

**Speech by Valteri Aaltonen, Secretary of State for Local Government and Ownership Steering, representing the Finnish Presidency of the Council of the European Union, EPSA 2019 Celebratory Ceremony at the Provincial Government House, 6 November 2019**

**“European Public Sector, fit for the future”**

Governor and King’s Commissioner Bovens, Director General Ongaro, Ladies and Gentlemen.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak here today.

What unites us all in this hall is that public services are our business. We share the task of making public services happen, developing them continuously and strengthening the guarantees of good governance.

And when we speak about public services, we always speak about the citizens those services are meant for. The public sector receives its legitimacy from the citizens it serves. That’s why we need to earn the trust of our citizens, and that’s why we must try to strengthen that trust, through our actions every day. That is no small challenge. The users of public services sometimes demand a great deal from the public sector, and of course they are perfectly entitled to do so. And if they are dissatisfied or feel excluded, this tends to be reflected in a decline in the trust they have in public institutions. And, a public sector that doesn’t have the trust of its citizens will find it really hard to function.

Then again, to build up the trust, we need to be in contact with the people. Especially now that public services are rapidly going digital, we must ensure that the public administration does not become distant and faceless entity. To keep in touch with the needs of citizens and customers, the authorities should be present in the forums and arenas where the citizens are. We should also involve the users of services in the planning of services more than is the case now, to ensure that services are fit for purpose and intelligible to the public.

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Dear colleagues, I have already touched upon the digitalisation of public services, and I would like to say a few more words about this topic.

Digitalisation is one of the great trends of our time. It dramatically shapes both private and public action. Digitalisation also carries considerable potential in the public sector. It can be used to increase the efficiency of public services and to improve access to them. Being independent of time and place, digital services eliminate many barriers caused by geography or life situations; at their best, digital services can lead to greater equality between citizens.

On the other hand, digitalisation also risks producing more inequality. In general, those people who are already good at using public services are best equipped for taking up digital services too. Conversely, those with a more limited capacity to use digital services may miss out on the benefits of digitalisation. If you struggle with digital services, this may also weaken your chances to obtain face-to-face services. Thus, as services become increasingly digital, the causes of inequality may accumulate. In the worst case, those who need public services most will be excluded from obtaining them. In digitalising public services, it is therefore especially important to consider the people for whom electronic services are not self-evident.

When talking about the challenges involved in digital services, the issue of older people typically crops up. These are people who were professionally active in the days before digital literacy became a basic requirement and before home computers became widely available. Mental and physical limitations due to ageing may also limit the take-up of IT hardware and digital services, or the learning of these new skills.

However, digital skills are also very unevenly distributed among young people, nor do the young always focus on the kind of skills that are crucial at work and in using public services. Young people have typically less experience in the operational logic of services provided by society. This means that we cannot take it for granted that all young people will automatically acquire the skills needed for using digital services. So, no age group is monolithic in this respect, or in any respect for that matter. Every age group includes different kinds of people, with different skills and different needs. Moreover, each and every one of us may occasionally need help in using digital services, for example because of a technical malfunction or a temporary inability to use electronic devices due to illness or accident.

In the context of digitalisation, we tend to talk about people's skills and whether or not they are willing to use electronic services, or whether or not they dare to use them. However, a difficulty may also arise if a digital service cannot be accessed, for example, with the aids used by the visually impaired. This is why accessibility should be given the same weight in designing digital services as it has in designing more conventional public services.

For the reasons outlined above, we have based the digitalisation of public services in Finland on the premise that no one should be obliged to use digital services against their will. Instead, the authorities are required to provide digital access for those who can and wish to make use of it. As far as the business world is concerned, however, we are gradually reaching the stage where businesses are expected to interact with the authorities digitally.

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Dear friends,

Public administrations exist to serve all citizens, from the youngest to the eldest. Public services concern all groups of people and all socio-economic categories. However, when developing these services, we should remember that different groups of people have very different capacities for using the existing channels for services, and there are also huge differences in their ability to make their voices heard in the planning of services.

New kinds of services tend to be designed for the people who are already most adept at using existing ones. However, the people who need public services most are typically those least capable of standing up for themselves and demanding their rights. We must therefore ensure that the most vulnerable groups of people are also consulted about the development of services.

Those of us who design and implement public services usually represent a certain group of citizens. We're all of working age, most of us are highly educated, and we're generally reasonably well-off. We know how the machinery of government works, and we're used to working with it. Therefore, we – the people who design public services – are not a representative sample of the people who use those services. It is very important to recognise this. In this way, we avoid the trap of designing services mainly for users like ourselves. As I have said, we should aim for essentially the opposite objective: to make public services as accessible as possible to those who are in the weakest position to obtain them.

Let me give you an example: in Finland we have had positive results in preventing homelessness by involving the homeless themselves in planning the action needed to help them. People with personal experience of homelessness have provided officials with first-hand information on the various causes of homelessness, and of the kind of support they would have needed in order to save them from becoming homeless in the first place.

Dear colleagues,

The citizens expect from the public sector the same efficiency in ability to provide services as from the private sector. They are right to do so.

For the public sector to be able to maintain its legitimacy, we must work efficiently and produce the best and most effective public services possible with the limited resources available. And it has to be acknowledged that improving and developing our activities continuously is not always easy or pleasant work. Trying to do better means hard work; it calls for difficult solutions and choices. Organisations, as well as individual people, tend to get stuck in their ways if there is no external pressure on them to improve. In the private sector, that pressure comes from competition in the market. It is an infallible performance indicator for businesses. In the public sector, there is no such clear, automatic force for improvement. We don't have shareholders watching over how their assets are managed and exerting pressure for better efficiency. That's why we must deliberately create our own pressure for continuous development; we must demand more from ourselves. That's why it's so valuable that European public sector has forums such as EIPA to provide points of comparison on how things are done in other countries and to enable benchmarking and evaluation of practices.

And when evaluating the quality of public services, we must remember to do so from the user's perspective. By placing users of services at the centre of our efforts, we can focus on what users need. The ways of providing a service are only means to an end – the end being the objective that the service is intended to fulfil. This applies not only to the channels through which the service is provided, but for example also to the language used by the authorities. We have some good examples in Finland of how the formalistic – and sometimes downright obscure – language used in communications by the authorities can be improved by involving a test group of service users in its development.

The legal protection of citizens requires that they can clearly understand whether a decision by a public authority is positive or negative, and what exactly they're entitled to under that decision. Every decision that isn't clear will also result in at least one more inquiry to the authority issuing it. This is a waste of time and money.

To recap, I have cited three goals that I consider to be very important for the public sector:

- We should demand a lot from ourselves, which means we need to be prepared to improve continuously.
- We should measure our improvement by how well we are able to meet the needs of our citizens.

- And when speaking about citizens and users of services, we should pay particular attention to those who have fewer opportunities to make their own voice heard.

These goals may seem obvious to many of you. But even the obvious needs to be stated from time to time.

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Dear friends,

I am sure everyone here is aware of the well-known fact that the people who have used public services usually rate them more highly than do people who have never used them. The latter group responds to surveys solely on the basis of mental images. And yet everyone pays the taxes which pay for public services. If public services have a poor image, this is likely to affect the willingness of citizens to pay taxes to finance them. Therefore, the public sector needs to communicate about its actions, and to prove its legitimacy even to those who rarely come into contact with it.

It's not enough to succeed: we also need to find ways to communicate our success to all citizens, without resorting to mere hype. Telling people openly about our successes and, with total honesty, about our failures too, is a good starting point for a continuously developing public administration.

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Dear friends,

A great deal has been achieved, much still remains to be done. The development of public administration is a never-ending task. Finland joined EIPA in 1992, three years before our accession to the European Union. We want to be at the forefront of the development of public administration, and we consider it important that the Member States work together in this field: we would like to learn from others and to share our own experiences.

During Finland's Presidency of the Council of the EU, the continuous development of public services, respect for good governance and the strengthening of trust are also key aims of the EUPAN network. We are not alone in striving for these aims, either. Trust is a key theme of the network's three-year strategy, and it will continue to be discussed during the coming presidencies.

I wish to thank EIPA for its contribution to the training of European public officials, and for the quality awards to be presented today. I hope you all have an inspiring day!  
Thank you.