

# Long-term view of the prison system

*Has the Ministry of Justice taken the decrease in the number of inmates and the increasing importance of rehabilitative activities into account when organising the prison system?*



# Long-term view of the prison system

*Has the Ministry of Justice taken the decrease in the number of inmates and the increasing importance of rehabilitative activities into account when organising the prison system?*

## Summary of audit results

**State Real Estate Ltd. (SRE)** is a state company whose task is to efficiently develop and manage state real estate. SRE is a competence centre for real estate, which advises areas of government on more cost-effective use of real estate. Prison buildings are owned by SRE and leased to prisons.

Source: Principles of State Real Estate Policy 2021. Ministry of Finance

**Rehabilitation** — social rehabilitation of inmates in order to help them to maintain and establish meaningful and positive social connections outside the prison, improve their social coping skills and influence them to behave in a law-abiding manner. In a broader sense, the purpose of all imprisonment is the rehabilitation of an inmate.

Source: [description of the concept of rehabilitation on the website of the Prison Service](#)

## Main observations

### For your information

In 2022, **75.1 million** euros were spent on the detention of persons.

The Ministry of Justice has not addressed the issue of improving and adapting the management of the prison infrastructure to meet the changing needs, although the number of inmates has consistently decreased and, according to criminal policy trends, will continue to decrease. According to the calculations by the National Audit Office, the costs will more than double per one inmate in the next decade if the number of inmates continues to decrease at the rate predicted by the Ministry of Justice, unless the management of the prison infrastructure is improved.

**Although the state has placed an expectation on the State Real Estate Ltd. to advise the areas of government on optimal management of real estate, the role of State Real Estate Ltd. has remained modest in improving the management of the prison infrastructure.**

The use of large prison complexes could limit the opportunities of inmates to effectively **rehabilitate** in prison. The existing prisons are dependent on the guard staff, and even now the inability to fill guard shifts is hampering the provision of activities to inmates.

**The inmate employment models used in prisons are adapted to large prisons and long imprisonment and no longer meet the needs of today's labour market, which nowadays requires more diverse skills from an employee.**

**Managing the prison infrastructure will become more and more expensive per inmate in the coming years.** In twenty years, Estonian prison system has changed from ten to three prisons that meet today's imprisonment conditions, but if the number of inmates continues to decrease, these will be occupied by one-third in a decade.

The ministry has set the goal of placing inmates in single cells but has not analysed its effect on the costs of imprisonment. According to the calculations by the National Audit Office, if the decreasing trend in the number of inmates continues and three prisons continue to be managed, the costs will increase from the current 2,800 euros to 6,600 euros per inmate per month by 2032.

The existing infrastructure, which includes both buildings that are already 20 years old as well as 5-year-old buildings, is managed in the same way (repairs and investments are planned), but due to the different cost level and the rate of decrease in the number of inmates, this may soon no longer be optimal. The ministry does not have the competence to assess

the efficiency of using the infrastructure, and State Real Estate Ltd. has not been given the necessary input to assess it either.

**The Ministry of Justice should start assessing the provision of rehabilitative activities offered in prisons and its outcome based on data.** The ministry only has a current overview of the activities offered to inmates in prisons but lacks knowledge of the need and effectiveness of the provision of activities, including no appropriate data have been collected to carry out more diverse and comprehensive analyses.

Creating a comprehensive overview of the activities offered to inmates and participation in them is therefore complicated, the impact of vacant positions on rehabilitation has not been analysed, and it has not been determined how many and which staff is required to improve rehabilitation in prisons. Development projects enabling data-based assessment are still in their early stages.

## Main recommendations

### **Recommendations of the National Audit Office to the Minister of Justice:**

- Draw up a long-term plan for the management of the prison infrastructure, taking into account the decrease in the number of inmates and the shortening of the sentence as well as the most optimal use of rehabilitative activities and staff necessary for the operation of prisons as possible.
- If the number of inmates continues to decrease, consider closing one prison complex or under-occupied units.
- Organise the database related to the detention of persons to be able to assess the provision and effectiveness of rehabilitative activities in prisons.

**Response of the Minister of Justice:** The Ministry of Justice finds the recommendation of the National Audit Office to analyse different forms and conditions of imprisonment and to make changes in the management of prisons accordingly to be appropriate.

The ministry emphasises that it regularly communicates with State Real Estate Ltd. on the topic of cost-effective use of the prison infrastructure, and the current high cost of managing prison properties is due to the company's lease model, including the terms and conditions of contracts entered into. The ministry points out that, for example, in the case of Tartu prison, the cost of terminating the contract is 3.28 million euros plus value added tax. The ministry has set the goal of involving probation officers more in preparing inmates for release and increasing the role of prison officers in rehabilitation. The ministry has also commenced with developments that allow automating data processing and both simplifying and diversifying the overview of the provision of rehabilitative activities.

**Recommendation of the National Audit Office to the chairman of the management board of State Real Estate Ltd.:** Organise the management models of prisons in coordination with the Ministry of Justice and improve the use of the prison infrastructure; among other things, support the ministry in calculating the profitability of adapting and possibly closing prison buildings.

**Response of the chairman of the management board of State Real Estate Ltd.:** State Real Estate Ltd. recognises that closer cooperation with the ministry is needed in planning the future needs of the prison infrastructure and improving the management models, including it is necessary to take into account the ministry's long-term strategy for optimising prisons. This cooperation between the ministry and the company has already commenced in 2023.