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Government proposal: Clients' freedom of choice in health and social services

The objective of the reform is to ensure equal, modern health and social services at reasonable costs. As part of the reform, freedom of choice will be improved for clients of health and social services. An Act on Freedom of Choice will be enacted for this purpose. The Government submitted its legislative proposal to Parliament on 8 March 2018.

The objective of the Act on Freedom of Choice is to speed up access to services and improve the quality and cost-effectiveness of services. Clients will have more freedom to choose the service provider that best suits them. Another important goal is to reinforce local primary-level services provided by health and social services centres as well as dental clinics. In addition to this, health and social services centres will also provide the services of specialist doctors in addition to social welfare counselling. The Act will also implement health and social services vouchers and personal budgets.

Freedom of choice would be gradually expanded in 2020–2022. In some counties, wider freedom of choice will be trialled even earlier in pilot projects.

You will be able to choose your health and social services centre and dental clinic

- According to the Act on Freedom of Choice, you will be able to choose your preferred health and social services centre and dental clinic. In doing so, you can choose between services provided by public, private and third-sector operators. The client fee will remain the same.
- The new health and social services centres will commence operation on 1 January 2021. In some areas, operations will commence even earlier. The health and social services centres will provide nurse and physician services as well as social welfare counselling. In addition to these, each centre will provide specialist medical services in at least two fields.
- According to the Act on Freedom of Choice, at the start of 2022 you will be able to choose between a public or private dental clinic. In addition to basic examinations and treatment, dental clinics will also provide dental prosthesis repair services.
- At their discretion, health and social services centres and dental clinics can also provide additional paid services in addition to the services funded by the county. These services are paid by the client in their entirety.
- In bilingual municipalities, the health and social services centres and dental clinics will have to serve clients in Finnish and Swedish, unless the county grants an exception.



- You will be able to choose a health and social services centre and a dental clinic from anywhere in Finland. You will sign up as a client of the health and social services centre or dental clinic of your choice, either by using the national online service or otherwise in writing. Each county will provide its residents with more detailed instructions on how and when to list as a client.
- You cannot choose just any medical practice or dental clinic. The service provider must be included in the service provider register and be approved by a county. This ensures that the service provider complies with the conditions set by the county and provides the agreed upon services.
- Assistance will be available for those who need help in making the choice. However, you can also refrain from choosing a health and social services centre or dental clinic. In this case, you will remain a client of your current health and social services centre or another health and social services centre designated by the county until 2023 and a client of your current dental clinic until 2024. After this, the county will list you as a client of the health and social services centre and dental clinic that is easiest to reach for you, based on your place of residence. Even after this, you will still be able to change your service provider if you so choose.
- A minor who has turned 15 will be personally allowed to choose his/her preferred health and social services centre and dental clinic. Before that, the parent or custodian will choose for them. Clients are not always able to choose their service provider, for example, due to a memory disorder. In such cases, the client's preference will be worked out in cooperation with the client's family member or other legal representative.
- You will be able to change your service provider six months after the previous choice. If your chosen service provider has several service locations in different localities, you will be able to visit any one of them throughout Finland if required.
- If, for reasons of work, studies or recreation, you are temporarily residing in a locality where your chosen service provider is not operating, you can visit some other service provider's health and social services centre or dental clinic. However, you must notify your own county – either using the national online service or otherwise in writing – that you are using another service provider on the grounds of temporary residence.
- The staff of your health and social services centre or dental clinic may determine that you also require services other than those provided by the centre or clinic. These other services will be provided by the county's service units, such as a social services station, mental health and substance abuse unit, or hospital.

Other health and social services to be provided by the county's service units

- According to the legislative proposal, the health and social services that are not the responsibility of health and social services centres and dental clinics will be provided by the unincorporated county enterprise's service units. You will be able to contact the unincorporated county enterprise's service units – such as maternity and child health clinics or social services stations – directly. The only exception to this will be non-urgent medical treatment, which will require a referral from a physician.
- The client's freedom of choice will also extend to these services as provided by the county. You will be able to choose your preferred unincorporated county enterprise from anywhere in Finland. As such, you can also become a client of another county if



you so choose. In addition to this, you can choose the service unit that will provide the services – such as your preferred maternity and child health clinic or the hospital where non-urgent surgery will be performed, for example. The referring physician will advise you on which unit to choose.

- You will be able to change your chosen unincorporated county enterprise every six months. The change can be made earlier if you move to another county or work temporarily in another locality.
- However, the freedom of choice will not apply to child welfare, school health care and student health care.
- If you do not want to choose a service unit, the county will choose one for you.
- The unincorporated county enterprises make official decisions and exercise public power.

Health and social services voucher and personal budget

- The services provided by the county will include an assessment of your situation, on the basis of which you can be provided with a client plan, if necessary. A client plan can be prepared if you require several or repeated services, for example. Based on the client plan, you will be provided with services directly by the county's service units, or you can be provided with a health and social services voucher or personal budget. With these, you will be able to procure the services that you need from private service providers.
- Health and social services vouchers can be used for individual procedures provided by other service providers. You can be provided with a health and social services voucher for physiotherapy or home care services, for example. There are, however, restrictions on where you can procure the service. You must choose a service provider approved by the county. This ensures the quality of services.
- If you are disabled or a senior citizen, you can be provided with a personal budget. The requirement is that you need continuous, wide-ranging help and can plan and choose a service provider and the content of the services yourself or with support. In this case, you will be provided with a client plan, and you will be able to decide where to procure the services included in the plan yourself. This way, you will obtain services that best suit your situation.
- The service providers will receive compensation from the counties for services delivered against service vouchers or personal budgets. Clients will not obtain money from the counties.
- You will not be obliged to accept the services voucher or personal budget offered to you. In this case, the county will have to provide you with the health and social services you need in some other way.
- Online services, client advisers and service coordinators will guide and support you in choosing the services that best meet your needs. Social services clients can be provided with a designated social worker.



Urgent care to remain the same

- In the event of an emergency, you can call the national emergency number (112). You have the right in an emergency to go to any emergency care unit close to you.
- Clients will be able to get urgent care and first aid in units providing urgent and emergency care services, just as before.
- In the future, large hospitals will also include emergency social services which will provide help in urgent crisis situations. Emergency social services and the police can be reached by calling 112.

Occupational healthcare and private health and social services

- As before, employed persons will continue to be provided with services at occupational healthcare units or health and social services centres. Similarly, clients will still be able to get private health and social services at their own expense, for example, by using private health insurance. Costs for health services outside the scope of freedom of choice will not be eligible for health insurance reimbursement after a transition period.

You will receive more detailed information about service quality and waiting times

- Counties will provide information on residents' rights and benefits as well as advice and support for using health and social services. The counties will be responsible for ensuring that residents have sufficient information for choosing their health and social services.
- Each county will maintain an online service with information on health and social services centres and dental clinics as well as providers of service voucher services. This online service will also have information about the quality and availability of services.
- Health and social services centres and dental clinics will be obliged to accept all new clients and provide up-to-date information online about their services and actual waiting times.
- Providers of service voucher services will also have to provide up-to-date information via the Internet about their services and the waiting times of services.
- Clients will have the right to receive the information provided in the online service even orally or in writing.
- Guidance and advice services will have to pay particular attention to clients who need a wide range of integrated services or special support.
- Health and social services centres, dental clinics and providers approved to deliver services against health and social services vouchers will have to issue annual reports on revenue, taxes paid and place of taxation, profit and loss, management salaries and bonuses as well as on corporate social responsibility, among others.
- Service providers will be subject to the Act on the Openness of Government Activities and the Administrative Procedure Act, among others. Under the Act on the Openness of Government Activities, official documents are in the public domain, unless specifically otherwise provided in an Act.



Counties to bear responsibility for the functionality of health and social services

- From 1 January 2020 onwards, counties will bear responsibility for publicly funded health and social services in their areas. They will receive funding from central government but decide themselves how to use the funds.
- The counties will be responsible for ensuring that all residents receive the services they need and that services by all service providers form a well-functioning system that runs smoothly and efficiently. The counties will compensate service providers for the services provided to residents.
- The counties and a national supervision authority will monitor the service providers' activities. Residents will have the right to submit an objection to the service provider or a complaint to the national supervision authority about any grievances that they experience, or submit the matter to the county for processing.

Act on Freedom of Choice to enter into force on 1 January 2020

Parliament will decide on the passing of the bill for the Act on Freedom of Choice in June 2018. The aim is for counties to start handling public health and social services from the start of 2020. From autumn 2019 onwards, clients will be able to choose the unincorporated county enterprise, i.e. the county, that they will receive services from. Counties would adopt the health and social services voucher and personal budget by 1 July 2020. Health and social services centres would commence operation by 1 January 2021 and dental clinics by 1 January 2022.

Since preparations have proceeded at various speeds from region to region, in some the freedom of choice will expand in 2018–2021 in the form of pilot projects involving health and social services centres as well as dental care. Health and social services voucher and personal budgeting pilot projects will be conducted in 2018–2019.

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