

Linguistic rights for the Swedish-speaking  
population in Finland  
and the reform of healthcare, social welfare  
and rescue services

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MANAGING LANGUAGES IN THE  
FIELD OF HEALTH & SOCIAL CARE IN MULTILINGUAL COMMUNITIES

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# The national languages

## The Constitution of Finland, § 17:

*The national languages of Finland are Finnish and Swedish.*

*The right of everyone to use his or her own language, either Finnish or Swedish, before courts of law and other authorities, and to receive official documents in that language, shall be guaranteed by an Act.*

*The public authorities shall provide for the cultural and societal needs of the Finnish-speaking and Swedish-speaking populations of the country on an **equal basis**.*

# The Language Act

- The basic linguistic rights are described in greater detail in the Language Act.
  - A public act that is applicable on all public sectors. Covers only the national languages, Finnish and Swedish.
- The starting point of the Language Act is that the national languages are **equal** and in the same position.
- The individual has a right to use his or her own language and to receive services in their own language, Finnish or Swedish.
- The public authorities are divided into monolingual and bilingual authorities, depending on if the administrative district includes bilingual municipalities.
  - The bilingual authorities are liable to arrange **equivalent** services and to ensure information in both languages.

# The Language Act

- The Act applies to courts of Law, state authorities, the municipal authorities of bilingual municipalities and bilingual wellbeing services counties.
- The Act does not apply to private companies – unless a public authority buys services from a private company, for example healthcare services.
- There is no criminal sanction system in the Act towards the authorities.
- The Act is supplemented by language provisions in special legislation.

# Reform of healthcare, social welfare and rescue services

- The organisation of public healthcare, social welfare and rescue services has been reformed in Finland.
- The responsibility for organising these services was transferred from municipalities to regional *wellbeing services counties* from 1<sup>st</sup> of January 2023.
- The key objective of the reform is to improve the availability and quality of basic public services throughout Finland.

# Bilingual wellbeing services counties

- The new wellbeing services counties are 21.
- 7 (+2) are bilingual.
- The obligations for the bilingual wellbeing services counties to ensure the linguistic rights are also regulated in special legislation; e.g., the Act on Organising Healthcare and Social Welfare Services.
- According to this Act, the bilingual wellbeing services counties shall  
*arrange their services in **both Finnish and Swedish**, so that customers are served in the language of their choice.*
- National Languages Boards – new mandatory political board in every bilingual wellbeing services county which shall monitor the minority language.

# The access to healthcare and social welfare services in Swedish *in practice*

- Although the linguistic rights are on a strong formal level in Finland, there are challenges to realise them in practice.
- Research shows that it is difficult to get access to healthcare services in Swedish, especially in regions where the share of the Swedish-speaking population is low.
- Challenges: Lack of Swedish-speaking healthcare staff, organisation of the Swedish service structures, budget-planning enough funds that cover services in Swedish
- New possibilities through the healthcare reform: the National Languages Boards, the cooperation agreement between the bilingual wellbeing services counties

# Thank you!

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