

Child welfare

One objective in the National Development Programme for Social Welfare and Health Care (Kaste) for the period 2008-2011 was a reduction in the number of children placed in care outside the home in relation to the age group. According to child welfare statistics, the number of clients nevertheless increased in both open care and foster care. In 2010 there were nearly 22 per cent more children under the age of 18 in open care and 6 per cent more placed in care outside the home than in 2007. In 2010 about 17,100 children and young people were placed in care outside the home and nearly 78,600 children and young people were within the sphere of open care measures.

Owing to statistics problems regarding the costs of child welfare services, it is not possible to present an estimate of total costs at the national level. In 2010 the operating costs of local authorities' institutional and family care came to 619 million euros and the costs of open care were estimated to be at least 236 million euros. Nor is it possible to present an exact figure concerning the size of the financial resources focused on child welfare by the state, since funds are channelled to child welfare mainly through the government grant system as well as projects aimed at developing services for children, young people and families. In 2011 about 8 billion euros in government grants were provided to finance local authorities' health and social services within the sphere of the government grant system, and a total of 33.29 million euros has been allocated to different projects aimed at developing services for children, young people and families within the Kaste programme in 2008-2013.

The objective of the audit was to determine whether the best interests of the child are achieved in child welfare services. The concept of the best interests of the child is quite open to interpretation and cannot be defined exhaustively. In the audit the best interests of the child were considered to be achieved if child welfare clients and their families received services according to their needs, client plans

and local authorities' child welfare plans were prepared according to legislation, child welfare resources and control were adequate, and the provisions in the Child Welfare Act were given priority in applying legislation concerning social assistance and client fees.

The audit examined whether children and young people receive the services and support measures they need in open, foster or follow-up care and how the family of a child or young person is supported in different stages of the child welfare process. The audit also surveyed whether client plans and local authorities' child welfare plans complied with legislation. In addition the audit examined whether supervision of the Child Welfare Act is adequate and whether other steering means have promoted the objectives of the Child Welfare Act. The relation between the Child Welfare Act and other legislation was also studied.

The main audit data consisted of interviews with child welfare workers in ten municipalities, imaginary child welfare cases, a questionnaire sent to the regional state administrative agencies and data from the child welfare register. The audit did not examine the achievement of the best interests of the child in preventive child welfare or the private sector.

The audit showed that the best interests of the child are achieved in child welfare to a varying degree according to the point of view and where a child or young person lives. In open and follow-up care children and young people receive services that meet their needs fairly well. Young people in follow-up care are supported financially according to need, but personal support and guidance in achieving independence are not offered sufficiently.

In foster care, on the other hand, objectives concerning placement according to needs are not always met. There are major shortcomings particularly in the availability of psychiatric care. The audit indicated that children who primarily need health care services are sometimes directed to foster care. In the opinion of the National Audit Office, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health should ensure smooth cooperation between child welfare and mental health services and prevent children's placement in child welfare institutions on improper grounds.

According to the audit, families are not supported adequately in any stage of child welfare. In open care support is meant to be provided to the whole family, but child welfare workers' lack of time

prevents comprehensive support for the family. In foster care parents are often left to their own devices, although according to law a separate client plan should be prepared for them. In foster care support for parents is most often left up to child welfare institutions, which is not the intention of the Child Welfare Act. The situation is also problematic because providers of purchased services do not necessarily pay attention to the reunification obligation. In follow-up care support for parents is minimal. The family is not considered important for a young person who is becoming independent. In follow-up care parents receive attention only if a young person so desires.

The new Child Welfare Act emphasises family reunification. In the opinion of the National Audit Office, one precondition for reunification is that work with parents is intensified and that reunification objectives are included in parents' client plans. Through its steering the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health should ensure that child welfare workers are aware of their responsibility in arranging contacts between family members. Client plans should also be prepared according to legislation, regardless of time constraints.

The audit found shortcomings in the supervision of foster care and particularly agreement-based foster families. All local authorities do not appear to be sufficiently aware of their responsibility for supervision. This especially concerns municipalities in which foster care units are located. Local authorities' insufficient supervision is also linked to resources as well as the amount of competent workers and worker turnover. The National Audit Office considers that the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health should pay special attention to ensuring that local authorities carry out their supervision tasks in both institutional and family care.

The supervision conducted by local authorities is of primary importance, since on the basis of the audit the regional state administrative agencies do not have the resources for thorough supervision. Visits are seldom made for this purpose, there are serious shortcomings in visits, and some visits are limited to the superficial inspection of facilities and other basic matters.

The Act on the Supervision of Private Social Services calls for supervision to be improved with the help of in-house control plans. On the basis of the audit, however, shortcomings in supervision are so serious that it is still necessary to conduct outside supervision

and to ensure that the regional state administrative agencies have the resources required for proper supervision.

The audit found that the implementation and development of follow-up care have remained in the shadow of open and foster care. Some foster care places do not prepare young people sufficiently and early enough for the shift to follow-up care. Furthermore child welfare's possibilities to intervene if a young person who has come of age lacks motivation for follow-up care and is in danger of marginalisation are practically nonexistent.

One key element of quality child welfare work is adequate resources. The audit indicated that the number of social workers in open care is too small in relation to the number of clients. According to the audit, tight personnel resources for open care are due not only to a lack of additional posts for social workers but also to high turnover, unqualified workers and a shortage of workers. Tight social worker resources do not create proper conditions for effective, high-standard and cost-effective child welfare work. As a result, tight social worker resources in relation to the work load have in practice only strengthened the role of child welfare as a corrector of problems. According to the audit, providing precise personnel recommendations without taking into consideration services and operating practices is not sensible. In the opinion of the National Audit Office the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health should consider how tasks that have been assigned to social workers could be divided among social instructors or persons with a bachelor of social services degree, for example.

The audit showed that calculating the costs of child welfare is problematic. National information on the costs of child welfare are available only with regard to foster care, and even in this case it is quite difficult to draw conclusions. Getting a picture of the total costs of child welfare is also made more difficult by the fact that within social welfare costs are shifted from one sector to another and according to the audit the payer is usually child welfare.

Although it is difficult to calculate the costs of child welfare, they need to be clarified since gaps in cost information hamper decision-making and steering. The National Audit Office recommends that the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health study the formation of the costs of open, foster and follow-up care at the national level.

The audit also showed that in child welfare the Act on Social Assistance is interpreted more loosely than in adult social work. An answer to the question of whether the basic allowance is reduced more rarely than in adult social work cannot be given, however. This is because research data on reductions in the basic allowance or its frequency in adult social work are not available. The National Audit Office recommends that the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health study how frequently the basic allowance is reduced in social work and whether this has helped prevent young people's marginalisation.

In addition the audit showed that collecting client fees in foster care is rare. Numerous problems are linked to the collection of client fees and particularly fees collected from parents, however. The National Audit Office supports the proposal of the Committee for Reforming Social Protection that provisions concerning social and health care charges should be collected in a single Act. Quality legislation is a precondition for treating clients equitably in child welfare.