

Citizen participation: an untapped opportunity for quality decision-making in local and regional governments

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Audit report

Citizen participation: an untapped opportunity for quality decision-making in local and regional governments

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Performance audit “Do the activities implemented by local and regional governments ensure the participation and awareness of the population?”

The audit was performed based on audit schedule No 2.4.1-8/2022 of the Fifth Audit Department of the State Audit Office of 14 March 2022.

The cover design includes an image from *www.depositphotos.com*¹.

¹ <https://depositphotos.com/24531265/stock-photo-last-piece-of-the-puzzle.html>

Dear Reader,

Various circumstances determine our willingness and readiness, as members of society, to participate in state administration processes. One of the most important is faith in the result of our efforts, that is, that the time and other resources we invest will be rewarded by listening to us and taking our opinion into account in solving issues that are crucial to all of us.

What was seen in this audit shows that citizen participation in the work of such an important branch of state administration as local and regional governments is relatively low. 85% of the residents we surveyed indicated that they did not participate in the decision-making processes of their local or regional government.

During the audit, we often have heard an opinion that residents are inert, uninterested and do not want to participate in the work of the local or regional government. In other words, it is the residents' problem. This inevitably brings such thinking into comparison with the private sector. It is unlikely that an economic operator who fails in attracting customers to his or her service also looks at customers as a potential problem. Or is he or she looking for reasons in themselves and in the way they address customers?

It is precisely the adoption of certain working principles of the private sector in the communication of local and regional governments with population what we invite the local and regional governments to do. The way in which local and regional governments pass this information on to citizens is as important as information itself. It can be provided formally, for example, by posting information on an official website in legal and technically accurate language, or it can be done in a citizen-friendly way, for instance, by reaching a relevant target group of citizens on social media and communicating the information in "popular" language. Knowing the operating principles and working algorithms of social media and other communication channels and their successful use work equally well both in the sale of goods and services, and in the dialogue of a local or regional government with its community.

The absence of an effective dialogue between a local or regional government and its residents can be compared to a disease that causes both immediate symptoms and long-term adverse effects on the entire organism. During the audit, we have found that a well-conceived, expensive infrastructure of local and regional governments that was created without the full involvement of target groups turned out to be unsuitable for users in many places. Such examples, as well as cases where citizens are not involved in decision making at all that is crucial to them, when decisions discussed with citizens are later amended unilaterally, when citizens are not given feedback on the outcome of their proposals, can create a sense of separation of power among citizens and undermine trust for public administration as a whole significantly.

I expect that the audit report will provide an incentive for local and regional governments to review and improve their practices in citizen involvement. Including, also inspired by best practice examples in other local and regional governments, which are reflected in this report.

We extend our gratitude to the representatives of all 11 local and regional governments, the Ministry of Education and Science, and the Ministry of Welfare involved in the audit for the productive cooperation during the audit!

I would like to express my special thanks to Association of Disabled People and Their Friends Apeirons and Ruta Siliņa, Director of Study Program of the Communication Department of Riga Stradins University, and her students for their enthusiasm and support in our joint work in the audit while assessing essential issues!

Respectfully
Mr Edgars Korčagins
Department Director



Summary

What is participation of population and why is it important?

An active civic society is one of the prerequisites for successful sustainable development and quality decision-making in Latvia as in any democratic country. A series of laws and regulations stipulates legally that in Latvia, including Section 101 of the Satversme (Constitution) stipulating the right of people to participate in the activities of the state and local and regional governments², which confirms the right of the people to participate in the activities of the state and local governments. The government must not only guarantee a citizen a formal right to participate, but it is also obliged to create prerequisites (opportunities) so that a citizen is able to participate in the work of the state and local and regional governments by participating consciously and understanding the essence of participation³.

Latvia's laws, regulations, and policy documents include various mechanisms for the involvement of civic society in the decision-making process, however, citizen participation in decision-making processes is low⁴, including in local and regional governments.

Considering a wide range of functions of local and regional governments, balanced and high-quality municipal decisions (which are the benefit of population and a local or regional government from citizen participation) have a significant impact on the quality of life of population. To determine whether local and regional governments promote the process important for citizens and local or regional government, that is, citizen participation, the audit selected issues that covered several preconditions for the ability of population and willingness to participate in municipal decision-making processes.

It is a range of issues and topics in which a local or regional government generally expects citizen participation, it is communication about the possibilities of participation and its results, or feedback, which has a significant impact on whether it is worth getting involved next time. The audit also paid special attention to the work implemented by local and regional governments with youth, which included, among other things, care for the formation of an active young civic generation.

The 11 local and regional governments included in the audit sample: Jūrmala City Municipality, Rēzekne City Municipality, Ādaži, Cēsis, Southern Kurzeme, Dobele, Gulbene, Kuldīga, Limbaži, Madona and Rēzekne Regional Governments. However, what audit findings are likely to be relevant for a much larger number of local and regional governments, considering similar practices in the local and regional governments included in the audit sample (hereinafter referred to as the Local and Regional Governments).

² Public participation in the decision-making process. Research report, Society “*Latvijas Pilsoniskā alianse*” (Latvian Civil Alliance), 2021. Available: https://nvo.lv/uploads/zinojums_lidzdaliba_lemumu_pienemsana_2021.pdf (viewed on 30 March 2023).

³ Kusiņš, G. Fundamental human rights. Section 101. From: Commentaries on the Constitution of the Republic of Latvia. Chapter VIII. Fundamental human rights. Author team under the scientific guidance of Professor R. Balodis. Riga: Latvijas Vēstnesis, 2011, pp. 376-394.

⁴ Public participation in the decision-making process. Research report, Society “*Latvijas Pilsoniskā alianse*” (Latvian Civil Alliance), 2021. Available: https://nvo.lv/uploads/zinojums_lidzdaliba_lemumu_pienemsana_2021.pdf (viewed on 30 March 2023).

Main conclusions

Despite several examples of best practice identified in the audit, the local and regional governments included in the audit sample are on the lowest rungs of the ladder of participation when it comes to ensuring citizen participation; in many issues that are important to population, citizen participation is not provided for, while in those cases where it is provided for, the actions taken to promote citizen participation are assessed as symbolic and formal in many places and therefore do not demonstrate the desire to achieve active involvement of population.

The audit findings show that the reasons for this can be found, first of all, in the lack of a strategic vision of local and regional governments regarding benefits of citizen participation and the consequences of non-involvement of population for local and regional governments.

Failure to foresee citizen participation in significant issues, non-use of the most appropriate way to appeal to citizens to participate, lack of feedback, an approach by publishing individual invitations to participate in easy-to-understand way and using a full range of communication channels to reach citizens, while not communicating about others at all or doing it in the form that is less likely to reach those residents for whom these issues could be crucial are the inconsistencies resulting from the lack of strategic vision and purposeful management, which characterizes why the Local and Regional Governments still have a long way to climb to reach the highest rungs of the ladder of participation.

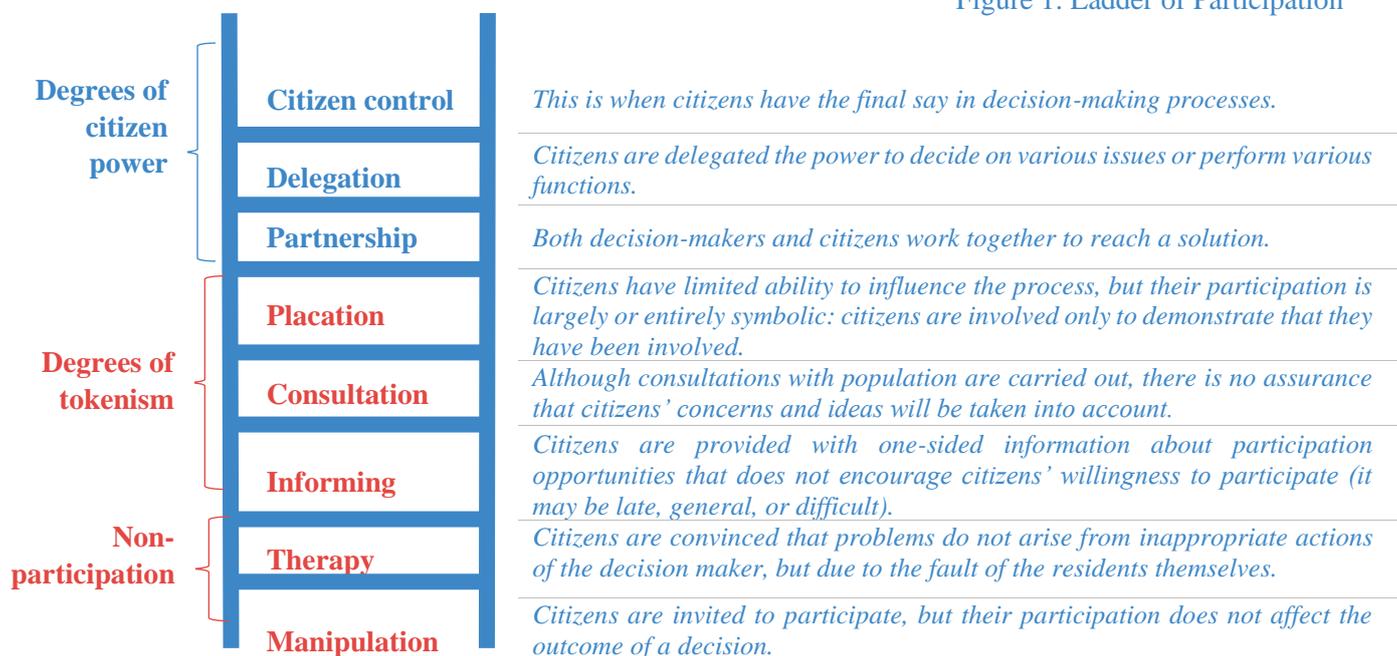
Such actions of the Local and Regional Governments have resulted in the adoption of several low-quality decisions the Local and Regional Governments already now by approving binding regulations, which must be changed very soon to adapt them to the needs of the population, and there is a high risk that the consequences of not involving the population in the decision-making processes will be noticeable even later.

This is evidenced by the low-quality decisions made by the former local and regional governments before the administrative and territorial reform, whose adoption processes did not encourage citizen participation; starting with the approval of strategies for work with youth, which had no effect on improving the situation in terms of youth participation, up to the use of municipal budget funds of at least 70 million euros for the creation of such an infrastructure, which forced a part of local or regional population, for instance, people with movement, vision, hearing and mental disabilities to accept not leaving their home, not going to municipal institutions to receive services, inability to receive services respectfully, including being constantly dependent on help provided by other people.

In the near future, local and regional governments plan to implement several important infrastructure projects, including those for people with functional disabilities, worth at least 21 million euros. The audit findings raise concerns as to whether this infrastructure will be respectfully usable and accessible to all residents of a local or regional government.

The Ladder of Participation is one of the tools to show the development level of citizen participation in decision-making processes clearly (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Ladder of Participation⁵



Several examples of best practice have been identified in the activities implemented by local and regional governments, which could correspond to the top rungs of the Ladder of Participation, for example:

- Rung “**Delegation**” corresponds to a participation budget (in Gulbene Regional Government), cooperation of local and regional governments with non-governmental organizations in the performance of municipal functions, for instance, within the framework of deinstitutionalization (in Cēsis and Madona Regional Governments), and organized calls for projects that give citizens an opportunity to implement their initiatives in culture, sports, youth, in the areas of territorial improvement by receiving financial support from local and regional governments (in all the local and regional governments included in the audit sample);
- Rung “**Partnership**” corresponds to the activity of citizen councils established by the Rēzekne Regional Government.

However, the irregularities found during the audit in which issues the citizens were involved in, how they were informed about the possibility to get involved and how the opinion of the citizens was taken into account, show that examples of best practice do not reflect the real situation in the Local and Regional Governments, which rather correspond to the lower rungs of the Ladder of Participation:

⁵ A ladder of citizen participation. Sherry R. Arnstein, 1969. Available: https://www.miguelangelmartinez.net/IMG/pdf/1969_Arnstein_participation_ladder_AJP.pdf (viewed on 30 March 2023), *Ladder of Citizen Participation, Organizing engagement*. Available: <https://organizingengagement.org/models/ladder-of-citizen-participation> (viewed on 30 March 2023).

- Rung “**Placation**” corresponds to the inclusion of citizens in the Municipal⁶ Commissions where their proportion to the number of employees of Local and Regional Governments has little influence on the citizens’ voice in participation processes, for example, in the Tourism Commission of the Gulbene Regional Government, only one member out of the 14 commissioners represents the citizens⁷;
- The fact that citizens are not provided with feedback on the result of participation, it is provided late, when the possibilities to influence something further are limited, or it is not possible to gain from the feedback the belief that the opinion of the population has been evaluated and taken into account when making a decision indicates that the Local and Regional Governments are on the rung “**Consultation**”;
- Rung “**Informing**” corresponds to the actions of Local and Regional Governments when providing citizens with one-sided information about participation opportunities, which does not correspond to the fact that a citizen wants to get involved: the invitations use complicated sentence constructions, professional vocabulary, specific sectoral terms, and general phrases that residents do not understand without in-depth understanding of documents or actions;
- Rung “**Therapy**” corresponds to:
 - Address by the Chair of the Rēzekne City Council⁸ reprimanding the population about the low activity of citizens in submitting ideas for the improvement of the city in connection with how high the requirements were set for the citizens to submit ideas (the ideas must be justified and the surrounding territories must be taken into account so that they are conceptually connected)⁹;
 - During the interview of the Southern Kurzeme Regional Government¹⁰, they referred the late deadlines for the absorption of the European Union funds to legal proceedings initiated by the population of Pāvilosta rather than the fact that the Regional Government did not involve the residents of Pāvilosta in the planning stages of the construction design sufficiently, which was why the residents also submitted a claim to the court;
- Rung “**Manipulation**” corresponds to the invitation of the Rēzekne City Municipality¹¹ to the residents to express their opinion (vote) about the dismantling of the monument, the responsibility for dismantling of which was determined for the City Municipality by law¹².

⁶ A ladder of citizen participation. Sherry R. Arnstein, 1969. Available: https://www.miguelangelmartinez.net/IMG/pdf/1969_Arnstein_participation_ladder_AJP.pdf (viewed on 30 March 2023), *Ladder of Citizen Participation, Organizing engagement*. Available: <https://organizingengagement.org/models/ladder-of-citizen-participation> (viewed on 30 March 2023).

⁶ Ādaži, Cēsis, Madona, and Gulbene Regional Governments.

⁷ See Annex 1 of the audit report for details.

⁸ The Chair calls on residents of Rēzekne not to be indifferent to their hometown. Available: <https://rezekne.lv/2021/09/priekssedetajs-aicina-rezekniesus-nebut-vienaldzigiem-pret-dzimto-pilsetu/> (viewed on 30 March 2023).

⁹ Residents of Rēzekne are invited to submit ideas for the improvement of the city. Available: <https://rezekne.lv/2021/07/26/rezekniesi-aicinati-iesniegt-idejas-pilsetas-labiekartosanai/> (viewed on 30 March 2023).

¹⁰ Minutes of the interview of the State Audit Office of Latvia with the Southern Kurzeme Regional Government on 21 June 2022.

¹¹ Express your opinion about the implementation of the provision in the administrative territory of Rēzekne. Available: <https://rezekne.lv/2022/08/29/izsaki-viedokli-par-likuma-normas-izpildi-rezeknes-administrativaja-teritorija/> (viewed on 2 September 2022).

¹² Law on the prohibition of displaying objects glorifying the Soviet and Nazi regimes and their dismantling in the territory of the Republic of Latvia, Cabinet Regulation No 448 “List of objects glorifying the Soviet and Nazi regimes in the territory of the Republic of Latvia to be dismantled” of 14 July 2022.

The actions of the Limbaži Regional Government when offering the population to vote on three visualizations of the appearance of the Salaca Bridge, of which only one was actually feasible¹³ are also thought-provoking.

In what decision-making processes do the Local and Regional Governments expect citizens to participate?

None of the Local and Regional Governments has developed a procedure that would determine at which stages and in which decision-making processes citizens are involved. Most often, citizen participation in the Local and Regional Governments is foreseen in the elaboration of development and territory planning documents at the stage where citizen involvement is regulated in relatively detailed regulations.

Other stages of development planning, in which citizen participation is decisive for the achievement of jointly developed development goals are **the implementation of development planning documents**, which include a wide range of issues, from which a strategy subordinate to the development program, binding regulations and other regulations affecting the citizens' or municipal budget were selected for verification in the audit, as well as monitoring the development and discussion of infrastructure projects and **monitoring the implementation of development planning documents, evaluation and updating** where the Local and Regional Governments foresee citizen participation in very rare cases.

Citizen participation in the development of subordinate strategies for fulfilling the goals of the development program is not foreseen in most cases investigated during the audit

During the audited period, five local and regional governments, namely, Cēsis, Gulbene, Kuldīga Regional Governments and Jūrmala and Rēzekne City Municipalities, approved 10 development programs, strategies of various fields and institutions or their amendments, for example, in education, culture, and tourism. However, only in the Cēsis Regional Government (two cases out of three¹⁴) and the Kuldīga Regional Government (one case out of two cases¹⁵), citizens have participated in the development or discussion of these documents and also not in all stages of citizen participation provided for in best practice¹⁶.



Figure 2. Stages of citizen participation¹⁷.

Almost no local and regional government anticipates citizen participation in the development of binding regulations and other regulations affecting citizens and municipal budget

¹³ Visualizations of the new bridge across River Salaca. Available: <https://www.limbazunovads.lv/lv/jaunums/jauna-salacas-tilta-vizualizacijas> (viewed on 29 August 2022).

¹⁴ Citizen participation is not foreseen in the development of the Culture Development Strategy 2030 of the Cēsis Regional Government (approved by Cēsis Regional Council Decision No 284 on Approval of the Culture Development Strategy 2030 of the Cēsis Regional Government of 19 May 2022).

¹⁵ Citizen participation is not foreseen in the elaboration of Development Strategy of Public Libraries 2022-2028 of the Kuldīga Region.

¹⁶ Advice for local and regional governments. When and how to consult the public? Association "Centre for Public Policy PROVIDUS", 2022. Available: <https://providus.lv/raksti/14918/> (viewed on 29 August 2022).

¹⁷ Advice for local and regional governments. When and how to consult the public? Association "Centre for Public Policy PROVIDUS", 2022. Available: <https://providus.lv/raksti/14918/> (viewed on 29 August 2022).

After the administrative and territorial reform (hereinafter - ATR), local and regional governments had to adopt a considerable number of binding regulations, which would further determine actions in such areas as pet animal welfare, provision of water management and decentralized sewerage services, municipal assistance in solving housing issues, waste management. In the audited period, the Local and Regional Governments have adopted 538 binding regulations in total, of which citizen participation is only envisaged in the development of 38 regulations. This has resulted in amending the regulations very soon after their approval in the Cēsis¹⁸, Limbaži¹⁹ and Madona²⁰ Regional Governments to eliminate the deficiencies found by the population in the approved regulations.

In the Local and Regional Governments²¹, citizen participation is not envisaged in 152 regulations approved by council decisions in the audited period, which provided, for instance, criteria in which cases and for which municipal funding non-governmental and religious organizations, citizens could apply for by submitting applications in project competitions organized by local and regional governments, achieving certain achievements in education and sports, etc. The Limbaži Regional Government has made amendments²² to one of these regulations²³ very shortly, three months after approving them based on the proposal received by eliminating the restriction of receiving a cash prize for outstanding achievements in education for those students who had won recognition in international competitions.

Citizen participation is almost not foreseen in the development of infrastructure projects and in the monitoring, evaluation and updating of the implementation of development planning documents

From 1 January 2022 to 31 December 2022, the Local and Regional Governments announced 74 procurements for the design of infrastructure facilities. For the construction or reconstruction of these infrastructure facilities, the Local and Regional Governments have foreseen the use of financial resources of at least 21 million euros in total²⁴.

Only three local and regional governments have invited citizens to get involved in one of the stages provided for in best practice²⁵ and not in all cases (Rēzekne City Municipality²⁶ and Gulbene Regional

¹⁸ Binding Regulation No 10 of Cēsis Regional Council “Amendments to Binding Regulation No 24 of Cēsis Regional Council “On benefits of Cēsis Regional Government” of 29 December 2021” of 24 March 2022; Binding Regulation No 28 of Cēsis Regional Council “Amendments to Binding Regulation No 21 of Cēsis Regional Council “On the procedure by which Cēsis Regional Government covers the costs of the implementation of the program for the private educational institution that implements a licensed preschool education program” of 2 December 2021” of 11 August 2022; Binding Regulation No 48 of Cēsis Regional Council “Amendment to Binding Regulation of Cēsis Regional Council No 26 “On concessions for student meal fees in Cēsis Regional Government” of 16 June 2022” of 1 December 2022.

¹⁹ Binding Regulation No 38 of Limbaži Regional Council “Amendments to Binding Regulation No 27 of Limbaži Regional Council “On the allocation of co-financing by Limbaži Regional Government for the connection of residential houses to the centralized sewerage system” of 25 November 2021” of 28 July 2022.

²⁰ Binding Regulation No 17 of the Madona Regional Council “Amendments to Binding Regulation No 21 of Madona Regional Government “Registration, admission, deduction, and round-the-clock monitoring service provision of preschool children in educational institutions of Madona Regional Government that implement preschool education programs” of 21 December 2021” of 31 May 2022.

²¹ Except for the Gulbene Regional Government, which invited citizens to comment on the progress of participation budget, which was used to amend the regulation.

²² Decision of Limbaži Regional Council of 28 April 2022 on amending Internal Regulation No 2 of Limbaži Regional Government “Cash prizes for outstanding achievements in education” of 27 January 2022.

²³ Internal Regulation No 2 of Limbaži Regional Government “Cash prizes for outstanding achievements in education” approved by Decision No 97 of Limbaži Regional Council of 27 January 2022 (minutes No 1, § 99).

²⁴ The total amount consists of the planned costs of construction or reconstruction of infrastructure facilities according to investment plans or publicly available information.

²⁵ Advice for local and regional governments. When and how to consult the public? Association “Centre for Public Policy PROVIDUS”, 2022. Available: <https://providus.lv/raksti/14918/> (viewed on 29 August 2022).

²⁶ Rēzekne City Municipality has invited citizens to submit beautification ideas before the construction project is developed for two urban areas, near the heating pipeline and in Pilskalns Park.

Government²⁷ each within the framework of one infrastructure project whereas Limbaži Regional Government²⁸ within the framework of two infrastructure projects): identifying needs, looking for solutions or offering to express an opinion for an already developed project.

At the same time, the call of the Rēzekne City Municipality, in which high requirements are set for citizen ideas, has not promoted significant activity of citizens in submitting ideas²⁹. On the other hand, the Limbaži Regional Government has offered citizens to vote on three visualizations of the appearance of the Salaca Bridge, of which only one was actually feasible³⁰.

The audit has also established that almost no Local and Regional Government³¹ envisages citizen participation in cases where the progress of the development planning documents developed and discussed together must be evaluated, they must be updated, or a proposal has been received to make changes to them. This creates a risk that the changes made by the five local and regional governments, that is, Ādaži, Southern Kurzeme, Limbaži, Rēzekne Regional Governments and Jūrmala and Rēzekne City Municipalities, might not meet the needs of the population by excluding or including new action and investment projects in the action and investment plans previously created together with the population. In their turn, the actions of the Jūrmala and Rēzekne City Municipalities, as well as the Rēzekne Regional Government call into question the openness of the local and regional governments towards the population without indicating traceable changes in the amended action and investment plans.

How do the Local and Regional Governments communicate about citizen participation opportunities and provide feedback?

Although the Local and Regional Governments provide for citizen participation in the elaboration of development and territory planning documents, as well as in the development and discussion of strategies³², binding regulations³³, as well as infrastructure projects³⁴ of individual Local or Regional Government, as well as in certain issues not included in the audit sample, however, the number of citizens who engage in these activities, is relatively small³⁵ in several cases.

The audit findings evidence that one of the reasons for the low activity of citizens is to be found in the lack of targeted actions of the Local and Regional Governments, that is, they carry out actions to

²⁷ The Gulbene Regional Government has invited citizens to familiarize themselves with the design of the construction project of Gulbīši Park.

²⁸ The Limbaži Regional Government has invited citizens to vote on the visualization options of the bridge across River Salaca during the development of the construction project (at the same time, only one of the options offered in the survey is actually feasible), as well as to provide information about their needs and possible solutions before the development of the construction project to improve the infrastructure and traffic of Parka and Ģildes Streets.

²⁹ The Chair calls on residents of Rēzekne not to be indifferent to their hometown. Available: <https://rezekne.lv/2021/09/priekssedetajs-aicina-rezekniesus-nebut-vienaldzīgiem-pret-dzimto-pilsetu/> (viewed on 30 March 2023).

³⁰ Visualizations of the new bridge across River Salaca. Available: <https://www.limbazunovads.lv/lv/jaunums/jauna-salacas-tilta-vizualizacijas> (viewed on 29 August 2022).

³¹ The conclusion refers to the local and regional governments which have approved the monitoring reports of the implementation of the development program (Ādaži and Gulbene Regional Governments) and/or updated or made changes in the development planning documents (Ādaži, Southern Kurzeme, Gulbene, Limbaži and Rēzekne Regional Governments, Jūrmala and Rēzekne City Municipalities) during the audited period.

³² Cēsis, Kuldīga Regional Governments.

³³ Ādaži, Madona, and Rēzekne Regional Governments.

³⁴ Gulbene and Limbaži Regional Governments and Rēzekne City Municipality.

³⁵ Except for Jūrmala City Municipality (on citizen participation in the development of territorial planning amendments and public consultation) and Gulbene Regional Government (on citizen participation in the development of sectoral plans, participation budgeting and tree cutting issues), which stated that the citizen activity was high.

achieve that as many citizens and various groups of citizens as possible learn about all the participation opportunities and want to engage in them.

For communication to be targeted, one must plan it by setting measurable goals and objectives as well. Such a strategy has not been approved for any of the Local and Regional Governments.

The audit has established that when inviting citizens to participate in the development and discussion³⁶ of territorial plans, local plans and detailed plans, much fewer communication channels are used than in other calls for participation, including using only those communication channels in some cases that are rarely used by population such as the website of the local or regional government and the territorial planning system³⁷ (hereinafter referred to as the TAPIS), which the population hardly uses, and the municipal newsletter that is published only once a month and does not include all invitations.

Irregularities were also found in other communication channels that were more often used by the Local and Regional Governments to inform citizens about participation opportunities, including in the Local and Regional Governments communicate with citizens with the help of social media “Facebook” (hereinafter referred to as Facebook).

Social media, including Facebook, are considered effective in reaching large audiences quickly. However, this is only possible if advertising services are used (they were used only by the Jūrmala City Municipality) and/or regular publication of posts is ensured. In addition, to ensure the appearance of posts in the followers’ news feed, due to the algorithms³⁸ created by the medium, the posts must encourage the interactivity of the followers³⁹ such as sharing them, reactions, and comments (the more comments, the more likely that future posts will appear in a follower’s news feed). The practice of using videos that grab the audience’s attention and inspire them to watch to the end also has an impact on the appearance of posts in a follower’s feed⁴⁰.

Three of the local and regional governments included in the audit sample, that is, Jūrmala and Rēzekne City Municipalities and Cēsis Regional Government, have used the opportunities provided by Facebook for a larger population relatively more during the audited period to reach a larger number of population. Some of the followers of the Local and Regional Governments might not see the posts of the other eight Local and Regional Governments⁴¹ including invitations to participate, as relatively less interactivity of followers can be observed in their accounts, as well as videos are rarely used in the posts. At the same time, both those Local and Regional Governments that use the opportunities provided by Facebook more and the other seven⁴² (except the Kuldīga Regional Government) do not post all invitations for citizens to participate in the Facebook account.

³⁶ In those Local and Regional Governments which invited citizens to participate in the development and discussion of territorial plans, local plans and detailed plans from 1 July 2021 to 30 August 2022, i.e., Rēzekne City Municipality, Cēsis, Dobeles, Gulbene Regional Governments (except for Jūrmala City Municipality, Kuldīga and Madona Regional Governments, for which the communication channels used did not differ by area).

³⁷ The publicly accessible part of dov.lv has been created for citizens on the website geolativija.lv.

³⁸ Due to the abundance of information, the media use algorithms that prioritize posts according to certain criteria, thus reducing the appearance of posts in the news feed that do not meet these criteria.

³⁹ See, for instance, *Haro-de-Rosario, Arturo, Alejandro Sáez-Martín, and María del Carmen Caba-Pérez. Using social media to enhance citizen engagement with local government: Twitter or Facebook? New media & society* 20.1 (2018): 29–49.

⁴⁰ *Understanding Video Distribution on Facebook*. Available: <https://www.facebook.com/formedia/blog/understanding-video-distribution-on-facebook> (viewed on 30 March 2023).

⁴¹ Ādaži, Southern Kurzeme, Dobeles, Gulbene, Kuldīga, Limbaži, Madona and Rēzekne Regional Governments.

⁴² Ādaži, Southern Kurzeme, Dobeles, Gulbene, Kuldīga, Limbaži, Madona and Rēzekne Regional Governments.

In its turn, when evaluating the content of invitations placed on the websites of the Local and Regional Governments, one has established that 57 % or 93 of 162 invitations to participate in the Local and Regional Governments⁴³ are not easy to perceive and do not create a desire to get involved. The invitations republished in other communication channels do not prevent that either:

- It is not clear from invitations what exactly will change and how these changes will affect a citizen, what benefit the citizen has from involvement in a specific activity, what the further process is and how realistic are the citizen's opportunities to influence a decision;
- Invitations use complicated sentence structures, professional vocabulary, and specific terms of the area, as well as general phrases that are incomprehensible to citizens without a deeper understanding of the document or action;
- Inconsistencies were found in calls for citizen participation in the elaboration and discussion of development and territorial planning documents (territorial planning, detailed planning, local planning), discussion of draft binding regulations, in calls to submit project tender applications, as well as in inviting young people to participate, that is, in areas that require in-depth understanding and motivation to get involved.

The different approach detected during the audit in the placement of invitations (in some cases, a wide range of communication channels are used, invitations are easy to perceive, but the opposite in other cases) indicates shortcomings in the openness of the Local and Regional Governments towards their population.

Providing sufficient and timely feedback on the results of citizen participation, which would allow citizens to make sure that their opinions have been weighed and to join citizen participation, was worthwhile but it has not been an accepted practice in the Local and Regional Governments⁴⁴.

It is both not provided in all cases when the laws do not envisage for such obligations for local and regional governments and it would be necessary to promote the already mentioned confidence among the population, for example, after surveys of the population (except for the Kuldīga Regional Government), but also in cases where it is clearly defined by laws and regulations, after citizen participation in the elaboration and discussion of development planning documents⁴⁵.

First of all, the Local and Regional Governments⁴⁶ do not publish feedback on the results of citizen participation as part of development planning in a place where citizens have a legal basis⁴⁷ to expect that it will be published there, in section "Citizen Participation" of the website. Such a section of the website has not been created at all in the Cēsis Regional Government and Rēzekne City

⁴³ The total number of notifications for all local and regional governments is indicated, see Annex 4 of the audit report for details on each of the local and regional governments.

⁴⁴ Inconsistencies in one of the types checked in the audit (feedback after participation in surveys or in the elaboration of development planning documents) have been found in all the local and regional government included in the audit sample.

⁴⁵ Except Rēzekne City Municipality, Gulbene and Rēzekne Regional Government, which did not have the final version of the development planning documents approved or there was no need to develop the documents during the audited period.

⁴⁶ In all local and regional government (except the Limbaži Regional Government) that have approved development planning documents during the audited period, namely, the Jūrmala City Municipality, Ādaži, Cēsis, Southern Kurzeme, Dobeles, Kuldīga and Madona Regional Governments.

⁴⁷ Sub-paragraph 9.4 and 10.5 of Cabinet Regulation No 970 "Procedure for citizen participation in the development planning process" of 25 August 2009 obligates local and regional governments to place information on the results of citizen participation in the framework of development planning (including which suggestions and proposals have or have not been taken into account, and the justification in the event that a suggestion or proposal has not been taken into account) in the Citizen Participation of the website by distributing it also in other ways if possible.

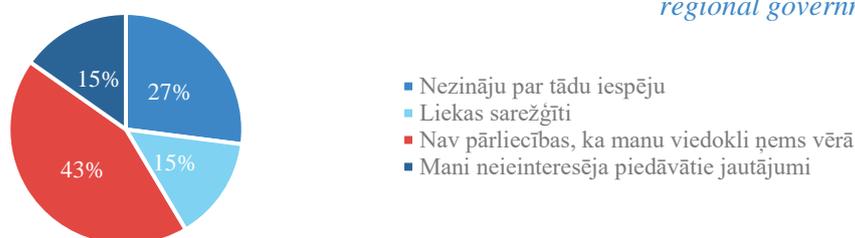
Municipality.

Secondly, in the place where feedback is published after citizen involvement in the development and discussion of development planning documents (on the website where a development planning document is available), it is done only at the end of the process itself⁴⁸ when the document has already been approved and not after each consultation, as it is determined by the Regulation⁴⁹.

Deficiencies have also been identified in the quality of feedback. Contrary to the provisions of the Regulation⁵⁰, the Southern Kurzeme, Cēsis, Dobeles, Kuldīga and Madona Regional Governments have not indicated directly in 257 their answers out of 509 answers⁵¹, and it is not clear from the explanation, whether the proposals made by citizens have been taken into account and will be incorporated into a development planning document, why they have not been taken into account (the justification contains general phrases and statements) or the resident is given a blank answer “accepted for information”.

As it follows from the results of the population survey⁵² conducted as part of the collaboration between the State Audit Office of Latvia and the students of the Communication Department of Riga Stradins University, the aforementioned factors such as the lack of information about the possibilities of citizen participation or their complexity, as well as the lack of confidence that an opinion will be taken into consideration as a result of participation are the reasons why the majority or 85% of surveyed residents do not participate in municipal decision-making processes (See Graph 1).

Why have not you participated in the decision-making processes of a local or regional government (for instance, giving opinions/proposals to a local or regional government in a survey, working group, in writing, etc.) in your local or regional government?



⁴⁸ In all the local and regional governments (except the Limbaži Regional Government) that have approved development planning documents during the audited period, that is, the Jūrmala City Municipality, Ādaži, Cēsis, Southern Kurzeme, Dobeles, Kuldīga and Madona Regional Governments.

⁴⁹ Sub-paragraph 9.4 and 10.5 of Cabinet Regulation No 970 “Procedure for citizen participation in the development planning process” of 25 August 2009.

⁵⁰ Sub-paragraph 9.4 and 10.5 of Cabinet Regulation No 970 “Procedure for citizen participation in the development planning process” of 25 August 2009, Annex 2 “Public objections and proposals on a development planning document”.

⁵¹ A total number of responses from all local and regional governments is indicated.

⁵² The students from the Riga Stradins University, in cooperation with the State Audit Office of Latvia, are surveying citizens about the possibilities of participation in local and regional governments. Available: <https://www.lrvk.gov.lv/lv/aktualitates/rsu-studenti-sadarbiba-ar-valsts-kontroli-aptauja-iedzivotajus-par-lidzdalibas-poszejam-pasvaldibas> (viewed on 30 March 2023).

Graph 1. Results of the survey of population on the reasons why they did not participate in citizen participation activities. (*I did not know about such a possibility; It seems complicated; There is no assurance that my opinion will be taken into account; I was not interested in the questions offered.*)

What are the Local and Regional Governments doing to promote a civically active young generation?

Even if local and regional governments foresee citizen participation in issues important to them, communicate purposefully and provide feedback, there is a risk that a part of the population will still not participate, including because they do not consider that civic activity⁵³ is significant for them as individuals individually and for society at large. To make the next generation more civically active, the work with the youth carried out by local and regional governments plays a big role, where one of the goals of this work is to facilitate the participation of young people, both for more effective work with the youth, and also generally improving the proportion of young people in decision-making processes shared by all.

However, the audit has established that the way Local and Regional Governments, both before the administrative and territorial reform and after merger, work with youth does not contribute to the formation of a more civically active young generation.

Even though the Youth Law, which stipulates the obligation of local and regional governments to plan work with youth by developing a youth policy planning document, has been in force for 10 years⁵⁴, such a document has not been developed in most local and regional governments⁵⁵ either before the administrative and territorial reform or after the merger in Ādaži, Cēsis, Southern Kurzeme, Dobele, Kuldīga, Limbaži and Madona Regional Governments⁵⁶.

At the same time, even in those cases where a youth policy planning document has been developed, its content does not indicate that the process of elaborating a document was of high quality, as it does not define measurable goals and targets, a document was shaped without statistical data on the age, place of residence, interests and needs (except for the Dobele Regional Government), as well as not involving the young people themselves in the elaboration of the document, who would be best able to discover which solutions would be relevant for them. Also, regular monitoring of statistical data, wishes and needs and reevaluation of strategies do not take place in the Local and Regional Governments, thus allowing the consumption of resources for activities that do not have a significant impact on the improvement of the situation in the field of youth participation⁵⁷.

Evaluating how the Local and Regional Governments work with youth in practice, the audit has found that only the Madona Regional Government⁵⁸, the Jūrmala and Rēzekne City Municipalities have

⁵³ Civic activities are any actions that an individual performs to improve the existing situation within a society or a community (See, for example, here: <https://delna.lv/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Jauniesu-pilsoniska-lidzdaliba-demokratiska-sabiedriba.pdf>).

⁵⁴ Part one, Section 5 of the Youth Law (as amended on 3 November 2010).

⁵⁵ See Table 6 of the audit report for which local and regional governments have not developed a youth policy planning document before the administrative and territorial reform.

⁵⁶ During the audited period, the youth policy planning document has not been developed in the Ādaži, Cēsis, Southern Kurzeme, Dobele, Kuldīga, Limbaži and Madona Regional Government. During the audit, the Madona Regional Government indicated that the activities set forth in the youth policy planning document valid in the former Madona Regional Government continued to be implemented in the newly created Madona Regional Government.

⁵⁷ In all the local and regional governments included in the audit sample.

⁵⁸ During the audited period, a senior specialist in the field of youth and family policy of the Regional Government performed the functions of an Advisory Commission for Youth Affairs in the Madona Regional Government.

used the opportunities offered by the Youth Law to create a full-fledged institutional system for work with youth during the audited period by establishing a youth council, an advisory commission for youth affairs, and a youth centre. The other eight local and regional governments⁵⁹ lack either a youth council or an advisory commission for youth affairs (except the Ādaži Regional Government, which has not established either of them).

However, none of the youth councils established by the Local and Regional Governments⁶⁰ fulfils all the tasks provided for in the Youth Law for the facilitation of youth participation. As a result, the youth council, which should be a full-fledged representative and defender of the interests and needs of young people by participating in the research and analysis of the interests and needs of young people, developing proposals for improving the quality of life of the youth of the local or regional government⁶¹ functions more as organizers of events for young people.

The digital work carried out by the Local and Regional Governments, which also includes communication with young people on social media, or those media that young people use the most daily, is implemented in a way that does not reach all young people, and if it reaches, it does not create a desire to get involved in the activities offered by local and regional governments:

- Posts of the Local and Regional Governments on social media do not appeal to young people, which is proven by both the low interaction of young people with announcements (there are few reactions, sharing of content and comments), as well as a small number of young people⁶² who follow the accounts of the Local and Regional Governments on social media;
- Posts are created mainly by using one image and placing a long text below it, which exceeds the number of characters corresponding to best practice⁶³ significantly, that is, even up to nine times on Facebook (in the Rēzekne City Municipality) and three times on social media Instagram (hereinafter referred to as Instagram) (in the Gulbene Regional Government);
- The Local and Regional Governments create content rarely by visualizing information in a series of photos or creating short videos that have a greater potential to attract and retain the attention of young people. For example, videos on Facebook accounts of the Local and Regional Governments make up only 7% of the posts included in the audit sample. A better situation can be observed on Instagram, however, even for the most active video uploader, the Gulbene Regional Government, they make up 33% and only 16% on average for the local and regional governments together;
- Posts are posted on the accounts that do not directly apply to young people, as well as municipalities in general publish posts on social media accounts less often than best practice⁶⁴ dictates (for example, the Cēsis Regional Government publishes posts on Facebook once in 11 days at an average and the Madona Regional Government posts on Instagram once in 10 days at an average). This, in connection with the low engagement, especially a small number

⁵⁹ Cēsis, Southern Kurzeme, Dobeles, Gulbene, Kuldīga, Limbaži, Madona, and Rēzekne Regional Governments.

⁶⁰ In all the local and regional governments included in the audit sample which have established youth councils, namely, Cēsis, Gulbene, Limbaži Regional Governments, Jūrmala and Rēzekne City Municipalities, except for the Madona Regional Government.

⁶¹ Part six, Section 5 of the Youth Law.

⁶² The “*Zeimulš*” account of Rēzekne City Municipality for communication with young people on social media Facebook is also followed by adults, which also explains a relatively higher number of reactions than in other local and regional governments that have created accounts aimed directly at reaching young people.

⁶³ *Ideal Length of Social Media Posts: A Guide for Every Platform*. Available: <https://blog.hootsuite.com/ideal-social-media-post-length/> (viewed on 30 March 2023).

⁶⁴ *How Often To Post On Social Media: 2023 Success Guide*. Available: <https://louisem.com/144557/often-post-social-media/> (skatīts: 30.03.2023.).

of comments and videos in the posts, which has an impact on social media algorithms⁶⁵, reduces the possibility that the posts of the local or regional government appear to all the followers of its account;

- Only 4% of 1,179 posts on Facebook and Instagram included in the audit sample do not foresee the interactivity of young people in the particular post, including they are not emotionally appealing and correspond more to one-way communication between the institution and the young person.

The Local and Regional Governments⁶⁶ also carry out mobile work rarely, the purpose of which is to provide opportunities for face-to-face participation for young people in places where there are no youth centres or where free time activities are limited. This, in connection with the shortcomings in the communication of local or regional government with young people on social media (a part of young people, most likely, do not even know about which day the mobile work will be carried out), limits the opportunities for all young people to engage in mobile work activities.

Does poor citizen involvement have consequences?

Consequences of the lack of citizen participation are felt by every resident of a local or regional government, and the impact of these consequences depends on the relevant decision of that local or regional government. When deciding what kind of infrastructure to build in the local or regional government, the consequences of involvement of an inferior target group are felt especially hard by people with disabilities caused by functional disorders. Ignoring or not considering the opinion and needs of these citizens results in a complete or partial restriction of their right to receive high-quality education, healthcare, and other types of municipal and state services. This contradicts the UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities, which Latvia has undertaken to fulfil and reduces the opportunities of people with disabilities and their relatives to fully integrate into the labour market and society, as a result of which these people are exposed to the risk of poverty, while also increasing the burden on social budget.

Therefore, in cooperation with the Association of the Disabled and their Friends Apeiron, the State Audit Office of Latvia assessed during the audit how accessible the infrastructure built and reconstructed by the Local and Regional Governments during the audited period was to people with disabilities.

Although during the audit, the Local and Regional Governments stated that the opinion of people with disabilities or organizations representing them was listened to regarding their wishes and needs before designing an infrastructure facility, the inconsistencies in the infrastructure constructed by the Local and Regional Governments detected during the audit show that the opinion and needs of people with disabilities have not been explored and considered sufficiently.

During the audit, one has established that people with disabilities caused by movement, vision, hearing, and mental disorders, cannot use 33 out of 34 municipal infrastructure facilities assessed during the audit independently, they are not functional and do not promote their independence. Namely, people with disabilities cannot use them as well as people without functional disabilities, and they need the help of other people, which makes them dependent on the help of other people.

⁶⁵ *Understanding Video Distribution on Facebook*. Available: <https://www.facebook.com/formedia/blog/understanding-video-distribution-on-facebook> (viewed on 30 March 2023).

⁶⁶ Mobile work will not be evaluated in the Jūrmala and Rēzekne City Municipalities and in the Madona Regional Government.

People with mobility impairments cannot enter 31 sites out of 34 sites without the help of other people because the doors do not open automatically, are heavy or otherwise unsuitable for them to open independently, the slope of ramp or sidewalk is too steep, or the ramp must be accessed on an uneven surface. It is also impossible for people with mobility impairments to move around a building, use the service and even visit the facilities without the help of other people in many places, as corridors are narrow, one can only move between floors by stairs or lifts, which are not suitable for all wheelchairs and aids. In addition, it has also been found in the facilities, where ensuring environmental accessibility for people with disabilities has been one of the prerequisites for granting funding from the European Union.

The built and reconstructed infrastructure also does not meet the needs of people with visual⁶⁷ and hearing⁶⁸ impairments, which, for example, are crucial in educational institutions so that students can learn to their full potential. In none of the educational institutions included in the audit sample in the Madona Regional Government⁶⁹, Cēsis Regional Government⁷⁰, Ādaži Regional Government⁷¹, Jūrmala City Municipality⁷², an induction loop was built, which suppresses the surrounding noises for a person with hearing impairment and allows them to better hear and perceive the necessary information. The induction loop was also not built in other infrastructure facilities included in the audit sample, such as day centres⁷³, culture, recreation, and adult education centres⁷⁴, where the presence of surrounding/adjacent noise makes it significantly more difficult to receive the service. Also, in the majority of infrastructure sites included in the audit sample⁷⁵, problems were found with insufficient observance of contrasts, provision of tactile surfaces that allow people with visual impairments to move and navigate in space safely by reducing the possibility of stumbling and getting injured from glazed surfaces that do not have sufficient contrast.

Rooms that are not too spacious or, on the contrary, narrow, the possibility to isolate oneself from the

⁶⁷ It was found in 30 sites out of 35 sites built and reconstructed by the local and regional governments included in the audit sample.

⁶⁸ It was found in 18 sites out of 20 sites built and reconstructed by the local and regional governments included in the audit sample.

⁶⁹ At the Madona City Secondary School located at 6 Valdemāra Boulevard, Madona.

⁷⁰ At the Cēsis City Secondary School located at 1 Leona Paegles Street, Cēsis.

⁷¹ At the Ādaži Primary School located at 6a Attekas Street and the Carnikava Primary School located at 1 Nākotnes Street, Ādaži Region.

⁷² At the Jūrmala State Grammar School located at 55 Raiņa Street, Jūrmala.

⁷³ Day Care and Social Rehabilitation Centre located at 39 Attekas Street, Ādaži; Support Centre Pērle located at 90 Rīgas Street, Cēsis; Social Support Centre located at 7 Ķieģeļu Street, Priekule, South Kurzeme Region; Day Care Centre and specialized workshops for adults located at 7A Dzirnāvu Street, Gulbene; Social Services Centre located at 7 Cēsu Street, Limbaži; Multifunctional Social Services Centre for Children with Functional Disabilities located at 4 Parka Street, Madona; Day Care Centre and specialized workshops for adults located at 10 Viļānu Street, Rēzekne; Day Care Centre and Social Rehabilitation Services Centre for Children located at 16A Zemnieku Street, Rēzekne.

⁷⁴ Īle Town Hall, Kumeliņi, Īle Rural District, Dobele Region; Krimūni Town Hall, Krimūni Rural District, Dobele Region; Dobele Adult Education and Entrepreneurship Support Centre located at 7 Brīvības Street, Dobele; Youth House in Kauguri located at 1 Mazā Nometņu Street, Jūrmala; Vilzēni Town Hall, Vilzēni, Braslava Rural District, Limbaži Region.

⁷⁵ Ādaži Region: Ādaži Primary School and Carnikava Primary School; Gulbene Region: group apartments in Tirza Rural District, Day Care Centre and specialized workshops in Gulbene, Family-type Setting Service in Stradi Rural District; Kuldīga Region: Culture and Education Centre “Adatu Fabrika”, Social Communal House in Nīkrāce Rural District; Madona Region: Cesvaine Castle, Madona Secondary School, Multifunctional Social Services Centre, Youth House; Rēzekne City: Day Care Centre and specialized workshops, Day Care Centre and Social Rehabilitation Services Centre for Children; In the municipalities of Cēsis, Southern Kurzeme, Dobele, Limbaži and Rēzekne Regional Governments and Jūrmala City Municipality: in all infrastructure sites included in the audit sample (See the details of audit sample in Annex 2 of the audit report).

noise of the surrounding environment (See, for instance, findings by the environmental accessibility expert in Day Care Centre Pērle in the Cēsis Regional Government), different colouring of the floors of buildings, easy-to-understand signs and symbols, are those aspects of environmental accessibility that allow people with mental disabilities to navigate in space. However, they were not provided or provided insufficiently in 14 sites out of 34 constructed and reconstructed infrastructure sites included in the audit sample.

These inconsistencies show the lack of understanding by local and regional governments about the needs of the users of the facilities to be built and the need to address these people proactively to ensure the meaningful use of the municipal budget funds.

Key recommendations

Based on the audit findings and the conclusions of the auditors, local and regional governments have been given recommendations for facilitating citizen participation, which will promote high-quality and balanced decision-making in local and regional governments, as well as promote a civically active young generation:

- Carry out actions to anticipate the participation of citizens in all matters relevant to them and in all stages provided for in best practice⁷⁶ while ensuring internal controls for its execution;
- Ensure that calls for participation are easily perceived and well visible, including with diverse communication channels that reach all population groups, while also establishing internal controls to prevent a selective approach in the creation of the content of calls and the choice of communication channels;
- Provide internal control procedures for providing timely and justified feedback in all cases of citizen participation;
- Carry out actions to promote youth participation within the framework of work with youth: create an institutional system and internal controls oriented to the interests of young people, which will ensure the development of youth policy and the participation of young people in it, regular data collection and policy reassessment according to current data, regular mobile work, as well as improving digital work competencies of employees involved with youth (including communication with young people).

During the audit, the State Audit Office of Latvia has also used the environmental accessibility self-assessment questionnaires prepared by the Ministry of Welfare, which are available on its website, to assess infrastructure accessibility for people with disabilities. In the opinion of the State Audit Office, final result of the questionnaire gives users an unfounded impression that the infrastructure created by local and regional governments is adequate for the needs of people with disabilities. The list of best practices provided in the questionnaires, which is not taken into account in the assessment of environmental accessibility in the Local and Regional Governments, is not the desired situation, but an essential prerequisite for environmental accessibility, which does not follow from the questionnaire. Therefore, the State Audit Office of Latvia will invite the Ministry of Welfare to review its activities in ensuring environmental accessibility in the country to ensure that the rights

⁷⁶ Advice for local and regional governments. When and how to consult the public? Association “Public Policy Centre PROVIDUS”, 2022. Available: <https://providus.lv/raksti/14918/> (viewed on 29 August 2022).

of people with disabilities are respected.

The State Audit Office of Latvia also sees irregularities in the national youth policy, including its implementation considering that the non-fulfillment of the obligations stipulated in the laws and regulations has been allowed for years on the part of the important creators of the civically active new generation, that is, local and regional governments. At the same time, low achievable results such as an exceedingly small number of young people in 2027 (15%) who will highly value their opportunities to influence decision-making in the country and local and regional governments, do not indicate that we can expect significantly more civically active young people and adults in the future. Therefore, the State Audit Office of Latvia will call on the Ministry of Education and Science to review the national youth policy under its competence to prevent the above-mentioned risks.