

SUMMARY

Annual Report 2005 of the Ombudsman for Children. Helsinki 2006. 44 pages.
(Reports of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, ISSN 1236-2115; 2006: 36)
ISBN 952-00-2034-9 (print)
ISBN 952-00-2035-7 (PDF)

Maria Kaisa Aula, Licentiate in Political Science, started work as Finland's first Ombudsman for Children on 1 September 2005. The Ombudsman for Children issues an annual report to the government on her activities. The annual report for 2005 is divided into two parts. The first reports on the Ombudsman for Children's work since September. The second part provides an assessment of the development of child welfare and the realisation of the rights of children. Changes that ought to be made to legislation are compiled in a separate chapter, which assesses client contacts made with the Ombudsman.

The Ombudsman for Children is an initiator of decisions, carries influence in society, amplifies the voice of children and builds cooperation among actors in the field of child policy. The Ombudsman monitors the living conditions of children and young people, and influences social development policy by strengthening the viewpoint of children. The duties of the Ombudsman also include reinforcing the participation of children and young people and conveying their opinions in decision-making processes. The foundation of the work of the Ombudsman for Children is the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

The Ombudsman for Children's task is to promote the realisation of the interests and rights of children together with other actors in the field. The Ombudsman does not replace the activities of other officials, but instead complements them. The Ombudsman for Children does not deal with individual cases concerning children or families. The aim is to improve generally the welfare of

children by strengthening networking and cooperation in child policy.

In the annual report the Ombudsman for Children presents a programmatic assessment of child welfare based on research of children's and young people's current living conditions. The aim is to concretise this appraisal in future reports. The majority of children in Finland fare well, but the continual increase in the numbers of children who suffer is a cause for concern. There are a small but growing number of children and families experiencing a range of problems.

It is the view of the Ombudsman for Children that the next government programme will be a national commitment to the concrete aim of reducing numbers of children in need. A long term objective could, for instance, be to half their numbers. In addition, the debate on corporate social responsibility should be broadened to cover child welfare and protection.

The annual report assesses the lack of information concerning children's welfare and living conditions. There is insufficient information about the development of children's living conditions and follow up within government is sporadic. There is a particular lack of information about the welfare of children below the age of 12. The extent and course of violence against children as well as children's own understanding of their security is not at present being followed. The same goes for children's mental health problems, their trends of development and the overall scope of services. There is a need for more statistical and research information on the reasons for the increase in the numbers of children in child protection and the course of this development as well as about the living conditions of children in protection.

In addition, a multidisciplinary research programme is needed to strengthen research on childhood, by which the factors that broadly affect the welfare of children would be assessed and anticipated.

The assessment of the realisation of children's rights is made in the report on the basis of the recommendations of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child. The main deficiencies in Finland concerning children's rights concern the uneven quality and availability of services and prevention of violence against children. There is a lack of assessment of children's interests in decision-making and there is too little expertise in this area. There is also insufficient knowledge in government of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and its follow-up process. The methods of listening to children and their participation must be improved.

The most usual issues of client contacts with the office of the Ombudsman for Children during autumn 2005 concerned school, media and advertising, care disputes in family separation situations and matters relating to non-institutional and foster care. The report assesses both the content of contacts and the legislative and other decision-making needs they manifest. The main ones are to implement an overall reform of child welfare legislation and in matters related to family separation the strengthening of psychosocial support and conciliation measures in services.

The Ombudsman for Children made an initiative in autumn 2005 for a child impact assessment by the project on restructuring municipalities and services. The perspective of children will be taken into account in advance in the reform process. Successful service solutions can support the realisation of children's rights and welfare.

The office of the Ombudsman for Children was opened without structures or service systems essential to a new authority being planned beforehand. The expectations of civil society were reflected by the hundreds contacts and questions received by the office of the Ombudsman by members of the public and collaborative interest groups. In terms of these expectations and tasks

the human resources of the office were insufficient. This is why, for example, there was a bad backlog with the client service during autumn 2005. In addition to the Ombudsman, a secretary worked in the Ombudsman's office then.

In its report VaVM45/2005 vp the Parliamentary financial affairs committee emphasises the need for the 2006 budget to settle how the Ombudsman for Children can network its practical needs for expertise and personnel resources in cooperation with different ministries, research institutes and other expert organisations. In developing the office's personnel resources there is a need to strengthen the participation of children, the assessment of children's living conditions, information and the contribution of client services.

Key words:

annual report, child policy, childhood, children, children's rights, Ombudsman for children, position of children, young people, welfare