Use of welfare information collected by local governments

Upon the organisation of welfare, does the local government collect from the people and the state from local governments the information that is actually needed? Is the burden involved justified?

Summary of the audit results

What did we audit?

The National Audit Office audited the collection, management and use of information (welfare information in the audit) necessary for organising social services and benefits in local governments. The focus was on the information collected from people and the burden involved. It was also analysed how the information collected by local governments is used by the state and what kind of burden it brings about for local governments. The audit was conducted pursuant to the requirements established for information governance by the Government of the Republic Regulation. The audited include the city of Tallinn, the city of Pärnu, and Jõhvi Rural Municipality as well as the Ministry of Social Affairs. Other local governments were also interviewed.

The purpose of the audit was not to assess whether people have received assistance when turning to the local government. The audit also did not address issues associated with keeping data secure. These have been addressed is the previous audits by the National Audit Office.

Why is this important to taxpayers?

A lot of information is collected in the field of welfare. This is understandable, because situations are usually complex and finding the best solution to help people presumes that several circumstances are considered. At the same time, it entails considerable burden, which is why it is important to make sure that no unnecessary information or information that is already available is collected. Well-organised information governance also helps to cut down on bureaucracy, improve the quality and cost-efficiency of services, develop new services or, in other words, do what is called smart governance in the Estonian Information Society Development Plan.

What did we find and conclude from the results of the audit?

The collection of information in the course of social work by local governments, management and use of this information is presently not well-organised. This results both in excessive burden as well as a situation where the information is not being used in the best way. There are omissions at the level of the local government and the state that exacerbate the problems. Information whose relevance is questionable is also being collected. The current state of affairs also exemplifies how the unresolved issues of information systems are starting to significantly slow down the development of the field as they keep building up.

Main observations with regard to the audited local governments:

- Information that the local government could obtain from the state or from their own databases or information that has no substantive meaning in terms of proceedings is being collected from people. Such data fields constituted about 20% of the application forms used in the audited local governments. The reason why people were asked to provide information already available in state databases was mostly justified with the shortcomings and errors of the Social Services and Benefits Registry (STAR). The Ministry of Social Affairs and the Social

Insurance Board must, of course, put STAR into order, but there are other ways to obtain information from state databases that could be used until then. Turning to people is justified when there are no other reasonable means to collect data or these have been exhausted. The practice of local governments, however, was varied, and there were also examples where the result was achieved by burdening people to a lesser degree.

- Information collected from people is often duplicated, and the same information is often stored in several locations simultaneously (in paper files, information systems). Information with different content is often scattered across different locations. The sense in duplication is questionable in and of itself. Scattered information is difficult to use.

- There are many different application forms and finding the right one is extra burden on people. For example, Pärnu had 20 and Jõhvi 18 forms. There are few universal application forms that could be used to express one's needs for several actions simultaneously.

- There are also few e-forms, and services and benefits as an e-service are not well-developed on the whole. Websites often only provide information about the service but lack application forms, not to mention an option to fill in the form electronically (for about 50% of the actions). However, it is positive that there are fully automated e-services available in Tallinn and Pärnu (e.g. universal benefits in Tallinn).

- The collected information is not being used to identify risks, assess the impact of actions and to adjust them. The value of the information is thus not fully realised. This is partly due to the paper-based nature of information management, but also due to the poor quality of information entered in the information systems and the poor functionality of the systems.

- Activities aimed at creating an overview of the information collected, its sources and locations of storing thereof as required by Government of the Republic Regulation on information governance are incomplete. All the audited had done something about it, but only Jõhvi Rural Municipality had done it comprehensively.

Main observations with regard to the Ministry of Social Affairs:

- The state-developed information system STAR has not become a tool that supports the local government in the way that was hoped. The system is basically necessary, but the frequent technical errors, issues with the logic of operation, etc. of STAR have resulted in unreasonable additional work. The Ministry of Social Affairs has not been able to decisively resolve these in ten years. The issues arising from STAR, in turn, exacerbate several other aforementioned issues (e.g. burden on people in submitting data, duplication of information). Since the delivery of STAR to the Social Insurance Board, things have started to move in the right direction, but it is still unclear whether and when the issues raised by the local governments can be resolved.

- Providing information to the state is a considerable burden for local governments. Data must be regularly entered into STAR, and statistical reports must be submitted once a year in S-Web. S-Web reports (11 different reports, 793 data fields) are particularly cumbersome and collecting the required data may take days. Local governments themselves often don't use the data in this form.

- The burden of S-Web reporting is not reasonably balanced with the actual necessity of data. The examples of data usage provided by the Ministry of Social Affairs are not convincing in showing that all the data in its current level of detail is consistently needed to achieve the objective established for reporting. The problem is the level of detail of data. Usage is often one-off or loosely related to the objective of collection (articles in the press, preparation of visits by the Ministry, etc.).

What do we recommend as a result of the audit?

The National Audit Office advised the audited local governments to discontinue requesting information on application forms that is not strictly necessary for proceedings or that they could obtain themselves. They were also advised to introduce more universal forms and to reduce the total number of forms. Local governments should also establish rules in their internal procedure that documents entered into databases are not duplicated on paper for longer than necessary for making a decision in a particular proceeding.

The National Audit Office recommended the Ministry of Social Affairs to reduce the volume of S-Web reporting in cooperation with the Association of Cities and Municipalities. Especially with regard to data that is not regularly needed. It was also recommended to introduce report forms pre-filled with STAR data, which would also encourage entering more data into STAR. A proposal was made to the Social Insurance Board to draw up an overview of the issues faced by local governments upon using STAR together with information on whether and when these issues could be resolved and to include it to STAR development plans. This provides assurance that important issues are being addressed, but it also helps to prevent the development of duplicating functionalities in the IT systems of local governments.

The audited local governments promised to generally follow the recommendations of the National Audit Office, as did the Ministry of Social Affairs. The Ministry of Social Affairs expressed their preparedness to make S-Web reporting as one of the topics of discussion at the regular meetings with the Association of Cities and Municipalities in 2020, but it also thought that the reduction of the volume of reporting should go hand in hand with improving the data quality in STAR. At the same time, the Ministry did not consider it expedient to spend money right now on activities which would result in the ability to pre-fill S-Web reports with STAR data. They believed that funds should be channelled into the so-called basic development of STAR.