

# Conclusions and recommendations of the National Audit Office

## Customer advice and telephone services provided by public administration

Provision of advice is one of the fundamental principles of good administration laid down in the Administrative Procedure Act, which also include the service principle, successful performance of service tasks by the authorities and cooperation between the authorities. The audit covered the customer advice and telephone services provided by mass administrative authorities. The focus was on the preparation of the establishment of the Public Service Info, which was launched at the end of 2013, and its early years. In the audit, the issues were examined from the perspective of the systematic nature, functioning and economic efficiency of the customer advice and telephone services.

According to the audit findings, the most important authorities provide their customer advice and telephone services in a manner that supports their service production process and that also takes into account cost-effectiveness considerations.

### Authorities can only develop their customer advice and telephone services if there is a common strategic objective

It was noted in the audit that the most important central government authorities providing customer advice and telephone services have developed their forms of service independently on the basis of their own needs. Some of the authorities are newcomers to the field of customer service but there are also authorities that started developing their services already in the 1990s. However, there has been no joint development strategy. Moreover, in its recent reference architecture work, the Ministry of Finance has not taken into account all aspects of the multi-channel nature of customer services. Instead, the focus has been on the electronic service channel, for which telephone services provide essential support. It was noted in the audit that the authorities have not worked together in order to ensure that their customer advice and telephone services would complement each other and allow efficient division of labour. The increase in the number of contacts to the Public Service Info is not connected with the effectiveness of the services provided by the authorities. On the contrary, a contact often means that the authority responsible for the service itself has failed to provide adequate customer service.

### Public Service Info has not achieved its original objective

The Public Service Info was established in Kouvola at the end of 2013. The main purpose was to reduce the number of the non-urgent requests for advice and telephone counselling received by the Emergency Response Centre Administration. At the time of the establishment of the Public Service Info, such calls totalled about one million each year. According to the audit findings, the Public Service Info has failed to achieve this objective. The aim was to reduce the number of non-urgent calls received by the Emergency Response Centre Administration by between 200,000 and 350,000 each year. The Public Service Info received about 40,000 contacts in 2015. Thus, this does not fully account

for the reduction in the total number of non-urgent calls received by the Emergency Response Centre Administration. The Emergency Response Centre Administration received a total of 638,000 non-urgent calls in 2015. The number of contacts to the Public Service Info increased during 2015 but this was mainly due to the problems affecting the appointments service of the police.

In the Emergency Response Centre Administration, each official on duty handled about 7,700 emergency assistance requests in 2014. The same year, each customer service official of the Finnish Tax Administration handled about 7,000 calls, while in the Public Service Info each customer service advisor handled about 1,100 customer service tasks. The unit costs/service performance in the Public Service Info are also many times higher than in central and local government organisations providing similar customer advice and telephone services. In the Public Service Info, unit costs/performance came to about 25 euros in 2015. The figure for the Emergency Response Centre Administration was about 16 euros and for the Finnish Tax Administration slightly less than seven euros.

#### Preparation of the Public Service Info was not on an adequate basis

The preparation of the establishment of the Public Service Info was mainly based on the final report of the Citizen Advice Service Project initiated by the Ministry of Finance. The Public Service Info currently operates in the police and court building in Kouvola. The Citizen Advice Service Project was launched without a separate location review. One of the aims of the project was to use the vacant premises of the emergency response centre in Kouvola as a location of the citizen advice service. When preparing the project, the Ministry of Finance failed to ascertain whether any part of the premises, which were built in accordance with strict safety requirements, would meet the needs of the Public Service Info.

According to the audit findings, there were no grounds or reasons for transferring the tasks managed by the Public Service Info from the Emergency Response Centre Administration to the State Treasury. Originally, the Emergency Response Centre Administration had planned a Kouvola-based service for non-urgent telephone calls and transferring the service to the State Treasury meant that a new function had to be established.

#### Managing customer advice services of the police is not the responsibility of the Public Service Info

During 2015, the Public Service Info was marketed in different media and the number of contacts to the service has increased. In relation to the personnel resources, the number of contacts remains low and the existence of the service cannot be justified with such factors as a substantial increase in the use of the police appointments system. The telephone numbers of the police customer service do not appear on the appointments pages of the police online services, which means that the Public Service Info is receiving unnecessary calls. The police also have personnel resources in its contact centre that are used for non-police duties, such as the reception of change of address notifications. According to the audit findings, management of police appointments services cannot be considered permanent part of the general advisory tasks of the Public Service Info. Neither was it originally assigned to the Public Service Info.

### Cost-benefit calculations concerning the Public Service Info are inadequate

The costs arising from the continuous service provided as part of the Public Service Info total about 1.1 million euros each year. According to the audit findings, the cost-benefit calculations pertaining to the Public Service Info are inadequate because the costs incurred by the Emergency Response Centre Administration as a result of the establishment of the Public Service Info have not been fully considered. The Emergency Response Centre Administration had to pay Senate Properties a lump sum of almost 2.3 million euros for the premises in Kouvola that it had to vacate before the expiry of the lease agreement. If the expenses incurred by the Emergency Response Centre Administration as a result of the vacation of the premises had been considered in the calculations, the results of the cost-benefit analysis would have been significantly different.

### Recommendations of the National Audit Office

1. The ministries responsible for their administrative branches should comprehensively review the division of labour between customer advice and telephone services and establish a strategic objective (including architecture descriptions) for cost-effective management of the telephone services.
2. When reviewing the division of labour between customer advice and telephone services, the ministries should pay particular attention to ensuring that the cost-benefit calculations are on a realistic basis. When service improvements are introduced, all essential costs affecting the process should be taken into account.
3. The Ministry of Finance should determine whether there is a need for a joint customer service centre or an actor similar to the Public Service Info and how it should be organised.