

PUBLICATIONS OF THE PRIME MINISTER'S OFFICE 2023:13

# Openness and Timeliness

Government Communications Guidelines 2023



PRIME MINISTER'S  
OFFICE

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# Openness and Timeliness

## Government Communications Guidelines 2023

Prime Minister's Office Helsinki 2023

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## Openness and Timeliness

### Government Communications Guidelines 2023

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**Publications of the Prime Minister's Office 2023:13****Publisher** Prime Minister's Office**Group author** Prime Minister's Office**Language** English**Pages** 24**Abstract**

The Government Communications Guidelines describe the changes in the communications environment and the effects of those changes, outline the values that guide communications and the meaning of those values, and explain the central government's communications procedure. The guidelines provide a foundation for central government organisations' own communications strategies and instructions, which put the principles of these guidelines into practice.

The previous Government Communications Guidelines are from 2016 and are in many respects still up to date. For this reason, the 2023 guidelines focus on the most essential updates.

The purpose of central government communications is to support democracy. Communications help include all population groups in society regardless of status and background and ensure that everyone has the opportunity to make their voices heard through democratic means.

The guidelines highlight openness as the foundation of central government activities. Public information should be accessible and easy to use. Different target groups must be taken into account when selecting channels and forms of communication, in the clarity of language and, if necessary, through multilingual communications.

Communications are one aspect of the work done by all central government staff. Communications professionals support management and employees in this task and make communications decisions. These guidelines are intended for all central government employees.

**Keywords**

law-drafting, Act on the Openness of Government Activities, communications, administration, policies, management, government, democracy, participation, openness, publicity, legislation, fundamental rights, non-discrimination, equality, decision making

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## Avoimesti ajassa Valtionhallinnon viestintäsuositus 2023

### Valtioneuvoston kanslian julkaisuja 2023:13

**Julkaisija** Valtioneuvoston kanslia

**Yhteisötekijä** Valtioneuvoston kanslia

**Kieli** englanti

**Sivumäärä** 24

#### Tiivistelmä

Valtionhallinnon viestintäsuosituksessa kuvataan viestintäympäristön muutosta ja sen vaikutuksia, linjataan viestintää ohjaavia arvoja ja niiden merkitystä sekä avataan valtionhallinnon viestinnän toimintamallia. Suositus toimii perustana valtionhallinnon organisaatioiden omille viestintästrategioille ja viestintäohjeille, joilla suosituksessa kuvatut periaatteet viedään käytäntöön.

Valtionhallinnon viestintäsuosituksen edellinen versio on vuodelta 2016, ja se on monilta osin yhä ajantasainen. Tässä vuoden 2023 suosituksessa on siksi keskitytty olennaisimpiin päivitystarpeisiin.

Valtionhallinnon viestinnän tehtävä on tukea demokratiaa. Viestinnällä tuetaan sitä, että kaikki väestöryhmät pidetään yhteiskunnassa mukana asemasta ja taustasta riippumatta ja kaikilla on mahdollisuus saada äänensä kuuluviin demokraattisin keinoin.

Suositus korostaa avoimuutta valtionhallinnon toiminnan lähtökohtana. Julkisen tiedon on oltava mahdollisimman hyvin saatavilla ja hyödynnettävissä. Erilaiset kohderyhmät on otettava huomioon viestinnän kanavissa ja muodoissa, kielen selkeydessä ja tarpeen mukaan monikielisessä viestinnässä.

Viestintä on osa kaikkien hallinnon työntekijöiden työtä. Viestinnän asiantuntijat toimivat johdon ja työntekijöiden tukena ja kumppaneina ja tekevät viestinnälliset ratkaisut. Tämä viestintäsuositus onkin tarkoitettu kaikille valtionhallinnossa työskenteleville.

#### Asiasanat

lainvalmistelu, julkisuuslaki, viestintä, hallinto, politiikka, johtaminen, valtionhallinto, demokratia, osallistuminen, avoimuus, julkisuus, lainsäädäntö, perusoikeudet, yhdenvertaisuus, tasa-arvo, päätöksenteko

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## Öppenhet i tiden

### Rekommendationen om statsförvaltningens kommunikation 2023

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#### Referat

I rekommendationen om statsförvaltningens kommunikation beskrivs förändringarna i kommunikationsmiljön och effekten av dem samt de värderingar som styr kommunikationen och betydelsen av dem. Dessutom beskrivs verksamhetsmodellen för statsförvaltningens kommunikation. Rekommendationen ska ligga till grund för de interna kommunikationsstrategier och kommunikationsanvisningar för organisationerna inom statsförvaltningen genom vilka de principer som beskrivs i rekommendationen omsätts i praktiken.

Den tidigare versionen av statsförvaltningens kommunikationsrekommendation är från 2016 och den är fortfarande aktuell i många avseenden. I denna rekommendation 2023 har man därför fokuserat på de mest väsentliga uppdateringsbehoven.

Syftet med statsförvaltningens kommunikation är att stödja demokratin. Kommunikationen bidrar till att alla befolkningsgrupper oberoende av ställning och bakgrund får vara med i samhället och att alla har möjlighet att göra sina röster hörda med demokratiska medel.

Rekommendationen betonar öppenhet som utgångspunkt för statsförvaltningens verksamhet. Offentlig information ska vara så tillgänglig och lätt att utnyttja som möjligt. Olika målgrupper ska beaktas i kommunikationskanaler och kommunikationsformer, i språkets tydlighet och vid behov i flerspråkig kommunikation.

Kommunikation är en del av arbetet för alla anställda inom statsförvaltningen. Kommunikationsexperterna samarbetar med och stöder ledningen och de anställda samt beslutar om kommunikationen. Denna rekommendation är avsedd för alla som arbetar inom statsförvaltningen.

**Nyckelord** lagberedning, offentlighetslagen, kommunikation, förvaltning, politik, ledning, statsförvaltning, demokrati, deltagande, öppenhet, offentlighet, lagstiftning, grundläggande fri- och rättigheter, jämlikhet, jämställdhet, beslutsfattande

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## FOREWORD

The central government and its communications are for the people. The main goal of central government communications is to strengthen democracy. To achieve this goal, communications must systematically promote freedom of speech, transparency, equality and non-discrimination.

Rapid changes in the communications environment and experiences gained during the crises of the past few years have highlighted the need to update the previous guidelines, which were completed in 2016. These updated Central Government Communications Guidelines, the sixth in the series, describe the changes in the communications environment and their effects, outline the values that guide communications and the meaning of those values, and explain the central government's communications procedures. The guidelines provide a foundation for central government organisations' own communications strategies and other instructions that put the principles of these guidelines into practice.

The guidelines will be revised more extensively once the new Act on the Openness of Government Activities has entered into force and central government organisations have gained sufficient practical experience of its application.

Communications is one aspect of the work done by all central government staff. The job of communications professionals is to evaluate alternatives and make choices related to communications. These guidelines are intended for all central government employees, not just communications professionals.

These guidelines are based on the work of a [working group](#) appointed by the Prime Minister's Office in February 2023 and replace the guidelines issued in 2016.

Permanent State Under-Secretary

Timo Lankinen

Deputy Director of Government Communications Jyri Rantala



# 1 A changing communications environment

The rapid transformation of the information environment has gained momentum from the crises of the past few years, including the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The prolonged turmoil has affected people's psychological resilience to crisis and affected how central government messaging is received and how communications are perceived.

The role of social media as an information channel has become even stronger over the past few years, and traditional media outlets have lost ground, though they still enjoy a strong position in Finland. Media consumption has changed the most and the fastest among the youngest age groups. The way media is consumed and the way information is interpreted have become fragmented, while the target groups for communications have become more diverse. The fragmentation of information environments has been fuelled by the accelerating polarisation of society. Due to these changes in the operating environment, central government communications must continue to become more target group-focused and interactive. In addition to traditional press releases, multi-channel communication is needed to tailor content for different audiences.

The media's publication cycle has continued to accelerate. This, too, places new demands on central government communications, such as when responding to requests for information. Visual communication has become increasingly important, and this has affected not only journalistic narratives, but also the way the authorities communicate. Artificial intelligence has taken major steps forward. It is likely that the continued evolution of AI will significantly shape the communications environment in the coming years and will also provide new communications opportunities for public authorities. Public authorities are always responsible for the AI systems they use.

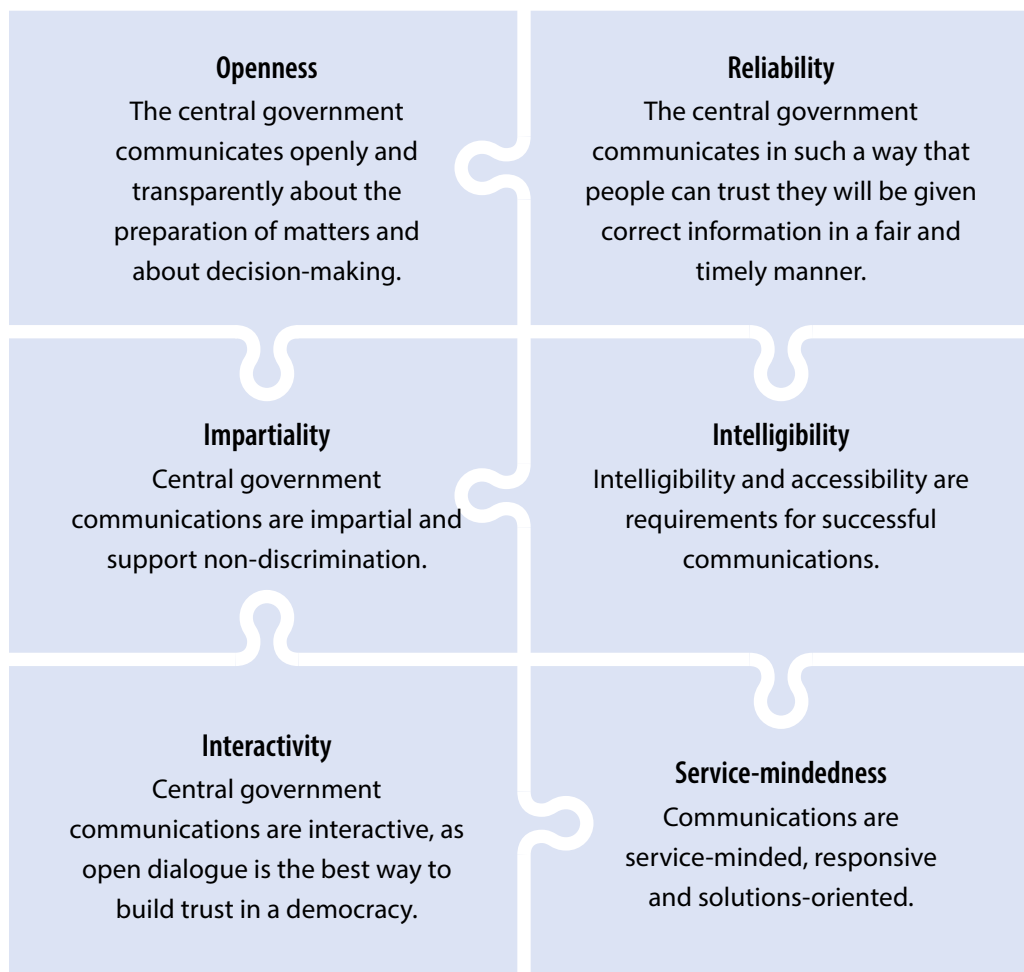
There is a daily struggle online over whose information is accurate and reliable. Opinions and beliefs spread online and challenge fact-based communications by public authorities. Civic dialogue is taking place in new forums, and people are increasingly forming their opinions on the fringes, outside of the traditional democratic decision-making system. Hostile actors seek to influence people and society by taking advantage of the changing information environment.

The rapid changes in the operating environment mean that communications must adapt. Above all, the changes require more goal-oriented management, more long-term planning and better tools to measure and assess communications. Communications are most successful when they are linked to strategic leadership, meaning that the organisation's words and actions are in balance.

## 2 Communication is guided by values – what does this mean?

The core values that guide central government communications are

- Openness
- Reliability
- Impartiality
- Intelligibility
- Interactivity
- Service-mindedness



## 2.1 Openness

Open communications are a key part of good governance and a fundamental right. They strengthen democracy, freedom of speech and the rule of law. The public authorities have an obligation to promote the openness of their activities and to produce and share information. Communications must be open so that individuals and stakeholders have the opportunity to influence matters under preparation, form an accurate picture of government activities and protect their rights and interests.

The central government communicates openly and transparently about the preparation of matters and about decision-making. Information should also be provided on matters that are still under preparation.

Public authorities are expected to report on their activities proactively and on a timely basis.

## 2.2 Reliability

Communications play a key role in building trust in democracy and decision-making. Reliability is the foundation of all official activities. Reliability is mainly based on actions, but it is also built and maintained through consistent communications.

The central government communicates in such a way that people can trust they will be given correct information in a fair and timely manner. Communications state objectives and effects clearly and seek to provide a good overall picture of complex issues.

## 2.3 Impartiality

Central government communications are impartial and support non-discrimination. All communications customers are served well and equally regardless of status or background

Communications promote diversity and do not reinforce stereotypes. Non-discrimination is taken into account when selecting images and text.

## 2.4 Intelligibility

Public authorities use appropriate, clear and intelligible language in their communications. When possible, communications are also provided in easy-to-read language.

Intelligibility and accessibility are requirements for successful communications. Efforts are made to ensure intelligibility and accessibility in all communications channels. When used correctly, visual elements improve intelligibility.

The Language Act is taken into account in all communications. Important matters are also communicated in minority languages used in Finland and in English. This is particularly important when communicating matters that are important to speakers of these languages.

## 2.5 Interactivity

The best way to increase trust in a democracy is through open dialogue.

Communications are inherently interactive. Interaction must be open to new things: extensive discussions and cooperation prior to and during preparation are essential for a successful outcome.

## 2.6 Service-mindedness

Central government communications are for the people. Communications are service-minded, responsive and solutions-oriented.

## 3 Central government communications – purpose and approach

### **The purpose of central government communications is to support democracy.**

Communications help include all population groups in society and ensure that everyone has the opportunity to make their voices heard through democratic means.

This is achieved by ensuring that everyone in Finland and abroad can get the information they need about central government activities and decision-making in an open, reliable, impartial and intelligible manner. Communications make the central government, government activities and services familiar to people and create a foundation for interaction.

Through its communications, the central government provides an overview of the services it offers and the decisions it makes, along with the effects of those decisions. This helps people understand the reasons for decisions and their and enables them to influence matters under preparation and to protect their interests and rights. Central government communications must be fact-based and must also provide information on negative things.

It is important for the central government to be present on the communications channels that people use. Every public authority chooses which channels it uses to communicate.

Social media has become an integral part of people's lives, and its significance will likely continue to grow in the future. At its best, social media provides an excellent channel for the central government to communicate information and build interaction and trust. However, social media is not without negative side effects. These must also be taken into account when public authorities consider their presence on social media channels. Particular attention must be paid to the information security, data protection and sustainability of services.

Public authorities must have official communications channels under their ownership. Channels owned by other parties should be supplementary. This way, public authorities can continue communicating if the owner of a communications channel decides to shut it down.

Efforts are made to reach people who are not reached by traditional official communications, for example through communication campaigns or targeted communication concepts. These may also include paid advertising and collaboration with social media influencers. However, paid advertising and collaboration with influencers may involve risks that need to be taken into account when considering their use. Particular consideration is needed when dealing with polarising subjects in society. Communications never take place in a vacuum – how communications are interpreted always depends on the current social climate.

## 4 Roles and responsibilities

All central government actors are responsible for their own communications. All actors must coordinate communications within their administrative branch and, when necessary, across administrative branches. This way, the central government can prevent conflicting guidelines and unclear outcomes.

Communications are an essential part of strategic leadership. An organisation cannot remain viable or functional without carefully planned and managed communications. Communications are part of any organisation's daily strategic activities and are directed, planned and budgeted just like any other activity.

Communications can bring a lot of added value to an organisation, as long as the organisation bears in mind that they are more than just a support or auxiliary function. Communications professionals and other experts in language use are responsible for deliberating on communications matters. This helps to ensure that communications are systematic, understandable, timely, appropriate in tone and suitable for different channels. Public authorities should have an up-to-date communications policy with the necessary guidelines.

The communications sector is constantly developing, and the role of communications experts as internal consultants, strategists and coaches in their organisations is becoming more and more important. Organisations should ensure well-functioning communications by making sure their communications professionals have adequate competence and training. It is also wise to stay up to date with global developments and international communications trends.

Communications tasks do not follow ordinary office hours. Where organisations have a regular need to communicate outside office hours, they are advised to put in place appropriate work time or on-call arrangements.

Cooperation in communications is particularly important in unexpected situations and when carrying out extensive inter-administrative reforms. Cooperation makes it possible to combine resources and find new, innovative ways of communicating.



Third-party communications resources may be used when special expertise is required or when the organisation's own resources are insufficient.

## 4.1 Communications are everyone's responsibility

Communications are an essential part of the work of every central government employee. The job of communications professionals is to evaluate alternatives and make choices related to communications. When communicating on a certain topic, experts on that topic are responsible for ensuring that the content of communications is accurate.

Communications professionals are responsible for the planning, implementation, coordination and assessment of communications. Communications services cannot be properly managed or developed without adequate resources.

To ensure seamless cooperation and the best possible outcome, experts on the topics of communications should ask communications professionals to consider future topics and related issues at an early stage. Similarly, professionals responsible for communications should be in contact with other experts about matters important for the performance of their duties and should actively prepare communications together with them.

Organisations need to make sure that all experts are aware of their duties and responsibilities related to communications. Experts are also entitled to receive the support and training they need.

Public authorities must be familiar with the principles of the Act on the Openness of Government Activities and understand what it entails. It is particularly important to understand how to assess what is public or confidential on a case-by-case basis as required by the Act.

## 4.2 Management is communication

Effective communication is only possible when the entire organisation is committed to common goals from the outset. With this in mind, communications must be at the heart of decision-making, including through representation in the organisation's steering group and as part of strategic management. Senior management gives a face to the organisation and is responsible for the organisation's communications culture, competencies and information management procedures. Communications are successful and timely when cooperation between management and the organisation's communications professionals is based on mutual trust.

Effective and impactful communications involve a great deal of cooperation within and increasingly also outside the organisation. The best way to build, manage and develop successful communications is through interactive cooperation.

Our environment and practices are changing rapidly. Preparing for the changes together with communications is a prerequisite for success. In times of crisis and in rapidly evolving situations, organisations should be prepared to increase their communications resources.

### **4.3 Good workplace communications make public administration run more smoothly**

Successful workplace communications lay the foundation for a well-functioning public administration. Not all organisations are the same, so it is natural that their interaction models will also differ from one another. The models must, however, be built on the same pillars.

Open workplace communications play a key role in maintaining and strengthening employees' sense of community, wellbeing at work and commitment to common goals. Workplace communications should be planned and implemented in close consultation with the management, human resources, the communications unit and staff representatives. Workplace communications are particularly important when there are changes in the organisation. Staff members will want to know the reasons for the changes, how the different measures will affect their position and what options are available.

A good flow of information is a prerequisite for achieving any organisation's objectives. Effective external communication is not possible without open internal communication based on dialogue. Open internal communication forms a solid basis for good external communication. This is of paramount importance for the organisation's reputation and employer image and for ensuring trust in the organisation.

The main guiding principle is that matters affecting the staff are always first communicated to the staff. Management and supervisors are responsible for ensuring that this principle is fulfilled. Supervisors play a key role in shaping how information is passed on within the organisation. Employees are responsible for acquiring the information they need at work and for passing essential information on to those who need it. This highlights the importance of everyone's role as a communicator: specialists, supervisors and other members of the workplace community cannot communicate about matters that they are not aware of.

A good employee experience is a prerequisite for a positive employer image. Central government organisations must also make sure they are interesting workplaces and invest in their employer image. It is in everyone's interest that the central government's common tasks are carried out by competent and motivated personnel.

## **4.4 Stakeholder work supports openness**

The aim of stakeholder work is to support openness, interaction and transparency in public administration. Stakeholder work supports the preparation of matters and ensures that those involved can have their views and opinions heard.

Good stakeholder work ensures that decisions are well prepared and justified, and that a wide variety of different perspectives are taken into account.

## 5 Target groups



### 5.1 General public

The central government communicates to the general public as widely as possible. Changes in the information environment mean that the population is becoming increasingly fragmented into different target groups. With this in mind, public authorities must communicate through multiple channels and be familiar with the different target groups and their special characteristics.



### 5.2 Media

The media is the most important individual stakeholder in communications. For the purpose of these guidelines, media refers to all communications that are committed to following the key principles of journalistic guidelines, regardless of the channel or form of communication.

The media communicates messages quickly and efficiently to the general public. It is important for public authorities to engage in continuous dialogue with the media in order to develop cooperation. For example, when organising background briefings or press conferences, it is important to take into account the flow of information to different regions. Remote connections provide a good opportunity for this.

### 5.2.1 Openness and requests for information

Openness is the foundation of all central government activities. Public information should be as accessible and easy to use as possible. Good governance of information helps specify how public authorities handle the information in their possession. The aim is to provide key public documents on the authority's website.

Organisations must have clear procedures for processing requests for information as required by the Act on the Openness of Government Activities so that decisions on the disclosure of documents can be made carefully and quickly. Authorities may charge a fee for processing requests for information only in special cases.

The media makes a lot of requests for information as part of journalistic practice. Special attention should be paid to processing requests for information related to quickly evolving news stories.



## 5.3 Customers

Many public authorities produce services for people and organisations, which creates a customer relationship. These services may be concrete products, such as passports or permits, or they might involve compliance with obligations or provision of benefits. Smooth and well-functioning customer communications are more interactive and personalised than communications targeted at the media or the general public. Good communication lowers the threshold between authorities and customers, instructs customers on how to proceed correctly and ensures that they are aware of their rights.

Successful customer communication helps the organisation understand customers' expectations, which in turn helps to develop products and services to better meet customers' needs. When communicating with customers, it is important to make sure that the customer knows how their matter is progressing and what is expected of them. Communication with customers must be based on a good understanding of customers and their different life situations. Developing customer communications requires continuous work to identify and map out customer needs. A human-centred approach is a key value guiding customer communications.

Successful communication with customers involves the use of multiple channels. Organisations must communicate clearly using the communication methods and channels that best suit customers' needs, taking into account the special characteristics of each target group. Important tools for reaching different target groups include digital services and targeted marketing on social media channels.

A good customer experience and efficient communications increase the level of customer satisfaction.

## 6 Crisis communications and the enhanced communications model

Clear and precise communications by the public authorities are especially important in exceptional situations brought on by crises. In a crisis, public authorities have a special obligation to ensure that citizens have access to information. It is particularly important to ensure that communications during crises are accessible.

In times of national crisis, communications by the country's leaders take on a special significance. At the same time, different administrative branches must be able to cooperate seamlessly. From the perspective of psychological resilience, it is essential that the words and actions of public authorities are in line with one another.

The competent authority is responsible for communications related to operative activities, including during crises. The ministry overseeing the competent authority is responsible for communications throughout its administrative branch. If a crisis affects several administrative branches, coordinating communications between the branches is especially important. The responsibility for managing and coordinating communications may also be transferred to the Government Communications Department by a separate decision.

The foundation for coordinating communications during crises and the methods of cooperation are created under normal conditions. Coordinating communications helps to improve the effectiveness of communications and support the competent authorities. In practice, this may involve drawing up joint core messages, maintaining a situational picture and agreeing on timeframes and channels for communications.

The principles, guidelines and recommendations for enhanced communications are outlined in the [Guidelines for Enhanced Government Communications](#). The guidelines also include an operating model for situations involving information influence activities.

In emergencies, communications are managed and coordinated in line with the legislation on emergencies.

## 7 Guiding documents

Central government communications are guided by various regulations, instructions and recommendations.

### These include:

- The Constitution of Finland (731/1999)
- Administrative Procedure Act (434/2003)
- Act on the Openness of Government Activities (621/1999)
- Decree on the Openness of Government Activities and Good Data Management Practices (1030/1999)
- Act on Information Management in Public Administration (206/2019)
- Non-Discrimination Act (1325/2014)
- Information Society Code (917/2014)
- Act on the Protection of Privacy in Working Life (759/2004)
- Act on Electronic Services and Communication in the Public Sector (13/2003)
- Act on the Publicity of Administrative Court Proceedings (381/2007)
- Employment Contracts Act (55/2001)
- Act on Public Officials in Central Government (1994/750)

### Language laws

- Language Act (423/2003)
- Sámi Language Act (1086/2003)

### Copyrights and freedom of expression

- Copyright Act (404/1961)
- Act on the Exercise of Freedom of Expression in Mass Media (460/2003)

### Laws regulating incidents and emergencies

- Emergency Powers Act (1552/2011)
- State of Defence Act (1083/1991, in Finnish)
- Act on Emergency Warnings (466/2012, in Finnish)
- Act on the Finnish Broadcasting Company (1380/1993)
- Safety Investigation Act (525/2011)



## 7.1 Instructions and recommendations

- Minister's Handbook (2023, in Finnish)
- Guidelines for Enhanced Government Communications
- Public Official in Social Media, Recommendations issued by the Council of Public Service Ethics (2016, in Finnish)
- Practical Guide for the Application of Language Legislation in Online Services, Recommendation issued by the Ministry of Justice (2015, in Finnish)
- Report of the Working Group for Clear Administrative Language, Ministry of Education and Culture (2014, summary available in English)
- License to Public Open Data, Recommendation 189 of the Advisory Committee for Data Administration in Public Administration (2014, in Finnish)
- Communication Code of Ethics, Council of Ethics for Communication (2023)
- Recommendation on the use of sign languages in government communications (in Finnish)
- Finnish Centre for Easy Language, Writing in Easy Finnish (in Finnish)
- Finnish Centre for Easy Language, Need for Easy Finnish (in Finnish)
- Guide to Inclusive Communication
- Strategy for Public Governance Renewal
- Ethical Guidelines for AI in Public Administration



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