

# ***Serving the interests of local residents***

THE IMPORTANCE OF TRANSPARENCY AND PUBLIC  
INFORMATION FOR LOCAL DEMOCRACY



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## ***Dear reader,***

The decision-makers and officials of municipalities and wellbeing services counties (Finnish regional authorities responsible for social and health care and rescue services) are in close contact with the representatives of the local Finnish news media. Usually, interaction and cooperation are smooth. The result is news articles and other stories about public services and democratic decision-making that serve the local residents.

Municipalities and wellbeing services counties in Finland look for models for their operating practices from the private sector and the business world. This is in many ways a good thing, but from the perspective of an open, transparent society, it is important to understand the role of transparency in local democracy.

It must be possible to openly discuss public sector services and decision-making. This is also a legal obligation under the Finnish law. Citizens have the right to be informed even of unfinished matters.

Responsible journalistic media produce reliable information and communicate it to citizens. Without local news media, news deserts would arise where the flow of information would depend on social media and miscellaneous online services.

When both public organisations and the media know each other's ways of working and purposes, it promotes opportunities for good cooperation. Municipalities, wellbeing services counties and the media share a common goal: serving the residents. This is the perspective we aim to explain in this guide.

This publication aims to describe the Finnish administrative system, which is founded on openness and transparency, to local decision-makers and public officials. The texts have been produced by the experts of News Media Finland.

***Jukka Holmberg***

*CEO, News Media Finland*

**News Media Finland** is a trade association of publishers of newspapers, free newspapers and other private news media. We strengthen the vitality of news media, produce information and promote information literacy, media literacy and reliable media content.

The electronic version of the *Serving the interests of local residents* guide – also available in Finnish and Swedish – can be found at [www.uutismediat.fi/kuntalaisten-asialla](http://www.uutismediat.fi/kuntalaisten-asialla).



## ***Different roles, common goal of serving the citizens***

” Open communication is needed alongside decision-making. Cooperation between municipalities and the journalistic media helps local residents understand what decisions are being made and why. This strengthens trust, inclusion and local democracy.

MINNA KARHUNEN  
CEO

THE ASSOCIATION OF FINNISH CITIES AND MUNICIPALITIES

PHOTO: KIMMO METSÄRANTA



## ***Public administration exists for the residents***

Municipalities and wellbeing services counties have been established to take care of the public services of the residents in their areas. Wellbeing services counties are responsible for social and health care services and rescue services, while the municipalities manage other municipal services.

In Finland, the activities of municipalities and wellbeing services counties are tax-funded public services that are decided upon democratically. Thus, their decision-making bodies are subject to strict transparency requirements.

Journalistic media help people understand how officials and elected councillors in municipalities and wellbeing services counties exercise their important public responsibilities.

When citizens understand how decisions are made and how they affect their daily lives, they can participate more actively in social debate and influence decision-making. This strengthens democracy and social cohesion.

### **Wellbeing services counties**

are self-governing regional authorities in Finland responsible for organising public health care, social welfare and rescue services. They were established in 2023 as part of a national reform transferring these responsibilities from municipalities. There are 21 counties, each governed by an elected county council. The counties are primarily funded by the central government and do not have tax-levying powers.

## ***The media explain activities of the authorities to their readers***

Journalistic media explain the activities of municipalities and well-being services counties to their readers, i.e. local residents. The role of the media is to make complex administrative processes and decisions visible and understandable to citizens. In this way, the media increase transparency and trust in the administration's operations.

Local news media are an important part of everyday life. They provide information that is concrete, close to home and directly relevant. Their news highlights issues related to the area's schools, health services, early childhood education and care (ECEC), zoning, traffic arrangements and events, for example. Local media strengthen citizens' participation and opportunities to influence their own local community.

Journalistic media serve as a bridge between public administration and citizens, highlighting the background to decisions, their impacts and their significance in everyday life. Without professional news reporting, understanding of many important issues could be lacking, which would weaken social participation.

90 per cent of Finns consider the reliable information produced by free Finnish journalistic media to be important for the functioning of democracy. As many as 72 per cent rated the significance of said information as very important.

## ***Administration and the media share the same goal***

Although public administration and the journalistic media play different roles, they both aim to serve the citizens. The media cannot perform administrative tasks, nor can the administration perform the role of the media, but with good cooperation, they can help citizens to understand the actions and decisions in the public sector: what is happening in the municipalities and wellbeing services counties and why.

When citizens receive reliable and up-to-date information about the public sector, the transparency of public decision-making improves. This increases trust in society's institutions and strengthens local democracy.

The journalistic media not only report on events, but also independently seek out information and news topics that are relevant to their readers. They play an active role in democratic society, ensuring that citizens' right to information is fulfilled.

***Together, the administration and media can help citizens understand public-sector operations and decisions.***



## ***Participating in the public discussion by sharing information***

Sharing information about matters for which authorities are responsible serves citizens and usually also benefits the provider of the information. By participating in the public debate with their own arguments and opinions, a public decision-maker can gain understanding and support for them.

A decision-maker sharing information is an active participant in the public debate. On the other hand, those who withhold information leave the public arena to others, and their perspective may be completely omitted. Undisclosed information cannot become public.

Newsrooms also happily accept proposals for article topics and opinion pieces. It is worth offering them for consideration.

If there are material factual errors in the articles, the news media are committed to correcting them. Requests for rectification should be sent to the specific address indicated by the newsroom.

## ***Citizens have the right to receive information***

In Finland, citizens have constitutional freedom of expression, which includes the right to freely receive information. The journalistic media do their part to ensure that this right is realised in practice. At the local and regional level, this means providing reliable and up-to-date information on the operations of municipalities and wellbeing services counties, among other things.

In a democratic constitutional state, power belongs to the citizens. The better educated and informed the citizens are, the better they are able to exercise their power. In Finland, the publicity principle of public administration and compliance with it is a key prerequisite for the realisation of democracy.

Without knowledge of public decision-making and the operations of public administration, the citizens' participation in society will be lacking.

***The better educated and informed  
the citizens are, the better they  
are able to exercise their power.***

## ***Press freedom is important for citizens***

Press freedom in Finland has long been ranked among the best in the world. In the Reporters Without Borders' 2025 survey, Finland ranked fifth among 180 countries. The journalistic media can operate freely in Finland without restrictions from the state or the political or economic power holders. The importance of press freedom becomes particularly clear in comparison with neighbouring Russia, which has extremely low levels of press freedom (ranked 171).

Strong press freedom is associated with a functioning democracy, the rule of law, low levels of corruption, citizens' trust and media literacy. In all of these areas, Finland has been shown to be among the best in the world. Having the basics of society in order explains why Finland has been declared the happiest country in the world several years in a row.

Above all, press freedom is important for the citizens. When the journalistic media can operate freely and journalists can do their work without fear, the citizens can get reliable information. This allows them to freely form and express their opinions.

### **Countries with the highest levels of press freedom:**

1. Norway
2. Estonia
3. The Netherlands
4. Sweden
5. Finland
6. Denmark
7. Ireland

*World Press Freedom Index 2025*  
<https://rsf.org/en>

## ***Finland is a society based on trust***

Trust is the greatest strength of Finnish society. Finns trust society's institutions. Finns also trust each other.

Free media are an essential part of Finland's high-trust society. Reliable and independent journalistic media increase citizens' confidence in the administration and decision-making, i.e. the use of public power, which strengthens the functioning of society.

The journalistic media strengthen trust even when they highlight grievances. When citizens can trust that the media will also report problems and misconduct, their confidence in society's operations increases. Reporting violations that may seem small creates confidence that even larger wrongdoings will be exposed. Transparency strengthens trust in society, and the possibility of exposure effectively prevents misconduct.

Finns' trust in the news is the highest in the world. 75% of Finns trust the news they follow. Finns consider social media to be the most significant sources of false and misleading information, with TikTok, X and Facebook at the top of the list.

*Digital News Report 2025,  
Reuters Institute for the  
Study of Journalism*

## ***News deserts threaten democracy and information resilience***

A functioning, open democracy needs free and pluralistic media at national, regional and local levels. Independent news media still provide relatively comprehensive coverage across Finland, but growing economic pressures on journalism threaten to weaken this coverage.

In the worst case, news deserts may emerge in areas where no journalistic media monitor or report on local decision-making. Democracy and citizen participation deteriorate quickly if citizens do not receive sufficient information about decision-making and its impacts. At the same time, information resilience, which strengthens national security, is jeopardised.

Securing the operating conditions for independent journalism is a matter that concerns society as a whole. Municipal decisions can also weaken the vitality of local news media. If the municipality starts producing online publications similar to news media, the roles of municipal communications and journalism will start to blend. Especially in smaller communities, a municipality's own online publication may erode the revenue base of local news media, potentially leading to the closure of newspapers.

In the United States, research has shown that the death of the local and regional press publications has reduced how well-informed citizens are and weakened the quality of local decision-making. The disappearance of professional journalism creates space for rumours and conspiracy theories as well as information influence by foreign states.

*Financing Dies in Darkness? The Impact of Newspaper Closures on Public Finance. Hutchins Center Working Paper #44, 2018*

## ***Journalistic media are bound by the promise to the public***

The journalistic media depend on the trust of their audience. They are committed to telling their readers, listeners and viewers things as they are.

Journalistic media committed to the Journalist's Guidelines strive to tell things truthfully, check facts and correct mistakes. When needed, they afford right of reply and often also the opportunity for discussion in the readers' section and in the comment sections of online publications.

No journalistic media can function without the trust of the citizens. Once trust is lost, the entire business is lost. Therefore, there is a strong emphasis on providing accurate journalistic information.

Preserving the independence of journalism is an essential part of the promise to the public. The public must be able to trust that publication decisions are always made by editors and that the editor-in-chief bears the responsibility for them.

***Preserving the independence of journalism is an essential part of the promise to the public.***

## ***Journalistic media operate responsibly***

” The responsible operations of the member media of the Council for Mass Media (CMM) also mean accountability. Anyone who suspects that good journalistic practice has been violated can refer the matter to the CMM. This raises the bar for journalism beyond what is required by law.

EERO HYVÖNEN  
CHAIR  
COUNCIL FOR MASS MEDIA

PHOTO: EPPU KITULA



## ***What sets journalism apart from other forms of communication?***

Journalism serves society. Its task is to produce, verify and publish information that is relevant to the public, i.e. the residents, decision-makers and communities.

Journalism acts as a “watchdog of power”. It monitors how power is used – also in municipalities and wellbeing services counties. It is essential for citizens to know what decisions are made by their elected councillors and how public funds are used. Independent media also raise difficult topics, which helps to develop services and decision-making as well as rectify social injustices.

Responsible journalistic media do not publish rumours or opinions as facts. Journalists check sources and facts, compare information and seek to present things fairly. This distinguishes journalism from many other online and social media content services.

All responsible news media are members of the Council for Mass Media and follow the Journalist’s Guidelines. This means a commitment to truthfulness, ethical conduct and taking responsibility for mistakes.

***Journalists check sources and facts, compare information and seek to present information fairly.***

## ***Journalist's Guidelines regulate ethics***

Responsible media build trust between local residents and the administration. The Council for Mass Media and the Journalist's Guidelines help ensure that the journalistic media operate responsibly even when they deal with difficult topics in municipalities or wellbeing services counties.

The Journalist's Guidelines are a collection of ethical rules and principles that responsible journalistic media follow in their publishing operations. The guidelines contain 37 sections that guide, for example, how to check information, treat interviewees, correct errors and respect privacy. All member media of News Media Finland are committed to adhering to the Journalist's Guidelines.

Editorial self-regulation protects media freedom and democracy. Self-regulation allows the media to work together to ensure the independence and truthfulness of journalism.

**The Council for Mass Media (CMM)** is an independent and impartial body that monitors whether Finnish media operate responsibly and follow good journalistic practice. The Council is not an authority; it is the media industry's own editorial self-regulatory body represented by publishers, journalists and representatives of the public. Anyone can file a complaint if they feel that the editorial media has acted unethically or incorrectly.

*More information: [www.jsn.fi/en](http://www.jsn.fi/en)*

## ***The interviewee has the right to review their statements***

According to the Journalist's Guidelines, the interviewee has the right to know in advance whether the discussion is intended for publication or use as background information. In addition, the interviewee must be informed of the context in which the statements will be used and where the interview will be published.

The interviewee has the right to request their own statements for review before publication. The request must be accepted if the publication schedule allows it. The interviewee must comment on the text within a reasonable time frame proposed by the editorial staff.

The right of review only applies to the person's own statements and does not grant the right to modify the editorial content. The publication of a statement can only be prohibited if the circumstances have changed substantially after the interview or if publication would be clearly unreasonable in light of new information.

If an article presents serious criticism or negative publicity towards an identifiable person or entity, the person or entity must be given the opportunity to express their own views in the same context. If this is not possible, their position must be published as soon as possible.

## ***Source protection ensures the safe expression of grievances***

Source protection refers to a journalist's right to protect the identity of their source. In practice, source protection means that if someone provides a journalist with information about misconduct in the municipality, for example, the journalist is not obliged to disclose who provided the information – not even to the police, court or authorities.

Source protection is important because it strengthens democracy and transparency. It protects people who want to speak up about misconduct and wrongdoing without fear of retaliation. This makes it possible for investigative journalists, for example, to obtain information. In Finland, journalistic source protection is part of the protection of the constitutional right of freedom of expression. The European Court of Human Rights has also affirmed that source protection is part of the freedom of expression secured by the European Convention on Human Rights.

Municipalities make decisions that affect people's immediate environment and everyday life, so it is important that grievances can be expressed safely.

***Source protection makes it possible for investigative journalists, for example, to obtain information.***

## ***Newsrooms make decisions on content by themselves***

In Finland, freedom of expression is primarily regulated by the Constitution and, more specifically, by the Act on the Exercise of Freedom of Expression in Mass Media. They provide that the media have the right to publish information and opinions without preventive censorship.

The law grants newsrooms strong independent decision-making power over the content to be published. Journalistic content must not be influenced by any parties outside the newsroom, such as advertisers, politicians, authorities or company directors. The same firewall applies to the owners of the news media publication and the management of the publishing company. The editor-in-chief is always responsible for publication decisions.

A journalist has the right to obtain information openly, but also through exceptional means if the matter is of social significance. For example, a journalist investigating the activities of an extremist movement can create a fake profile for themselves online and impersonate a supporter of the movement in order to gain information about its operations. A journalist can participate in conversations under a pseudonym and use anonymised connections to ensure that their true identity is not revealed.

## ***Journalistic media are different from social media***

The main difference between journalistic media and social media services is related to the publisher's responsibility. According to the law, each editorial publication and online publication must have a responsible editor, i.e. the editor-in-chief, who is responsible for the content of the publication.

The content distributed on social media platforms varies widely, from reliable journalism to content by social media influencers, hidden advertising, conspiracy theories and fake news produced by foreign states. The platform companies have no editorial responsibility, fact checking is not required and virtually anyone can claim almost anything without any real consequences.

Funding of journalism is ultimately based on the trust of the audience. That's why the reliability of content is everything for media companies. The earnings of social media companies are based more on the emotions aroused by the content shared by the users. In this case, the accuracy of the information is not a priority.

The best way to combat disinformation and propaganda is to ensure that there is enough accurate, trustworthy information available. On the internet, it is essential to know how to distinguish reliable information providers from those that are not. The media and information literacy of citizens needs to be strengthened so that they understand the value of journalism and recognise media operating under journalistic responsibility.

More than half of young people aged 13–18 get their news via TikTok. The platform has become the most important news channel for young people. When you follow news via social media, it is essential to know how to distinguish reliable journalistic media content from all other content.

*Nuoret ja uutismediasuhde survey, Kantar Media 2025*

*More information on media literacy:  
[www.tunnistajournalismi.fi](http://www.tunnistajournalismi.fi)*

# ***Everyone has the right to public information***

” Access to public information makes it possible to influence the preparation of decisions and the evaluation of the actions of the authorities. It also effectively strengthens trust in the use of public power. Everyone has the right to be informed of an authority’s documents and information systems, unless public access is specifically restricted by law.

OLLI MÄENPÄÄ  
PROFESSOR EMERITUS, FACULTY OF LAW  
UNIVERSITY OF HELSINKI

A portrait of Olli Mäenpää, a man with short grey hair and glasses, wearing a dark suit, white shirt, and striped tie. The portrait is set against a dark orange background that is part of a larger graphic design on the left side of the page.

PHOTO: H. PELTOLA /  
SUOMEN DIGITUOTE OY

## ***As a rule, public authorities' documents are public***

Freedom of expression is at the core of an open, democratic society. This includes everyone's right to receive information. The Constitution of Finland and the Act on the Openness of Government Activities provide for the principle of openness. Its widest possible application strengthens freedom of expression.

According to the Constitution of Finland, documents and recordings held by the authorities are public, unless the right of access to them is specifically restricted by law for compelling reasons. Everyone has the right to access public documents and recordings.

According to the Act on the Openness of Government Activities, documents of the authorities are public, unless otherwise provided for in the act or in another law.

The purpose of the rights of access to information and obligations of the authorities laid down in the Act on the Openness of Government Activities is to implement transparency in the activities of the authorities. They allow individuals and entities to oversee the use of public power and public funds, freely form their opinions and influence the use of public power and to safeguard their rights and interests.

## ***The law obligates authorities to share public information***

In the Act on the Openness of Government Activities, the term authority also refers to the authorities of wellbeing services counties, joint municipal authorities and municipalities.

The right of access to authorities' documents is a constitutional right that the authorities must promote in their operations. The Act on the Openness of Government Activities not only provides for the right of access to information about documents, but also provides for the obligation of the authorities to produce and share information.

According to law, the authorities must, among other things, promote the transparency of their operations, provide information about their operations and services as well as about the rights and obligations of individuals and entities in matters related to their sector.

Authorities must also ensure that documents or lists concerning them that are essential for the public's access to information are available in libraries or public information networks or by other means easily accessible to the public, as necessary.

## ***Anyone can submit a request for information***

Media representatives' access to authorities' documents and the publication of their content serve the freedom of expression and individuals' right to information. According to the law, anyone has the right to request information from the municipality and other authorities. This is usually done by a journalist working for the news media on behalf of the public.

The subject of a request for information may be an individual piece of information from an authority, a document containing certain information content or more extensive official materials. The request for information must be identified in such a way that the authorities are able to locate the requested information.

A request for information is usually made in writing, for example, by emailing a public official or the registry of an authority, but it can also be oral.

The request for information shall relate to the authority's existing information materials. However, the authorities also have an obligation to provide information on matters of great significance, even when no finished documents exist.

***The authorities also have an obligation to provide information on matters of great significance, even when no finished documents exist.***

## ***Information must be disclosed without delay***

The authority either discloses the requested information, asks the requester to clarify their request or provides justification for why the information cannot be disclosed under the Act on the Openness of Government Activities. If the requester so wishes, a formal decision must be issued, which may be appealed to the administrative court. If the request for information requires clarification, the authority must offer to assist in identifying the requested information, for example by using its registers.

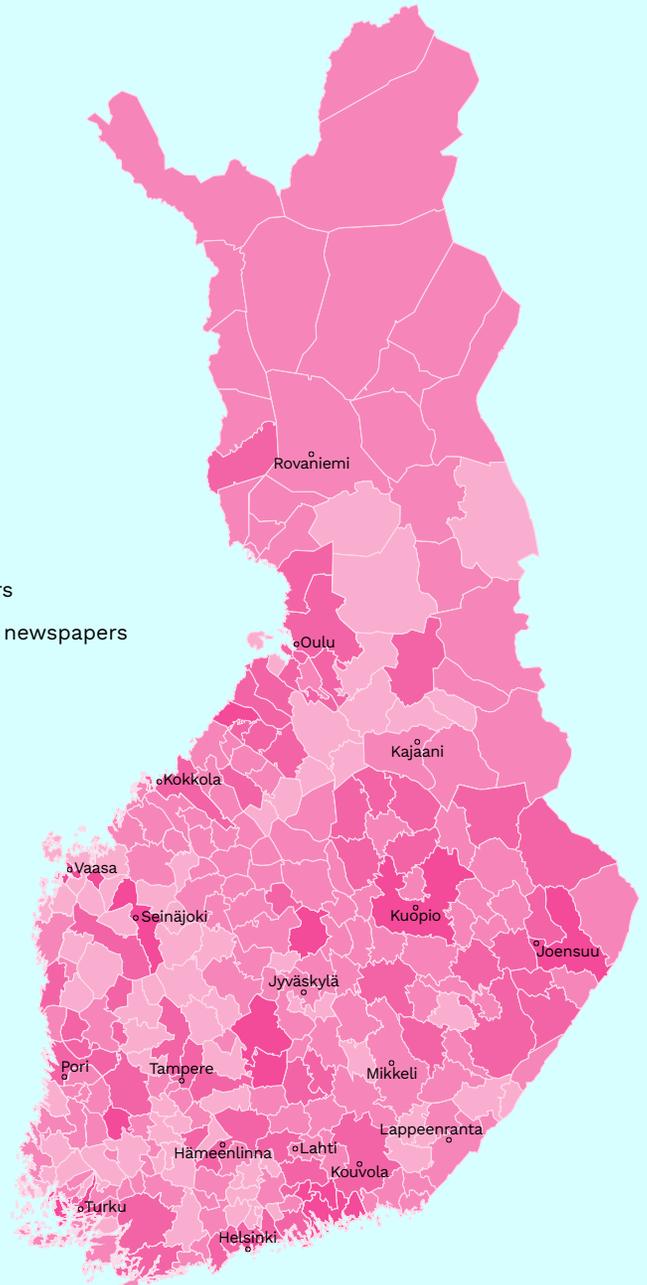
According to the Administrative Procedure Act, the authority must respond to a request for information without delay. The requested information must be disclosed without delay and within two weeks at the latest, in accordance with the Act on the Openness of Government Activities.

If the requested document is a public authority document, it must be handed over to the requester. In the case of exceptionally extensive documents, the authority may ask the requester to specify exactly what information they are seeking.

If required by the Act on the Openness of Government Activities, the authority may refuse to disclose the requested material in its entirety. In this case, only any public information that is part of the material will be disclosed to the requester. As for the decision, the authority must ask whether the requester wants a decision against which an administrative court action may be brought and provide information on any fees related to the procedure.

## ***Local news media coverage of Finnish municipalities***

- Monitored by one newspaper
- Monitored by two newspapers
- Monitored by three newspapers
- Monitored by more than three newspapers



The classification is based on the member newspapers of News Media Finland that monitor municipal decision-making and report on local affairs in the respective municipality.

An open flow of information is in everyone's interest. When public officials, decision-makers and journalists understand each other's operations, it results in trust, cooperation and, above all, information that serves the local residents. Openness strengthens democracy and increases citizens' opportunities to participate.

This guide offers perspectives on how the public sector and the media can act transparently and responsibly in their own roles, producing reliable information about public services and decision-making.



*We know the news media.*