



Working together to improve accessibility: Foreign-language speakers involved in the development of social and health care services

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In September 2026, the project *Working Together to Improve Accessibility: Inclusion of Foreign-Language Speakers in Social and Health Care Services* was launched. The project promotes the development of social and health care services together with foreign-language-speaking residents in South Ostrobothnia and Kanta-Häme. Seinäjoki University of Applied Sciences (SEAMK) serves as the lead partner, while Häme University of Applied Sciences (HAMK) is a project partner. The project will run until the end of January 2029.

The basic idea of the project is simple: services should not be developed *for* foreign-language speakers, but *with* them. Foreign-language-speaking residents possess valuable knowledge about what works well in service pathways, and where challenges exist. So far, this knowledge has not been systematically utilized in service development.

Building permanent structures for participation in the regions

In both project regions, the proportion of foreign-language speakers remains below the national average. In South Ostrobothnia, foreign-language speakers accounted for 4.3% of the population in 2024 (8 229 people),

while in Kanta-Häme the figure was 6.6% (11 117 people). The corresponding national share was 10.8% (Statistics Finland, 2025). Despite the lower proportions, growth has been rapid. In South Ostrobothnia, the number of foreign-language speakers nearly doubled between 2018 and 2024 (Regional Council of South Ostrobothnia, n.d.).

According to a national study, one in three people who have migrated to Finland feel, that they do not receive sufficient access to physician services to meet their needs (Kuusio et al., 2023). While the number of foreign-language-speaking clients in the project regions remains relatively small, multilingual service practices do not emerge automatically. This makes it particularly important to develop and strengthen them now.

Service-user development groups are currently being formed

The project's regional goals are to increase the participation of foreign-language speakers in the development of social and health care services, and to improve access to those services. The project also seeks to strengthen professionals' language-aware and culturally responsive competencies. A key objective is to establish permanent structures that support participation by developing regional models such as customer panels and service-user development groups. The resulting knowledge, operational models, and training materials will also be disseminated nationally.

The project begins by building a foundation for future work. A steering group will be established, the current situation will be assessed, and networks will be strengthened together with wellbeing services counties, municipalities, and civil society organizations. One of the key tasks is to establish service-user development groups. At least five foreign-language-speaking developers will be recruited in each region, and the groups will meet regularly throughout the project. Participants will receive compensation for their work, and interpretation services will be provided when needed.

During the project, a multilingual and easy-to-read service guide will be developed, along with an operational model for customer panels and an online training package for social and health care professionals. The project aims to engage 60 foreign-language-speaking participants and train 60 professionals.

The project has started with great enthusiasm, and there is much to be done. If you are interested in the topic, would like to join a development group, know someone who might be interested, or work in a related field, please feel free to get in touch: suvi.tuomi@seamk.fi

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