2003.

Main findings

- The procedures for the issue of licences for organising youth camps have a sufficient legal framework, but the requirements set by the government are partly formal – these cannot be complied with (e.g. the requirement to provide particulars on all educators, who will be working in the camp in the three subsequent years) or the fact that the camp met the requirements at the time of applying for the licence provides no assurance that it continues to meet these in the future.

- The MER has respected the legal requirements in issuing the licences. Uniform requirements are set to all licence applicants, but all applicants have not been awarded equal treatment with regard to assessing conformity to these.

- The availability and the effective functioning of a control system applicable to camps are crucial for ensuring the conformity of camps. The Health Protection Inspectorate and the Rescue Board do have specific inspection guidelines, whereas the MER doesn't. The officials of the MER have not inspected the camps' activities; the members of the advisory body set up by the Minister – the Camp Managers Panel – have visited the camps, but these visits cannot be seen as monitoring measures.

- The government has set not requirements to the so-called "project camps". The Youth Work Act provides that these are subject to the approval of the commune or city government (which cannot, in principle, refuse approval). No penalties can be imposed on those who organise a camp without such approval.

- The government supports the organisation of camps financially, making payments to the camp operator in accordance with the number of days the young people have spent at the camp. The funds come from gambling tax. Although the rules of procedure adopted by the Government provide that the Gambling Tax Council set up by the Parliament should make a separate decision on each aid application, it has determined only the total amount of the aid. Payments have been made on the basis of the distribution plan prepared by the project manager working at the EYWC administered by the MER and without duly formulated supporting documents. Neither the MER nor the Ministry of Finance has checked the management of payments. The auditors did not confirm the suspicion that payments have been made to persons, who have not entered into a

corresponding contract with the MER.

- Since the camps have not been required to keep account, on a daily basis, of the young people staying at the camp and to preserve the relevant documents, it is not possible to establish afterwards whether the camp operators reports (and the calculations based thereon concerning aid supplements or refunds) give a true picture of the situation. As the contracts with camp operators do not provide for supplementary payments for the number of camp days exceeding the limit fixed in the contract, the supplementary payments have been made unduly. The reports show that in certain periods some camps have hosted more young people than the Health Protection Inspectorate has allowed.

- The substantive aspects of managing the organisation of camps has been the responsibility of the EYWC, which has co-ordinated its activities with the Camp Managers Panel. The MER has formalised the decisions of these bodies. In principle, this division of functions can be considered appropriate, but it has not been sufficiently regulated with the Minister's regulatory documents and the statutes of the EYWC.

Main proposals to the Minister of Education and Research

- To consider the need to amend the Gambling Tax Act so that it would specify the amount of that part of gambling tax accrued to the state budget which will be used to support youth camps and that the MER would be subjected to the obligation and granted the right to decide on all aid applications submitted by all youth camp operators either in accordance with a procedure to be laid down in a law or in a regulatory document of the Government (like it is currently provided laid down for the financing of investments under regional programs). As an alternative, to consider the possibility of planning the aid in the state budget under the expenditure of the Ministry's government area as a separate amount, which would be used pursuant to specific rules to be laid down (separately from the Gambling Tax Act and its implementing rules).

- To consider waiving the requirement that the licence applicant must furnish information about all educators, who will be working in the camp, and limiting the requirement to information on the camp manager (and the existence of an agreement with him/her) only. To consider waiving the requirement of possessing certificates issued by the Rescue Board and the Health Protection Inspectorate or to stipulate that a licence will be granted only to those, who provide documents in support of the application showing that the camp's facilities and territory meet all the requirements in full at the time of applying for the licence.

- To provide, in the contracts to be made with the beneficiaries, for the requirement to keep, on a daily basis and in accordance with the form and procedure to be established by the government, exact account of persons staying at the camp and to lay down the corresponding accounting form and procedure as an annex to the contract made with the beneficiary, and to establish the procedure for verifying compliance therewith.

- To take measures, which ensure that aid amounts are paid on the basis of distribution plans (and their modifications), which are in due form and which have been verified and approved by competent persons.

- If the MER considers it appropriate to continue the current practice – the EYWC manages all the activities related to youth camps in accordance with the guidelines of the MER – to set out this task in the statutes of the EYWC in a much more specific way and to make the necessary amendments to the procedure for issuing youth camp licences.

- To establish the procedure for the monitoring of the activities of youth camps by the MER.

- To consider the possibility of laying down in a law the penalties to be imposed on persons organising project camps for young people without the approval of an executive body. If this is not considered necessary, to make a motion for amending the Youth Work Act in order to repeal the approval requirement – the law should not contain a provision, if compliance therewith cannot be required.

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The Minister of Education and Research notified of his agreement with most of the proposals made and of the measures envisaged for implementing these. The responses from him and the Director of the EYWC

have been reproduced in full at the end of this report.

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