

# Life on the Edge of the Cliff

***Post school experiences of young people with disabilities and additional support needs***

# FINLAND

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**Study visit**

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ARC Scotland

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***This report is for young people with additional support needs and disabilities, and their families. They can tell us what works, and what doesn't. It's time we listened. They are an amazing resource and we are lucky to have them.***



The logo on the front cover was created especially for this project by 22-year-old Jana, on a 2-month internship at Vates-säätiö, who recognised her skills as a graphic designer and have supported her to exercise them. In her words: "It feels good to do what you think you are good at finally, after being a bad academic student your whole life—you are like, OK, maybe I'm good at something after all."

*This study visit took place between 29 September and 30 October 2023*
*and included conversations with policy makers, families, services and providers in Helsinki, Oulu, Tampere and Turku*

# Introduction

**Finland is regarded by many as a world leader in the delivery of excellence in welfare and social services for its citizens.**

The World Happiness Report, published by the United Nations, has placed Finland first among 150 countries around the world for the last 5 years based on studies of data including access to social support, healthy life expectancy and the freedom to make life choices. It also consistently rates above, or very well above, average in a range of international studies across categories such as educational achievement, social inclusion, mental health and wellbeing, and support into employment.

I was interested to see how these positive attributes impact the lives of young people with disabilities and additional support needs. Do they translate into better experiences of transitions than we find in our own country?

Finland has many parallels with Scotland. The populations are virtually identical at around 5.5 million people, and there is a similar split between urban centres and rural or remote locations. It is also undergoing reviews of policy and legislation similar to those under consideration here.

I spent 4 weeks in Finland, moving between Helsinki, Oulu and Turku visiting services; interviewing strategic leads, programme directors and policymakers; and meeting service users and families. In the vast majority of cases the standard of English was such that no interpreter was needed. This reflective report is the result of many conversations and discussions, and represents my personal interpretation from an outsider's viewpoint.

I plan now to share my learning, insights and connections as widely as possible through the Scottish Transitions Forum, to enable others to gain a better understanding of a country facing the same challenges as ourselves and, like ourselves, looking for ways to address long standing issues.

My hope is this will offer a fresh lens through which to view our own policy, practice and provision, and inform our discussions.

This report is the first step. I plan to organise a series of online events bringing people from both countries together to explore issues of shared interest further, and to create supportive connections and contacts.

Through my contacts in Finland, I also plan to continue sharing the work taking place in Scotland, particularly around the Principles of Good Transitions, Principles into Practice and the development of Compass.



*Poster at Vates-säätiö head office, Helsinki*

*"We firmly believe that people deserve better than what is currently available and will leave no stone unturned in our search for solutions and services that work."*

Markus Raivio,
founder of Kukunori

*Note:*

- *The terms "additional support needs" and "disabled" in this report should be taken to include any and all young people who may be at risk of not making a smooth transition to adulthood without requiring extra support.*
- *In many cases the Finnish names have been used for organisations and services, but where these are long I have given the English version as used by the organisation itself.*

# Themes, learning points and reflections

**Finland and Scotland have much in common and there are already well established links between our countries. The most useful contribution this report can make is to highlight Finnish approaches and ways of working that support positive outcomes specifically around the transition to adulthood, to inform our discussions and practice development.**

**Each theme has pointers to the relevant section of the report.**

**Rights based approach**
There are clear, strong messages around the rights of all citizens within Finland, and mechanisms to uphold and maintain them. Rights underpin all governance and social policy (p. 7). Ways this appears in practice are a strong focus on advocacy (p. 11); formal involvement of minority groups in shaping local and regional government (p. 10); and the VANE committee, tasked with monitoring implementation of the UNCRPD (p. 10).

**Openness**
There is a great deal of transparency around governance, data and decision making. A lot of information is online, often in multiple languages (p. 26). Citizens may propose legislation in parliament (p. 7) and members of the general public can easily ask questions or request information. There is a strong tradition of local representation through the municipalities, even in small communities (p. 7).

**Trust in people**
There are many examples of people being trusted to act responsibly without high levels of scrutiny. Teachers are trusted to deliver pupils' learning outcomes (p. 15); people manage their own health and social care records through the digital system KANTA (p. 22); and one reason non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have become so central is that they are viewed, at least partially, as a chance for everyone to play a part in finding solutions to social issues (p. 8).

**Inclusion**
This is a fundamental right of all citizens under the Finnish Constitution (p. 7). Help with accessing information or communicating wishes about service options is an entitlement (p. 9); and there is a national centre supporting organisations to make communications more accessible (p. 27).

**Needs-led provision**
Eligibility criteria exist, but there are fewer hard boundaries around age or diagnosis (“youth” includes up to age 30 and sometimes beyond). Services available following an assessment of needs are person centred and holistic, and led by what an individual needs to enjoy a good quality of life (p. 9). Many NGOs have completely open access to services (p. 30).

**Flexibility**
This seems to be baked into the Finnish system, with few hard boundaries or dead ends. Two examples are the provision for movement in and out of education (p. 16) and pensions and allowances (p. 13). This makes it much easier to be responsive to an individual’s changing circumstances and needs.

**Education**
Finland regards access to education for everyone, regardless of age, ability or circumstance, as the key to achieving equality in society. Consequently there are multiple opportunities to work towards qualifications and skills (p. 16). In particular, the TUVA programme (p. 14) is a shining example of how to provide a breathing space within the system to explore options and find direction.

**Role of families**
Families are not expected, and in some cases not allowed, to provide certain levels of care. However the

Informal Carers Agreement, which recognises and supports the role carers play, helps effective partnership working in real life settings (p. 9).

**Experts by experience**

Many NGOs provide peer support for young people and families (p. 30). The pilot project run by Lauste, to embed parents trained as advocates formally within child welfare services, is particularly interesting (p. 11), as are the mentorship and leadership programmes run by Rusetti (p. 30).

**Wellbeing focus**

Wellbeing is embedded as a measure of a positive outcome, with tools to assess and monitor this. It is noticeable how many services and NGOs promote integration and building social connection with others as a core part of the work they do (p. 30). There is a clear focus on outcomes rather than destinations.

**Building skills and confidence**

In common with other Nordic countries, managed risk is seen as beneficial in building resilience and skills, and as a vital preparation for independent living. Experiences that replicate life "in the real world" are prioritised through education (p. 19) and support (p. 29).

**Evidence based practice and policy**

There is a clear commitment to evidence based practice, supported by a single expert agency whose role it is to collate and share data, streamline and align information from multiple sources, track developments, plug gaps and provide expert advice to support planning (p. 26). I am enormously grateful to Sanna Ryökkynen (p. 20) and Nina Heräjärvi (p. 28) who have allowed me to share their recently published research. While undertaken in a Finnish setting, in both cases the focus is on what young people want and need from services, which I would argue make the findings universally relevant and a good point of understanding to inform our own discussions.

# Reflections

**I was very surprised at the apparent lack of a clear**, structured process to support the transition of young people with additional support needs and disabilities. If such a thing exists, no one I spoke to was aware of it or able to explain it. The level of interest in the Principles of Good Transitions 3, Principles into Practice, and Compass, was high in every agency I visited.

School staff take a lead role in exploring options and providing guidance, although this is linked to educational attainment and may not take place until the point it becomes apparent someone is unlikely to complete their education successfully. This can contribute to a scramble to find a suitable next setting for them.

Social work is the main gateway to services and funding, although many NGOs do not require formal referral. The allocated social worker is generally responsible for creating a plan, identifying and accessing services, and monitoring a young person's progress. The young person must be involved in the choice of support and services they receive, and these are reviewed regularly to ensure they still meet their needs. Many areas do not have overly formal processes for this as it is assumed professionals can be trusted to do their job.

However it is clear from talking to families that they often find this opaque, difficult to follow, and even where it goes well they can feel sidelined and their voices unheard. There remains a feeling that it is still largely down to parents to make the running if they have aspirations for their young person beyond meeting their basic needs— to find work, for example, or a life that is fulfilling to them.

The restructure of health and social care has also increased confusion at present, particularly around funding and where responsibility lies.

So while basic needs are generally met, there appears to be a challenge in pursuing more ambitious dreams and goals for this group of young people. In the wider society, and particularly in the world of work, there still seems to be a great deal to do to raise awareness of what young people are capable of and how best to support them.

So with its many strengths, Finland still has some way to go before its ideals of inclusion and equality for all can be fully realised.

# Finland—an overview




**Finland is a member of the European Union and joined NATO in April 2023.**

It borders Sweden and Norway, but by far the longest land border is with Russia. Relations remain tense following the invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

The population is around 5.5m—similar to Scotland—with the vast majority in urban centres in the south. Lapland, in the north, is Europe's last untamed wilderness.

Income per capita is among the highest in western Europe. Finland is a global leader in information technology and communications, and new technology is part of everyday life.

The country was ruled by Sweden for 600 years before becoming part of the Russian Empire in 1800, and did not become an independent republic until 1917. Nevertheless it has a long standing commitment to democratic self government and equal inclusion: in 1906 Finnish women were first to receive the right both to vote and stand for election, and in the following year 19 women became the world's first female MPs.

There are two official languages, Finnish and Swedish, and English is also widely spoken. Many young people speak English among themselves to practise and connect online. Many publications and websites are available in English.

Since independence from Russia, Finland's status as a small nation close to a larger, dominant neighbour has had an impact on foreign policy and defence spending. Conscription and military service continues for all able male school leavers (and female, if they volunteer), and Helsinki has enough underground bomb shelters to accommodate the city's population if required. Spending on defence is a given.



**Did you know...**

Saunas have been central to Finnish cultural and social life for hundreds—maybe thousands—of years. As well as public saunas, many houses and apartment blocks have their own. There are an estimated 3.3m saunas in Finland—more than one for every two people. It's a place to relax, socialise, and be yourself: a pretty good leveller!

*Northern Finland is part of Sápmi (Lapland), traditionally the home of the semi-nomadic Sámi people. Sápmi stretches across Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia, and is administered by the four countries. Under the Finnish Constitution the government must consult with the Sámi Parliament on issues that affect them, and the rights to maintain and develop the Sámi language and culture are protected.*

*There are around 10,000 Sámi in Finland.*



# Governance

**Democracy, equality and inclusion are fundamental principles of Finnish society, protected since 1919 by a written Constitution that cannot be overruled. Parliament has Representatives, not Members, as a reminder they speak for the people and not themselves.**

*"Most challenges are quite similar across Europe, for example an ageing population, not much money any more in the services, not the equality of opportunity there used to be."*

Aapo Kotkavuori, Kukunori

## National Constitution

Everyone is equal under the Constitution, with the right to share in civic society and influence how they live. Rights to life, liberty, integrity and security of confidential information are protected. Public authorities have an obligation to promote employment and the right to work, and to protect the right to a life of dignity, through social allowances if necessary. Everyone with a disability is guaranteed basic subsistence.

## Parliament (*Eduskunta*) and President (*Presidentti*)

Alexander Stubb, of the conservative National Coalition Party, was elected as president in February 2024 for a 6-year term.

In April 2023 a centre right government was elected, in a move away from the previous centre left coalition. Prime Minister Petteri Orpo, also of the National Coalition Party, leads a coalition of the populist Finns Party, the Swedish People's Party and the Christian Democrats. There is no upper chamber.

The election focused on public finance and reducing debt; immigration; and the future of health and social services. Many expect reduced public spending and budget cuts over this parliament and services to be under pressure as a result.

Since 2012 any Finnish citizen may propose legislation in parliament, or amend existing legislation, by submitting a Citizens' Initiative.

## Regional and local government

Finland has 310 local government municipalities (*kunta*), with the largest representing hundreds of thousands of people and the smallest, just 109.

Each municipality is self governing and councils are elected every 4 years. Municipalities receive funds from parliament, but also raise their own taxes and decide how money is spent.

All municipalities must belong to one of the 19 regional councils (*maakunta*), responsible for regional development and land use planning.

Some bodies, such as the Sámi Parliament, have self governance for historical reasons.



*The debating chamber of the Finnish Parliament, where the central statue holds a child facing the Representatives as a reminder when voting of their responsibility to the people of the future*

# How services are provided

## Municipalities

Municipalities are responsible for education to age 18, services such as libraries, road construction and environmental services. They may join forces to share service funding and provision. They were previously responsible for health and social care, but this changed in January 2023. They remain responsible for public and environmental health, and collaborate on health promotion and wellbeing programmes.

## Wellbeing Services Counties (WSCs: see p. 22)

New Wellbeing Services Counties were set up in January 2023 to manage all frontline health and social welfare services, including primary health care, social support and rehabilitation.

The WSCs assess needs and organise and pay for services, but these may be delivered by a combination of non-governmental organisations (NGOs), private agencies and other providers such as Kela, the social insurance agency. Counties can work jointly to provide the best services.

## Non-governmental organisations (NGOs)

These sound similar to some charities in the UK, but in the Finnish mind they are very different.

Charities are seen as offering short term support in severe need, so can carry an added stigma. Funding is from donations, which depend on peoples' ability to give, so they can be financially vulnerable and less able to provide long term solutions.

NGOs are seen as essential and integral to stable, long term services and support. They are largely funded by government grants, and in some cases through selling their services, research funding, or European Union grants.

They have historically been the bedrock of the welfare system, providing help and support, and encouraging participation by involving people directly in addressing social needs and concerns. There are more than 11,000 social welfare and health care NGOs of all sizes, from one or two people managing teams of volunteers to large organisations employing multiple professionals and managing companies. They mainly work in health and wellbeing counselling, peer support, rehabilitation, sharing expertise and influencing legislation.

If government funding is significantly reduced over the coming years, the balance between charities and NGOs may have to change.

*"NGOs play a really important part in making sure families get the support they need."*

Anne Mäki, Invalidiliitto

# Assessing and meeting needs

**Wellbeing Services Counties** (WSCs) are now responsible for assessing the needs of people who need support.

Anyone can request an assessment. For many young people it may be triggered by routine screening in school by education staff, a school nurse or school social worker.

A disabled person may qualify for *subjective rights*, meaning the WSC must organise services whether planned for or not, or *services bound to appropriations*, which are subject to availability of resources.

Legislation requires assessments to be carried out and services arranged without delay, but waiting times are getting longer. The City of Helsinki aims to acknowledge requests and allocate a social worker within a week, and to give a decision within 3 months. Elsewhere waits for a social worker can be up to a few months.

People have the right to any support they need during the assessment, e.g. supported decision making, and their legal rights and service options must be explained. They have the right to receive a written decision and can appeal.

A legally binding personal service plan (EHO) is put in place after an assessment unless the need is temporary, and is monitored by the WSC.

*"We really have a lot of good services. But you have to ask about them because no one tells you. And if you don't know, you don't find out."*

Parent

### What count as subjective rights?

- ***Personal assistance:*** at least 30 hours per month to manage daily life, work/study, social and leisure activities, and taking part in public life. Family members or friends may not take on this role except in exceptional circumstances.
- ***Transport:*** seen as essential for independent living. May include travel training, support using public transport, or transportation in the home county and neighbouring districts. Must include trips for errands and leisure activities as well as journeys to work/study. Adaptations to private cars may be reimbursed.
- ***Serviced accommodation:*** can be in the home, a private apartment or a group residence. Includes laundry, cleaning and help with medication.
- ***Home alterations and equipment/devices:*** can be reimbursed if necessary to daily living.
- ***Day activity services:*** geared to supporting independent life and social interaction. Can include organised work.
- ***Work activities and job coaching:*** aim to move people from social to work activities, then into the open labour market. There is no salary but some activities may carry an incentive payment.

### What are services bound to appropriations?

- ***Rehabilitation guidance****:* includes advice, support and counselling to help achieve wellbeing and life management.
- ***Adaptation guidance:*** counselling, guidance and coaching for the person and close family or friends to find solutions to practical challenges, e.g. building communication skills or practicing life skills.
- ***Reimbursement:*** some of the cost of essential items, e.g. a wheelchair hoist or indoor heater; particular items of clothing; or to support a special diet.
- ***Support for families and Informal Care networks:*** include short term tasks such as help getting ready for school, or longer term support. Informal Caretakers are family or close friends, who enter into an agreement to support someone in their own home. All Informal Caretakers have the right to 2 days leave per month with their responsibilities undertaken by support workers.

Other measures can be granted to realise the purposes of the Disability Services Act.

# Making rights real

**Finland's Constitution guarantees equal rights to basic subsistence, individual freedom, dignity, justice, and involvement in civic life and society regardless of disability. All citizens are guaranteed access to education and personal development opportunities, and social and health care services.**

*"You cannot overrule the Constitution of Finland, disabled people have rights to move where they want to move."*

Parent

Finland ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) in 2016.

A national advisory board, VANE, brings together government representatives, disabled people and their families, labour market organisations and representatives of local and regional government to coordinate implementation.

Municipalities and Wellbeing Services Counties have their own disability councils. They must ensure disabled people and their families are represented, in support of their right to take part in civic life and influence planning, decision making and monitoring all areas of local government.

**Right to Social Inclusion and Equality: National Action Plan on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2020-2023)**

VANE published a national action plan to raise awareness of disabled peoples' rights and promote social inclusion, identifying 110 measures government ministries have committed to implement. The plan's second phase is currently under evaluation.

Among the measures are indicators to assess and monitor:

- work and employment;
- adequate standard of living and social protection;
- movement and mobility; and
- participation in cultural life, leisure and sport.

# Legislation for disability and disability services

**There is plenty of legislation and** guidance on what disabled people should expect but it can be hard to navigate.

A new Disability Services Act due to come into force in January 2025 is an attempt to clarify this. It will gather all rights and duties in one place, and allow everyone with a disability to access services appropriate to their needs and wishes wherever they live, giving them more control over their support. This has been welcomed, but many question if its aims can be achieved when social and health care face staffing challenges, and the government plans to reduce public funding.

Young people with additional support needs who are 12 and over have the right to be involved in discussion around their care and support. Parents and carers may act as guardians where a young person lacks capacity until they reach 18, when formal legal powers are needed.

**Key relevant Acts**

- Non Discrimination Act
- Social Welfare Act (social services for disabled people)
- Disability Services Act (situations not covered by the Social Welfare Act)
- Act on Special Care for People with Intellectual Disabilities (services for people with impaired development or mental capacity)
- Act on Disability Benefits
- Basic Education Act (ensuring disabled children have support to access education, including assistive equipment, specialist services and transport)
- Healthcare Act
- Act of the Status and Rights of Social Welfare Clients
- Act on the Status and Rights of the Patient
- Act on Services and Support for the Disabled
- Act of Interpretation Services for People with Disabilities

# Advocacy and peer support

**Finland has a strong emphasis on advocacy and peer support groups. Specialist services are widespread through NGOs, privately, or within organisations. Many NGOs are peer support and information groups.**

*"We are advocacy central. You can find advocacy for every specialist area in Finland."*

Autismisäätiö

## From client to advocate

At Lauste, a family rehabilitation centre based in Turku and Uusikaupunki, a project is trialling bringing peer support and advocacy together to embed experts by experience within the structure of formal child welfare processes.

*Asiakkaasta kumppaniksi* ("From a client to an advocate") is in its fourth year. It aims to strengthen the agency and involvement of parents in the most challenging family circumstances, and make their voices heard in service and practice development.

Parents taking part meet weekly over 5 months to find out how to draw on their own experiences, develop the skills to act as a parent advocate, and learn about child welfare policy including legislation, service systems, values and ethics. They also have three full training days and a period of field practice.

The project leaders include experts by experience, child welfare workers, a lecturer in social work, a lawyer and a professional guidance counsellor.

So far 40 parents completed the programme and around half are now parent advocates, supporting and training other parent groups and taking part in discussions, student training and media activity. Themes include parental stress, resources and resilience, handling family crises and the challenges children and young people face.

Initial findings indicate when a parent advocate is involved, parents feel better represented and report an increased sense of wellbeing. Staff report easier relationships and better understanding between services and families.

The project is funded until 2025. There are plans to increase the numbers receiving peer support and gather more information on its impact. The team is discussing a cooperation agreement with the Wellbeing Services County of Southwest Finland to identify where in the process advocacy might be most useful. Parallel research into the cost effectiveness of peer support is being undertaken by the Department of Health and Welfare and there is a proposal to develop a national online peer support service.

*"Clients are experts in their own lives. We are walking with them and we learn from each other."*

Kati Teppala, Lauste



*Lauste offers rehabilitation for families in the most challenging circumstances at their centre in Turku (right), including furnished residential accommodation with round the clock intensive support for the whole family for up to a year. The centres offer a safe and quiet environment to focus on individual challenges and behaviour and enable families to build capacity to return to their communities.*

# Money

*“People think the taxes they pay should cover these things. They don’t think they should have to pay more.”*

Parent

**Historically, high taxation has** funded public services.

This has generally been accepted because services are seen as high quality and available to all. The consensus is that well funded public programmes promote equal opportunity and a sense of community.

People pay taxes to the state and in their municipality. A compulsory health insurance contribution is paid to Kela, the social insurance institution, and unemployment insurance and pension contributions are also payable.

The Wellbeing Services Counties (WSCs) are funded centrally by government. Municipalities receive some government funding and also raise their own revenue.

The current government's stated aim is to reduce public spending, meaning private sector provision may increase.

## How funds are distributed

*"Our grant from STEA gives us stability so we can think long term. You can't think about making a difference strategically if you don't know if the funding will be there for staff or premises."*

Autismisäätiö

**One problem is confusion around** who should pay for what.

Eligibility criteria often vary and it can be hard to align funding from more than one source - for example education, which is a municipality responsibility, and social care, funded by the WSCs—leading to gaps in provision.

Grants from the state to NGOs are administered by STEA, the national Funding Centre for Social Welfare and Health Organisations. These can fund activities, development and introductory projects, but not business or commercial activities.

STEA does not fund statutory services, leading to confusion in practice where NGOs are involved in delivering services for municipalities or WSCs - the distinction around who funds what may not be clear.

Another player in the mix is Kela, the social insurance institution of Finland, which can also provide some services.

### All a bit of a lottery

**An important source of revenue is the gaming company Veikkaus Oy, which is owned by the state** and has exclusive rights to all gambling in Finland including lotteries, scratchcards, slot machines and arcades, betting and the country's two casinos (in Helsinki and Tampere). Profits are entirely allocated to social causes including youth work, social welfare and health.

Veikkaus Oy was formed in 2017 by a merger of three operators to minimise risks in gambling and prevent gambling related fraud. In 2022 it distributed profits of €679.9m, of which €292.3m went to social welfare and health organisations (Veikkaus Oy Annual Report, 2022).

## Kela — the Social Insurance Institution of Finland



**Kela has an important role in the** social security system.
It became responsible for disability benefits and allowances in 1989 and provides some services directly, such as interpreter services.

Its funds are from statutory health insurance contributions and government funding.

Its network of local offices are being replaced by citizen service centres supported by online hubs and call centres. A Social Security Committee was set up in 2020 to reform the social security system by 2027 to streamline administration and reduce costs.

## Benefits and allowances

The **basic state pension** can be granted from age 16 if someone can't work. It is also possible to qualify for **a variable-rate disability pension**. This means someone with a disability can retire without ever working. People may earn up to €922.42 per month without losing their pension. They can take a pension break for up to 2 years, but this can be complicated to arrange.

There is a **rehabilitation subsidy**, effectively a fixed-term disability pension to fund services such as work preparation or some therapies, and **Disability Allowance** for over 16s with a diagnosis that causes impairment lasting at least a year, leads to extra costs or means they need help in everyday life. It is not means tested and the level depends on the support needed.

Carers can apply for an **Informal Care** package including an allowance of at least €461.99 per month, the services the cared-for person needs and guaranteed carer support and respite.

## STEA—the national Funding Centre for Social Welfare and Health Organisations

**STEA administers and monitors grants to NGOs that promote** inclusion, participation and equality. Some are funded for a short time, others much longer— 20 years or more in some cases. Ongoing funding is likely to continue as long as a service or area of work is needed.

In 2023 €373.6m was given to social welfare and health care organisations in grants, with the smallest around €25,000 and the largest around €5m. Around €286m was for ongoing funding.

### What might an NGO do?

***Quite a lot...***

**Invalidiliitto is an umbrella** organisation for local and national membership associations, and publishes *IT Invalidiliitto*, a leading magazine on disability issues in Finland.

It influences government policy on behalf of members, is active in monitoring the implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and provides information and guidance about disability, including legal advice on services for disabled people and training, summer camps, events and peer support.

Invalidiliitto owns the special vocational education and training college Spesia, providing training to young people and adults who need individual support, and the social enterprises Validia Housing and Validia Rehabilitation.

# Education

**If there is a jewel in Finland's crown, it is education. Removing barriers to education for every citizen has long been seen as the best way to promote the core constitutional principles of equality, inclusion and participation.**

**The system is designed to be** flexible, accessible and to protect entitlements for every learner, regardless of age, academic ability or circumstances. There are no dead ends and it should always be possible to progress to a higher level.

Education to age 18 is state funded and provided by the municipalities. Most private schools receive state funding and follow core curricular guidelines.

Teachers have a high level of autonomy and can decide how to group pupils and organise teaching, including methods and materials, provided they meet pupil outcomes and legal requirements. Inspections were abolished in the 1990s and evaluation is by sampling.

The level of responsibility means teachers are expected to be highly qualified, usually with a master's degree in education plus a degree in a specific subject if teaching at upper secondary level. Special needs teachers must have either a master's degree with special pedagogy as the main subject or a teaching qualification that includes special needs studies.

In 2023 the average teaching salary was €46,981 (£40,392). Teaching is considered an attractive profession and staff turnover is low, although there have been strikes over pay.

## Hitting pause




**The Finnish system offers many** ways for pupils to hit pause on formal education and re-enter it later, create their own flexible path, or take time to review options and gain skills to progress. It gives students with additional support needs a chance to work towards qualifications and skills at a pace suited to their own style and abilities, and engage with lifelong learning along with everyone else.

The TUVA programme was introduced in 2022 for those who need more time to prepare for upper secondary education or employment. It lasts up to a year, but students can move on as soon as they have the right skills. It also offers a chance for those who are beyond school age but missed part of their education to return to the system and use the time to consider their options. TELMA is for students with learning disabilities, health issues or social difficulties that are more severe.

There are no exams. Graduation from all the programmes is skills based, through continuous assessment. Pupils gain credits for the parts of the programme they complete, so everyone leaves with something to build on for the future.

The main problems are high demand, and providing places where young people live so they can stay in their local area. There is also discussion around funding and whether these are education programmes, to be funded by the municipalities, or social care, and the responsibility of the new WSCs.

## Learning support in school

If an additional support need or disability is not apparent at birth it may be picked up through routine screening in school, which assesses all pupils for challenges that may impact their ability to learn.

There is a 3-tier approach to support in school. Every pupil is entitled to general support for learning as soon as a problem emerges. This is temporary and aims to prevent problems escalating. No official documentation is needed.

If a pupil needs second-tier, or intensified, support, the school carries out a pedagogical assessment and a learning plan must be made where the need for support is defined and the support measures described. The third support tier—special support—requires an extensive assessment and a formal decision.

The purpose is always to provide the support the young person needs to move to the next educational level. Special support can be in the pupil's own school or elsewhere, and needs are regularly reassessed.

All pupils, at any age, have a right to welfare services within school including guidance, counselling and health care, along with access to psychologists and social workers (who must be provided by the Wellbeing Services Counties). Guidance counsellors in schools must have a master's degree, plus a guidance counsellor studies qualification. The focus of counselling is expected always to be the strengths and hopes of the young person and finding a suitable place for them to further their skills and development. The RUORI self assessment tool, developed by Luovi College to help vocational students explore what is important to them, is one way to support these conversations.




*What's your dream? Young people with additional support needs are encouraged to talk about their goals and aspirations at Luovi, a special Vocational Education and Training college in Oulu*

Students in upper secondary level and beyond are entitled to disability services organised by the Welfare Services Counties, including personal assistance and transport.

## Education after 16

The last 2 years of compulsory education can be in a range of settings, but whatever the route, the aim is to achieve a qualification that allows entry to the next educational level or to the labour market.

### General upper secondary schools and VET

General upper secondary schools focus on academic

**Since 2021, education has been compulsory for everyone to age 18.**

Early childhood education and care is available from birth, with the amount families pay depending on their income, family size, and how many hours a week a child will attend. There is a compulsory pre-primary year at age 6 before entering "basic" education, which covers 9 years of primary and lower secondary education to age 16.

From age 16 to 18, a variety of routes and educational settings are available to enable all learners to complete their educational entitlement and achieve a qualification that allows them to progress to the next educational level or to the labour market.

A young person is entitled to prolong their compulsory education if they are not able to achieve the prescribed education goals within this timeframe because of illness or disability.

study rather than a particular profession. Vocational Education and Training (VET) schools focus on professional skills alongside theoretical learning, and businesses play an important role in planning, implementing and assessing courses. There are also specialist VET schools offering training for students with additional support needs.

The VET system works in the same way for school age students and adults continuing or returning to learning. Each student has a personal competence development plan setting out their existing skills, identifying those they need to acquire, and outlining how these will be achieved—for some this may be through workplace experience, for others further school based study. Currently around half of students continue to VET rather than a general upper secondary school.

Whatever route a student chooses, and however long it takes to complete their course, the final qualification allows them to apply to any university. Learning units are in modules rather than year groups or classes and pupils decide their own schedules, meaning they can study individual modules at any stage during their course. Some can be available online so pupils who cannot attend in person can still study, and students can mix and match modules across educational settings.

Courses are designed to last 3 years, but this depends on the student. Each module is assessed when complete and the leaving qualification is awarded when a pupil gains the right number of credits. General upper secondary school pupils also take a national matriculation examination.

## University education

Universities are self governing. As a rule Finnish citizens study free of charge.

Students can apply to traditional universities or universities of applied sciences, so long as they have graduated from secondary.

A bachelor's degree is 3 years, but can be spread over a longer time at a university of applied sciences. A master's degree needs a further 2 years of study and at a university of applied sciences you must have 2 years of work experience between courses.

Each university manages its own academic support arrangements. For example, at Häme University of Applied Sciences, students contact the special education teacher to discuss their needs and provide anything required to support the request, before applying online for the necessary adjustments. They receive a decision within 2 weeks, the details of which form a contract with the university. It is the student's responsibility to inform staff of the arrangements agreed. Non-academic support is through the Wellbeing Services Counties as for any other disabled person.

## Other options

**Anyone can access continuous learning through non-formal** settings including adult education centres, folk high schools, learning centres, sports training centres and summer universities.

*Folk High Schools*

There are 74 of these schools across the country. There are no entry qualifications and no upper or lower age limit.

The schools emphasise practical skills and many have a special area of interest, for example sport, media and communications or languages. Some specialise in supporting students with additional needs and disabilities, but anyone may apply for any study programme.

Over 19,000 pupils attend folk high schools annually and help with funding is available through Kela, the social insurance institution of Finland.



*The Oodi Library in Helsinki, home not just to learning resources but music studios, art and craft bases, a crèche, meeting spaces, cafes and work bases. You will never want to leave!*

# Special Vocational Education and Training (VET) colleges

**For many young people with additional support needs, VET offers a** practical, skills based, flexible approach that allows them to work towards qualifications in a way and at a pace that suits them.

Pupils with disabilities or additional support needs have the same entitlement as any other student to complete upper secondary education in a standard vocational college. Colleges have a duty to provide support including adapted teaching, training and advice. However in practice many struggle with how best to help pupils who need extra support or a different style of learning.

Finland has six special vocational colleges with multiple campuses across the country catering for students who need intensive special support. An element of their funding is linked to students finding work at the end of their course, which has led to an increased focus on careers advice and development. However opportunities after leaving remain limited for disabled young people.

A partnership network of vocational special education colleges, AMEO, exists to influence legislation and practice.

*"I came here to figure out what I want to do as I don't really have a direction in life. So I came here to find that thing, to find my passion, so I can enjoy working with what I do."*

TUVA student at Luovi College

## Luovi—preparing for life

**Luovi College is one of the** providers offering special vocational education and training (VET), with more than 30 centres across Finland.

For Principal Seija Karvonen, Luovi's most important function is to prepare students for a future they can shape and participate in.

"Luovi's core value is trust," she explains. "Trust in our staff to deliver our objectives. Trust in the ability of the young people who come through the doors. When no one else trusts and believes they can do it, we do."




*Luovi's main campus in Oulu, 60 miles south of the Arctic Circle*

Prospective students are assessed individually and most are interviewed. Admission and graduation are not tied to term dates, meaning spaces may become available throughout the year and a student can usually start their course immediately to maintain momentum.

Within the first few days, staff agree an individual study plan with the student based on assessment using RUORI, an interactive tool developed by Luovi and now used across Finland to help young people identify what matters to them and set their own goals.

"The important thing is to make sure the plan meets the student's individual needs so they stay motivated and engaged," says Seija. "If they are only here because they feel obligated, it doesn't work so well. This isn't school in the way they might have known it,

and it's important they know they have a choice to be here."

Developing practical skills and strategies is as important as academic qualifications. Luovi runs 50 TUVA and 60 TELMA courses (see p.14) across Finland.

In Oulu, TUVA students have a mixed timetable of group activities alongside individually tailored work experience, skills development and life planning. Regardless of when they enter the programme, each student has up to 38 weeks to focus on who they are, what interests and motivates them, and what they need to succeed. How this looks in practice is different for everyone, but is likely to involve careers and welfare counselling, trying out a range of options and developing essential skills. It's a real chance for students who need it to have a breathing space and more preparation before they progress to the next step— improving their chances of success when they get there.



*Working bakery at Luovi in daily use by TELMA students*

TELMA takes an holistic approach that prepares students with severe learning disabilities for work and independent living, including information about to housing and rehabilitation. They learn by doing: for example, in the fully equipped kitchen and bakery on the Oulu campus,

## Using technology to support learning

**For students in remote areas, or otherwise** unable to attend college, Luovi provides satellite teaching which can be arranged for a single student or a group.

This is not home based learning - although one student, confined to bed and able only to track with their eyes, has followed a vocational training course using Augmented Reality and Virtual Reality software to gain experience of being in a work environment.

More typically, Luovi identifies a local space students travel to, replicating the experience of travelling to college or work, where instructors join them remotely through Teams. Work placements are also arranged locally.

"For some students it has worked perfectly," says Luovi Principal Seija Karvonen. "A young person stays in familiar surroundings and keeps their existing support, which avoids upheaval. They also experience work where they are going to live, not somewhere else that might have different jobs that are less relevant to them. It's about taking education to where they are, rather than requiring them to come to us."

Luovi chose to employ an IT professional to explore new technology, including AR and VR programs and equipment. Seija believes they are already beginning to realise the benefits.

Some students, for example, experience the setting a car mechanic might work in, without leaving the college. Not intended as a substitute for real work experience, it is useful in preparing someone who struggles to visualise a setting they have not yet experienced. In this way an actual placement is likely to be more successful.

"It brings a new dimension and gamification to the learning experience," Seija explains. "It's engaging and it has a very practical application. We are preparing young people to live and take part in the world of the future, and this will be an important part of our success."

which supplies shops and cafes in the city.

Whatever the learning programme, all staff members are collectively responsible for ensuring students progress towards the outcomes agreed in their learning plan.

The staff are also responsible for finding placements for work in which a student has expressed interest, and supporting students and employers to make sure the experience is positive. This might include advising employers on suitable tasks for the placement, explaining the adjustments needed and advising how best to supervise someone and give them instructions.

"It's crucial to the success of the placement, especially at the beginning," Seija says. "It's important they get the right experience so they can decide if this kind of work is really for them—but also to build their confidence and self esteem."

Within the TUVA programme, if you change your mind or decide something isn't for you it's not the end of the world. It's simply another opportunity to gain experience and learn a little more about yourself within a supportive environment.

"I came here to learn to be a joiner," one student explained. "Actually, when I tried it I didn't like it—it's not for me." He is now considering computer programming and his next steps will be developing skills that allow him to try this option too.

Asked about TUVA and Luovi, the answer was loud and clear.

“I can’t think of a better place for me right now. There’s nothing I want to change.”

# Making the world your oyster

**Students with additional support needs at Luovi enjoy the** same opportunities as anyone in Finland to try living and working abroad.

The Erasmus+ programme allows any student in a participating country, regardless of disability, to study or work in another European country, but Luovi also has its own contact network outside the EU and is continually seeking new partners.

Miia Tolonen is Luovi’s International Coordinator. Her role is to build relationships with study and work providers worldwide.

"Students take up a range of opportunities," she says. "A car mechanic student and a catering student went to Canada for an internship. Another placement was set up for a catering student in Spain, directly to the working place. With group trips, there are possibilities for all—last summer a group of TELMA students [with severe learning disabilities] went to Denmark for 2 weeks. We have extensive experience of supporting these kinds of placements—we know what we are doing."

International professionals have used Erasmus themselves to spend time in Finland and learn from the Luovi approach.

Students who travel must be stable healthwise, have some language skills, and be assessed by staff as capable of managing the trip. Luovi sets up the placement, arranges the paperwork and organises accommodation. Students have support for everyday living and language, although basic English is helpful.

If a student identifies travel as one of their goals, their individual study plan will include the preparation and skills development to equip them for the trip. This can include preparing families too: for many this is the first time travelling without family members.

Dealing with the unexpected is part of the learning experience but support is always available and in 10 years, only one placement has broken down to the point where the pupil had to come home.

"College is not always about the safe thing," Miia explains. "For many students this boosts their self esteem, opens their eyes to new possibilities, and builds their aspirations. It shows them what they are capable of, and prepares them for the future."



*Swans taking flight are a national symbol of Finland*

*"A student with special needs in one area of life can be a top expert in another."*

# What do students say good vocational education and training is?

Sanna Ryökkynen

**New research listening to students who need intensive learning support offers important insights into how we might best help these young people achieve their potential**

These findings, based on research among students themselves, raise questions around the purpose of vocational education for this group and how it is delivered.

If the aim is to prepare young people with additional support needs for employment, yet such a small proportion go on to find meaningful work, it may be that a focus on labour market competences alone is not serving them well.

A clear finding is that these students can struggle to exercise agency, motivation and self efficacy — important skills for success in vocational education, and essential in the workplace. One explanation could be if school has not involved the young person greatly in shaping their own support and study path, they may need more time and help to adjust to a different approach before they are ready to engage with their course.

The research also reveals the enormous importance of social belonging in enabling a young person to study effectively as well as develop skills for the workplace. It suggests a broader approach than qualification requirements and labour market needs might be more beneficial in supporting this group of young people to complete education with the skills they will need in the wider world.

The study concludes that to best serve the interests of this group, education needs to be less closely connected to economic growth and efficacy, and instead take an approach that supports longer term sustainability.

***Four characteristics students consider crucial to good study environments and a sense of belonging*:**

- **Understanding attitudes among staff and peers**. Acceptance, good relationships and responsiveness were important for wellbeing and self esteem. Students valued people who saw beyond their support needs and viewed them as people with skills and capabilities. Those who did not experience positive recognition found it much harder to value themselves and their skills.
- **Staff presence and time**. Recognition, guidance and encouragement from teachers were very important. Students saw positive relationships with teaching staff as key to their abilities being validated and their voices heard. They expected teachers to provide instructions, explanations and direction. It mattered that teachers were understanding, supportive, and available to talk.
- **Social empowerment**. For these students, finding their feet socially and building a positive self image were defining features. Many had difficult previous experiences and

saw college as a new start and a turning point. Feeling accepted was empowering, but for anyone denied acceptance or unable to take this chance it had an equally powerful opposite effect that significantly impacted their ability to think positively. Students who struggled for recognition or faced negative stereotypes were especially alert to signs of exclusion or rejection.

- **Professional qualifications**. They regarded these as meaningful, and appreciated the chance to study and gain new skills and knowledge. They hoped to find their place in the wider world through having attended college.

***Pointers to good practice:***

- Staff should make sure students' voices are heard and support them to develop greater agency.
- More attention must be paid to personal growth of students with additional support needs, including a greater focus on positive social experiences and belonging, creating capability and supporting wellbeing.
- Negative social experiences are the most significant factors hindering students from achieving their objectives.
- Recognise some students need support to develop decision making skills, determine their own aspirations, and manage interactions before they can engage effectively with their course. More time for student-teacher conversations would help increase their ability to think and act independently.
- Students with additional support needs should be given opportunities to practice expressing their preferences and voicing their needs for support.
- Vocational education and training staff are change agents who can promote equality and inclusion.
- Soft skills are especially important for teachers: values, self awareness, empathy, understanding the emotional states of others, along with developing the ability to affirm the skills, knowledge and strengths of all students.
- The focus should be on young peoples' skills, knowledge and capabilities rather than their support needs.
- Different types of support should be available so it is person centred and not a "one size fits all" approach.
- Involving a student's wider social network including families, peers and support outside college, is hugely important in rooting their experiences in the wider world.
- More attention should be paid to eliminating barriers to learning and participation in employment.

Ryökkynen, S (2023). *"They did not give up on me." Vocational students' perceptions of the special support in their studying*. PhD thesis, University of Helsinki. In English.

# Health and social care



**In January 2023, after 20 years of discussion and planning, responsibility for social welfare and health care moved from local municipalities to 21 Wellbeing Services Counties, plus the City of Helsinki (which still organises its own services).**

## Wellbeing Services Counties (WSCs)

Each WSC is governed by an elected council and belongs to one of five collaborative areas. They are accountable to government, which must approve strategic objectives and investment plans. All have elected councils for people with disabilities, which include disabled people and their families, and help shape services.

The WSCs manage frontline services, hospitals and emergency or rescue services, while municipalities remain responsible for environmental health and collaborate on campaigns to promote health and wellbeing.

Primary health care is through health centres or occupational health care systems. Private practice is increasing, but only three providers are nationwide. Access to health professionals with appropriate expertise can be an issue for some groups and some areas.

The changes aim to tackle previous weaknesses when over 300 municipalities organised care locally. This sometimes led to regional disparities, poor coordination and inefficiency. The WSCs are meant to improve access for everyone with multidisciplinary teams, longer opening hours and more digital services. They also aim to coordinate care more easily across services.

The Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare (THL) will evaluate performance of the counties annually.

The changes, although welcomed in principle, have been controversial. There are concerns social care risks becoming a “poor relation”, with the lion's share of funding moving to health as a universal service, leaving those who depend on social services a lower priority. They have also impacted the municipalities, whose local autonomy has been a fundamental aspect of democracy in Finland. Some have lost around 50% of their budgets with the transfer of funds to the WSCs.

### KANTA—Finland’s health and social welfare data management system

Finland is a global leader in the electronic data management of health and wellbeing.

Kanta digital services allow people across the country to view and manage their own health and social welfare data online. It covers public and private providers, so data can be shared and updated easily across a range of settings, and access is controlled by the individual themselves and appropriate professionals who are supporting them.

Parents can maintain data on behalf of their children to age 18, after which guardianship is needed.

## Spending on health and social care

**Finland's spending on health and social care services per head of** population is above the EU average, but lower than other Nordic countries as a proportion of general government expenditure.

Since 2000, there has been a 71% increase in spending on specialised health care, compared with 17% on primary care.

Around 80% of funding is from public sources. Unmet needs for medical care due to barriers of finance, location or waiting times are higher than the EU average, especially for those with low incomes. *Source: State of Health in the EU: Finland Country Health Profile 2021, European Commission*

## Mental health in Finland

**Approaches focus on strengthening good mental health for the** population as a whole, and reducing factors that undermine it.

Individual wellbeing is widely used as a measure throughout public services but experiences vary. Historically suicide rates in Finland have been high. Evidence indicates young people in Finland increasingly struggle with mental health, especially following Covid, and this can be marked for those with additional support needs and disabilities.

The Sekasin chat—an online discussion platform for 12-29 year olds offering support by professionals and trained volunteers—has been running since 2017.

"There are teething problems and issues between municipalities and WSC teams, and lots of discussions about money. For example, who is responsible for what—some things are clear, others less so, as to if the municipality or the WSC should pay.

For staff they think about uniform, corporate identity and so on. And the work cultures can be different between municipalities and the WSCs or between health and social care. Some are more relaxed and laid back, based on relationships of trust, others have a more formal process. They may have been organised and managed differently, and processes and even language may not always align.

It's different across Finland too. In some areas they had already worked closely together so it was easier. If they were more independent and autonomous, it's more of an adjustment.

We estimate it will take about 7 years before the WSCs will work as they should be working. We are worried the culture will become more service centred than person centred, and that in creating new institutions provision may be changed or cut."

*Kehitysvammaliitto*

### Staffing levels

*Finland faces a shortfall in health and social care staff, and there are difficulties recruiting and retaining people with the right skills and experience. Salaries, complexity of the work and increasing pressures play a part, along with a drive to cut immigration. Some question how reforms can be implemented with current staff levels.*

### Health inequalities

*In April 2021 the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health launched an Action Plan to reduce inequalities in health and wellbeing in Finland with 144 measures to be implemented by 2030. A key objective is to support the ability to work and study. The plan is being monitored by the Advisory Board for Public Health.*

### Mental health strategy

*In 2020 the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health announced a 10-year mental health strategy. The focus is currently on developing services, launching a new suicide prevention programme and promoting mental health in everyday environments as part of a wider programme of promoting wellbeing and health, particularly among young people.*

*"It's vital to gain knowledge from the young adults themselves as they are experts in their own lives."*

# Quality of life for young people with severe disabilities through and beyond transition

Nina Heräjärvi

## New research into the quality of life experienced by young people aged 19-22 with severe disabilities based on interviews with young people themselves

The study shows quality of life mostly deteriorates in adulthood, linked to the structure and provision of services and the reduced ability of the family to provide support beyond childhood.

The biggest challenges are a lack of appropriate support to continue education where young people live; difficulty accessing effective health care; and unequal services provision. There is a direct link between these and poor outcomes in employment, inclusion and the chance to create a family or other close support network.

The evidence suggests the following factors would make the most difference to wellbeing and health, capacity to work, ability to engage with others, inclusion and reduced dependence on services for these young people.

***Key findings***

- Poor experiences of education and health care are the most significant predictors of poor quality of life, and poor outcomes.
- Good services and support are the defining difference in the ability to work, participate in society and maintain physical and mental health.
- Better outcomes depend on the understanding of others, as young people cannot change their disability.
- Good transitions are critical to long term health and wellbeing.
- A person centred approach is essential.
- The best measure of a successful outcome is the quality of life young people report after transition.

***What makes the biggest difference?***

- **Training for education and healthcare practitioners** to ensure they understand the importance of early interventions and access to specialist skills. Pairing staff with more experienced mentors or supporting professional networks could help.
- Policy and practice with a **focus on improving lives rather than improving processes**.

- **Leadership** within organisations to set goals and maintain momentum.
- **Focus on accessibility**, both physical (e.g. transport services, access to buildings) and intellectual (e.g. literacy/digital literacy programmes, information in easy language, interpretation and advocacy services).
- Low stress home environment (**physical and financial security**).
- Gathering **direct feedback** from young people.

*Within education:*

- Support to complete education, and continue to learn new skills into adulthood. Those not supported to complete education report greater financial difficulties, feel less equipped to form positive relationships outside the family and less able to access information important to them.
- Services that focus on young peoples' needs and hopes, and the skills they will need to participate in society—particularly literacy and digital literacy.
- Appropriate, flexible and accessible educational materials.

*Within health care:*

- Providing assistive devices as early as possible, and regular maintenance and monitoring to ensure continued effectiveness. There is a direct link between this, improved mobility, and reduced inequality.
- Effective management of pain, fatigue, and emotional and psychological health.
- Focus on social and leisure activities to combat loneliness, promote skills development and boost mental health and wellbeing.
- More accessible and person centred adult health and social care settings, with multiprofessional clinics available to young disabled people.
- Improved access to primary health care and practitioners with an understanding of this group's particular needs.

To sum up, positive change depends on delivering evidence based, practical services and processes that address young peoples' goals, and creating a disability aware environment within the wider community.

Heräjärvi, N (2023). *Developing quality of life implementation feedback model to improve quality of life for Finnish young adults with severe physical disabilities.* PhD thesis, University of Jyväskylä. In English.




# Data informed practice

## THL—right information, right place, right time

**Decisions are only as sound as** the data and evidence on which they are based.

The Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare (THL) is an independent, state owned expert and research institute within the administrative branch of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health.

It gathers data across five departmental areas and provides reliable information to a range of operators to support decision making and activities in health and welfare, with the goal of promoting the welfare, health and safety of the population.

With around 1300 employees, and offices in all Finland's main cities, THL is a recognised centre of excellence and a partner in projects involving domestic and international scientific cooperation. Each year it publishes around 700 articles in scientific publications, around half of which are in collaboration with international partners.

As well as maintaining national statistics, THL coordinates record keeping so data from multiple sources is streamlined and cohesive, and identifies information gaps to commission new research. This includes promoting data collection on community based social care services, vulnerable people, special population groups and digital security.

An important aspect of THL's work is to provide stakeholders with information and solutions to build a more equal, equitable and sustainable society. Decision makers in central government, municipalities and Wellbeing Services Counties, local government officials, and social welfare and health care professionals are all among their service users and they foster cooperation among different operators and good practice in the promotion of health and wellbeing. Data reports and conclusions are also available to the general public.

## Disability in Society unit team




Online Handbook of Disability Services (see link, p.32)

*The work of the Disability in Society unit team at THL is based on human rights and promoting equity, and is extensively related to disability with a particular focus on services and the service system.*

*The team's key product is the Online Handbook of Disability Services, which disseminates information to help practitioners apply legislation. Information is also shared through events, network meetings and publications.*

*The unit team systematically collects data related to services for people with disabilities through various research and development projects, to improve services and promote social equality. It also participates in the development and reform of legislation.*

# Accessible to all

**Strategy, guidance and even legislation only has an impact if it translates into action.**

Kehitysvammaliitto, or FAIDD—the Finnish Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities—supports others to improve what they do and make aspirations real.

FAIDD facilitates Selkokeskus, the Finnish Centre for Easy Language, promoting easy to understand information, communication and culture.

Easy language is normally associated with written text, but it also applies to spoken language.

"Easy language is a way of modifying content, vocabulary and linguistic structures so it is easier to understand for everyone," explains Leealaura Leskelä, development manager at Selkokeskus. "The need may be individual, but all of us could find it useful at different times in our lives."

Selkokeskus estimates up to 14% of the population may benefit from easy language to help manage everyday situations, study and working life, and social participation. This includes people with a permanent need for linguistic support, due to a disability or cognitive difficulty; those whose language skills become impaired, through illness or injury; and those whose mother tongue is not Finnish. Easy language may help people recovering from problems with mental health or addiction; who are unaccustomed to reading; and anyone in difficult or crisis situations.

The Centre provides guidance and training on how to write and




*Image: Tapio Haanperä*

speak easy language, and how to lay out and illustrate an easy language publication or make an easy language video. As well as publishing their own materials, they provide editorial and checking services to authorities, municipalities and other groups, with the national easy language logo granted to those who meet the criteria as a hallmark of clear and effective communication.

Research into easy language development is ongoing, and the University of Helsinki runs a network, Klaara-verkosto, to share learning and developments in Finnish and English with anyone interested.

Accessibility expert Tapio Haanperä is one of the trainers at Papunet, also part of FAIDD. Here are his recommendations for accessible communication onscreen. All use using standard office software or free online tools.

- Don't use images alone to convey information, provide a text alternative.
- Check colour contrast between text and background.
- Don't rely on colour to convey meaning, e.g. in graphics or charts: add text.
- Change wording to make clear what happens if you click a link: "Click here to register" is more accessible than "Click here".
- Make sure people can navigate and enter information using a keyboard, not just by touch.
- All videos should have captions (subtitles) and audio description with information to clarify the context: e.g. "A man with a guide dog is getting on a bus."
- Podcasts need a text alternative.
- Avoid moving text (e.g. rolling quotes on websites, automatically updating content) or videos that start automatically, or make sure the user can disable these features.
- In emails include important information in the message itself, not just in a download. Downloads and attachments should be accessible too and their titles describe the content.
- Use embedded styles for headings, body text or lists, not just different fonts, so screen readers can identify them.
- Identify the language of any text not in the main language of the site or document.
- Make sure everything is visible on a mobile phone without having to scroll left and right.

# Employment

*I think in Finland as well as other countries there's a lot of work to do with attitude. That's a problem I think and attitudes, they don't show, we keep them secret."*

Employment expert

**For many people regular, paid work is more than economic stability and security. It reflects who we are, our place in the world and what we can offer those around us. So it should be no surprise the more barriers there are to finding and keeping work, the harder it is to feel recognised, included and valued.**

Finland places faith in a strong education system to support inclusion, but this has yet to translate into equal work opportunities and progression for most disabled adults.

The biggest barriers are often attitudes and assumptions among employers.

Vates-säätiö are experts in the equal employment of people with disabilities, long term illnesses and partial work capacity. They train employers and staff to recognise disabled workers as a resource they can't afford to overlook.

Kaija Ray, vice president of the European Union of Supported Employment and a senior specialist within the Vates team, believes employers who think creatively are those who will succeed in a changing world.

"What the future of work is going to be—we are in that discussion right now," she says. "It's not that people with disabilities can only do low level jobs. We have thousands of disabled people with a university degree or a good level of education, and we shouldn't forget about them."

Working with employers matters as much as with disabled jobseekers. Vates-säätiö helps companies identify easy changes—for example, combining essential tasks into a single role—to create an opening for a disabled person.

There is a place for legislation, guidelines and into work plans to support employment initiatives, but Kaija feels they bring their own challenges and maybe the answers lie elsewhere.

"They can make criteria too tight and end up excluding people who still need help," she says. "We should shift the dialogue and talk about solutions and getting the best from your skills, whoever you are—not about the barriers and whether you qualify for help to overcome them. As long as this kind of speech is going on it won't be a person centred approach, and it won't be enough to change things."

***Principles of Supported Employment***

The Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare (THL)

- The service is open to anyone who wants to have a job
- The goal is employment in the open labour market
- Quick job search
- Job coaches create close cooperative relationships with employers
- The starting point for the job search is the client's own interests
- Personal ongoing support
- Job coaching is integrated with other activities that support work
- Benefits counselling is part of job coaching

# Supporting people into real jobs

**Kehitysvammaliitto, or FAIDD—** the Finnish Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities—promotes the participation of people with intellectual disabilities, and people who need special support in learning, understanding and communication.

With over 100 members, including disabled people and families, they are active in shaping policy and practice.

Employment expert Simo Klem is developing Palkkaamo, a national network for professionals and job coaches in disability services. It also connects disabled job seekers with employers.

The challenge is trying to support people into "real" jobs. Finland has a tradition of sheltered work, intended as a way into employment, but in practice often trapping people in low skilled work.

"The language used is the same as employment, and it gives the impression these are actual jobs," Simo says. "But they aren't on the same basis as a regular employee at all. Some people stay for 20 years or more."

FAIDD's research shows disabled people are generally not supported to move into more demanding roles, and as the disability pension is viewed as providing a good standard of living, many do not see the need for specialist support. An important part of the discussion is raising awareness not only of the value disabled people bring to the workplace but the need for career development pathways to support permanent, fulfilling jobs.

Progress has included a government work ability programme in 2020-2022 promoting supported employment, and setting up a state owned company, Työkanava, to provide paid work for disabled people.

*"We have had a discussion about sheltered work here for a long time … If it suits you and you're happy, fine. But if it becomes an approach applied to everyone, it may work against you. If you are stuck for years with no other possibilities, that's not good. It isn't your choice."*

Employment expert

# Job coaches bridging the gap

**A good job coach can be a** gamechanger. They can bridge the gap between a disabled person and an employer, helping each better understand the needs of the other, and act as a point of contact for either side to smooth the transition into work.

But crucially, it must be a tailored to the individual's needs.

"We have a problem with some work coaching, because it is often a one to one service," says Vesa Korhonen of Autismisäätiö, which runs its own into work programme. "For our clients, the challenge is being in groups. They may be highly skilled, but if you only meet them individually you don't see where the challenges lie. We practice group skills."

There can also be issues around the length of time support is available. If it is part of an agreed social care package, the recipient is entitled to 50 hours.

"Involving a job coach over a longer period can make a big difference," explains Simo Klem at FAIDD. "If you take support away too soon it may not be so effective."

There are many ways to access job coaching. It may be provided through employment services, the health insurance agency Kela, the municipalities and Wellbeing Services Counties, private companies or NGOs. Sometimes job coaches are on the staff of larger organisations, or special vocational education and training colleges.

Vates-säätiö facilitates a network of job coaches around the country, offering seminars and peer support for many who work independently and value connection to others in the field.

# People, not process

**Good practice scratches where people are itching.**

**These are examples of services that are very different from each other but share some striking characteristics.**

**They have responded to identified needs and focused on people, not process. They have resisted restrictive eligibility criteria linked to age or, in some cases, diagnosis, and have prioritised personal wellbeing and fulfilment. Last but not least, they have developed programmes, activities and support that open new possibilities and build on what people *can* do rather than being limited by what they can't.**

**It's not rocket science, and it doesn't cost extra money. It's the culture and values that make it work.**

## Resonaari



*The Resonaarigroup, disabled musicians employed by Resonaari to demonstrate inclusion in action, rehearse for a gig*

**Resonaari makes music possible for everyone, with teaching** methods and approaches that allow complete beginners to play with bands and groups from their first session. Being part of a community of musicians working together is absolutely key.

The school is open to anyone, of any age—the oldest pupil is 84. No one is asked about diagnosis: simply "Is there anything it would be good for us to know?". The vast majority of pupils have physical or learning disabilities, are neurodiverse, or have cognitive or processing issues. They don't need to own an instrument or have previous musical experience.

Resonaari has also become an "expert centre" for consultancy and training that is making music more inclusive across Finland and beyond—a process director Markku Kaikkonen describes as "democracy in learning".

## Rusetti

**Rusetti has only two paid workers but is challenging attitudes to** disabled women across the country.

For individuals, their community based work offers peer support and mentorship.  At national level they campaign on relevant issues, including making safe houses more accessible for disabled women facing domestic violence and on disability and gender.

They connect women and girls of all ages and with disabilities of all kinds, making them more visible in society, and giving them a voice. Information includes their handbook for disabled women who are mothers or considering motherhood, alongside discussion groups for older women and a new virtual platform for women and girls under 30.

Rusetti mentors are all disabled and trained with the help of the Finnish Mentor Association to work with people one to one to identify personal goals and offer support.

## Kukunori

**Kukunori began in 2012 as a mental health advocacy NGO tackling** social issues in unconventional ways. Most members have issues with mental health or substance misuse, or learning disabilities.




*In the shared meeting space at Kukunori—people are often out and about!*

It uses the Guided Functional Peer Support model, pioneered by founder Markus Raivio, which connects people through shared interests in “culture houses”—often art or music, but anything a group wants. Current activities include walking football, making podcasts, Huudikoutsit—which coaches people with addiction issues to support one another—and Roso-tuotanto, an online music culture house for 18-35 year olds that collectively writes and releases music.

Hundreds of people are involved across the country. Members provide peer support, and organise and manage their own activities with the help of a trained supporter. People join and leave as they wish.

## Seitti

**Seitti – “web”— is facilitated by Invalidiliitto and links five member** organisations to arrange events for disabled young people aged 13 to 29. The aim is to build confidence, practise life skills and have fun.




*Seitti sport camp, summer 2023. Used with permission*

Seitti arranges 10 national events and camps throughout the year and subsidises places for young people and their support workers or personal assistants. Family members are not allowed to attend. The point is to do something away from your family, like anyone else.

Between camps volunteers organise local events, also subsidised by Seitti. “We only talk about youth work, never ‘youth work for the disabled’,” says Seitti leader Kalle Jokinen. “It’s more like we are making youth work accessible for all—that's the idea.”

## Autismisäätiö

Autismisaatiö, the Autism Foundation in Finland, was started by families determined to plug gaps in services and its founding values are still hugely important. But how they are delivered is changing.



*In the art room at Vallila, one of Autismisäätiö’s centres in Helsinki*

“We don't create programmes then look for clients,” says Vesa Korhonen. “We develop services to meet the needs of people who come to us. It's about individual plans that reflect their goals and outcomes.”

People come by many routes—through schools, municipalities and WSCs, or families get in touch directly. People can attend long or short term and Autismisäätiö can operate as a stop gap while families wait for assessment and diagnosis, or for services to be put in place. They support people with ADHD/ADD and characteristics of pathological demand avoidance (PDA) as well as autism.

Individual programmes are through day centres, psychotherapy and neurorehabilitation, work coaching, or tailored support programmes.

“We stress to them this is not a school, it's not compulsory,” says Vesa. “You *can* come, but there is no ‘must’.”

# Useful links

*All links are to pages in English unless otherwise stated. Google Translate is very effective for sites in Finnish*

## Key information and resources for everything to do with health care and social welfare

THL— the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare
Online Handbook of Disability Services. Published by THL to help practitioners apply legislation.

## Making rights real

VANE—the Advisory Board for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
National Action Plan on the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2020-2023)
Lauste—rehabilitation centre working with the whole family

## Money

STEA—Funding Centre for Social Welfare and Health Organisations
Kela—the Social Insurance Institution for Finland
Veikkus Oy—annual report 2022

## Education

Finnish VET in a Nutshell. This, and other guides, published by the Finnish National Agency for Education.
Luovi College
Folk High Schools in Finland
Häme University of Applied Sciences (HAMK)
Sanna Ryökkynen: *"They did not give up on me." Vocational students' perceptions of the special support in their studying*. Click here to request the full thesis.

## Health and social care

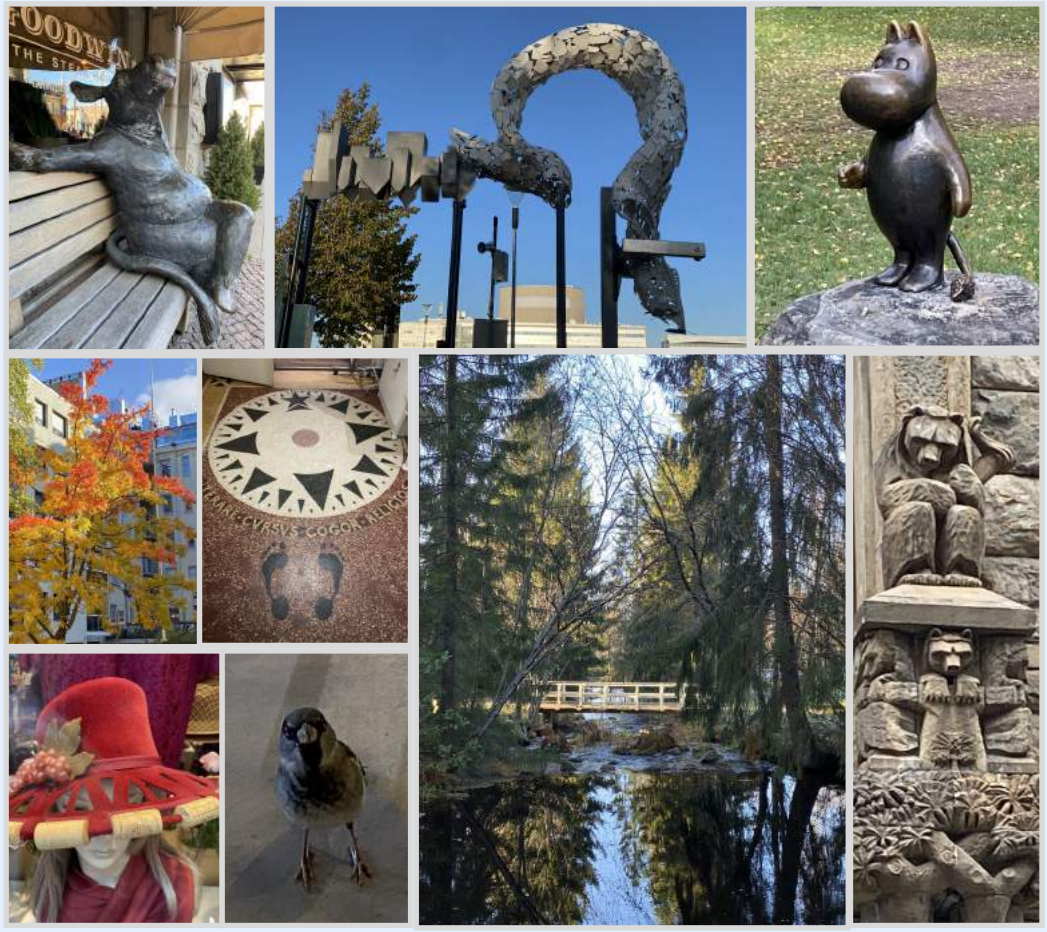
KANTA— managing personal data in health care and social welfare
Information from THL relating to health and welfare inequalities
Mental Health Strategy 2020-2030—Information from THL
Sekasin Chat—part of a mental health focus on young people
Nina Heräjärvi: Developing quality of life implementation feedback model to improve quality of life for Finnish young adults with severe physical disabilities. Click here to download the full thesis.

## Employment

Työkanava—state owned company (***in Finnish***)
Government work ability programme (2019-2023)

## NGOs

Vates-säätiö—equal employment of people with disabilities, long term illnesses and partial work capacity
Kukunori—supporting wellbeing
Rusetti—peer support and empowerment for disabled women (***in Finnish***)
Invalidiliitto—wide range of activities and support to promote a full life for disabled people
Seitti—youth organisation (***in Finnish***)
Resonaari—inclusive music creation and performance
Kehitysvammaliitto (Finnish Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities)
Selkokeskus—accessible and easy language
Papunet—promoting inclusive communication (***in Finnish***)
Autismisäätiö—Autism Foundation of Finland



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