Conclusions and recommendations

Using digitalisation in the public sector processes required for starting business activities

The aim of the audit was to determine how successfully digitalisation has been used in the public sector processes required for starting business activities and in the development of these processes. The audit was performed as a Nordic parallel audit, where the other participants were the national audit institutions from Sweden, Norway, Iceland and Faroe islands. This national audit report contains the Finnish part of the parallel audit. A joint report that will cover the key findings of the participating countries will be published separately.

The audit had the following target groups: the central government agencies that are directly involved in the starting of a business or the procedures supporting it, and the organisations responsible for the steering of digitalisation in central government and for centralised support services for digitalisation. During the audit the information was mostly collected from the administrative sectors of the Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment.

Customer-orientation is partially realised in the services involving the starting of business activities

Support and advice for the start of business activities is available online and as personal service. However, the information available online is contained in a large number of different sources and thus it is not always easy get an overall picture of what is required of an individual starting a business. The suomi.fi/company website serves as the single contact point for individuals planning to start a business but, at the moment, it does not function effectively as a provider of one-stop-shop services. The shared ownership of the service could also be clarified.

The service processes reviewed as examples in the audit were reasonably transparent from the customer's perspective. The customers are at least told how long the processing times might be in different processes.

Not all government agencies give the same priority to the customer perspective when developing their services. Customers may be involved in the development processes by means of service design, while at the same time occasional collection of feedback may be the only way of analysing customer experience. As a whole, the customer perspective is recognised as an important starting point in the development of services but at practical level, more concrete action is required.

Level of digitalisation in government agencies varies

In the processes reviewed in the audit, a great deal of progress has been achieved in digitalisation when the material to be processed is fully electronic and when the focus in the development of processes is on the automation of work stages. At the same time, however, in some of the processes, information is still recorded manually and some of the information is still in paper form. From the perspective of the government agencies involved, the absence of interoperable information systems occasionally makes efficient operations difficult.

Many government agencies have plans to develop their processes and digitalisation plays a key role in them. The target levels and the implementation of the plans depend on the starting point and the resources available for the purpose. According to the audit findings, there is room for efficiency improvements in government agencies and these improvements can be supported through digitalisation.

Making digital services obligatory requires better cooperation

Under the legislation that is coming into effect, government agencies will be obliged to provide digital services. Correspondingly, there are also plans to oblige business operators to use digital service channels. In the implementation of these plans, it should be ensured that the public administration services provided to companies are sufficiently advanced so that the necessary prerequisites for the obligation exist. For example, the shared suomi.fi services have been primarily developed from citizens' perspective and there has been less emphasis on services intended for companies.

In the activities reviewed in the audit, government agencies are carrying out development cooperation with natural partners. The general view is, however, that this is not without problems and that joint projects may involve funding-related challenges. Ensuring sufficient investment funding for projects that are regarded sensible either for the agencies or their customers is one way to enhance the prerequisites for development. Cooperation also allows the shift of the customer perspective from a silo-based approach to a more seamless customer experience.

Joint prerequisites for digitalisation should be developed on the basis of the agencies' needs

According to the survey carried out as part of the audit, government agencies are of the view that they are fairly well placed to develop digitalisation. At the same time, however, they did not consider the digitalisation principles, intended to serve as rules guiding the development of digitalisation, particularly important. The shared support services for digitalisation (suomi.fi services) are considered important but the use of the services may have been limited by the fact that based on their own view, government agencies have not been able to play a key role in their development. In the development of shared services, other government agencies should be seen as a key customer or stakeholder group and the shared solutions should provide answers to their needs and problems.

A large number of projects and measures for promoting digitalisation are underway in central government but the coordination between them is fairly weak. Development support as well as steering and funding models could be more closely linked with each other so that the work will produce the desired results and there are no unnecessary overlaps in carrying out the development.

Recommendations of the National Audit Office

1. The Ministry of Finance and the Population Register Centre should create and maintain operating models helping to develop public administration digital services so that the emphasis is on customer perspective.

2. The Ministry of Finance and other ministries should strengthen the prerequisites for inter-administrative joint development and encourage government agencies to work together to enhance the smoothness of services from the customer's perspective.

3. The Ministry of Finance and other ministries should jointly create operating models that will ensure that digitalisation in public administration is steered, supported and funded in a coordinated manner.

4. The Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment and the Population Register Centre should ensure that the functionality of the single contact point provided to companies (suomi.fi/company) meets the needs of new entrepreneurs.

5. The Population Register Centre should consider the needs and problems of other government agencies as a key starting point when developing shared support services for digitalisation.