

## **Audit summary**

### **on the Development and Maintenance of Green Space Owned by Local Governments (0934)**

The State Audit Office of Hungary (SAO) has completed the audit on the development and maintenance of green space owned by local governments of communities (hereinafter: local governments). The resulting findings and recommendations are as follows.

Public green spaces are playing a major role in the formation of the environment of communities, especially of towns. They have beneficial influence on the ecological conditions; bring about favorable changes to the microclimate, the thermoregulation and water regime, the developments in the air pollution, the noise transmission. In addition, they improve the physical well-being of the residents and the esthetics of the community.

Through the National Environmental Protection Program II (NEEP II) addressing the period 2003-2008, the Hungarian Parliament set down the major goals of environmental protection and the actions necessary for their implementation. The Act on Environmental Protection requires the local governments to develop a local environmental protection program that has to include for the given community the tasks, assignments falling under the category 'green space management'. When drafting this local program, 70 percent of the audited 50 local governments complied with NEEP II requirements. Half of the audited local governments included in the program the required community-level tasks, assignments of green space management.

At two thirds of the audited local governments, the maintenance and development of the public green spaces was included as a public service to be provided in their respective Rules of Organization and Operation (ROO) and economic programs. Nevertheless, neither the content, nor the individual tasks, assignments, that make up 'the maintenance and development of green spaces' have been specified at these local governments.

This is partly accounted for by the lack of an individual parliamentary act that could provide a standard definition for the 'maintenance and development of public green spaces' that, as an activity, is one of the public services to be provided by local governments. The term 'green spaces' is not defined identically in the different valid regulations. According to the Act on Local Governments, the parks belong to the 'primary assets' that basically serve the provision of compulsory public services and are non-tradable. But, on the other hand, the term 'park' is not defined by any rules.

Due to the shortcoming in legal regulations the local governments interpreted, regulated and performed their respective tasks, assignments that they (optionally) assumed as compulsory ones and that are falling under the maintenance, renewal and development of municipal green spaces, differently.

Where the term of 'park area' was understood as the total space of all municipal green spaces, the green space management was regarded a compulsory task for the local government. This was the case at 24 percent of the audited local governments. The remaining 76 percent listed green space management among the tasks they assume to perform on voluntary basis.

In order to provide a healthy environment for residents, the local governments took into account the legislative stipulations that address protection against the common ragweed and that was published in 2008. Thus, in the audited period, the local governments made use of competitive opportunities, projects that announced invitations to applications for clearing spaces heavily infected by ragweed, promoted job creating programs to employ protective measures against ragweed.

The green space assets presented in the local governments' respective real estate registers were in accordance with the actual situation at 70 percent of the audited local governments. At 62 percent they were in accordance with the area registered as municipal by the land registry office. As regards the green spaces registered by the land registry office, there was an increase of 16 percent from 2004 to 2008. In this respect the increase of forest areas was decisive. At the audited local governments, there was a favorable change (i.e. an increase by 22.5 percent from 2004 to 2008) also in the size of the environmentally managed areas.

The local governments categorized the green space assets owned by them as public parks, public gardens, and public rest-space forests, publicly accessible forests under protection or arboretums. However, considering the content of their definitions and other related terms these categories do not cover the total of green spaces owned by local governments. On the one hand, they did not include the green spaces covered by permanent vegetation but smaller than 200 m<sup>2</sup> and not suitable for resting, games, sport activities. (Only the half of the local governments assigned these spaces to the categories public gardens and public parks.) On the other hand, from among the spaces owned by local governments and covered by permanent vegetation and open for public use, neither do the above categories include the green spaces taken up by roadside slopes, tiny green strips, rows of trees, ditches that consequently, do not appear in the records on the green space real estates. Based on data the SAO requested and received from local governments, their area amounted to 67 percent of that of the assets registered as green spaces.

NEPP II set the goal to increase the amount of green spaces for public-use per town resident from 38.7 m<sup>2</sup> in the years 1999 and 2000 as starting point to 45 m<sup>2</sup> in 2008, but failed to specify which green spaces of the towns are relevant to and be included in the calculations. Lacking such a specification, it is not possible to check the 38.7 m<sup>2</sup> value, considered as starting point and measure the extent to which the goal was achieved. The latest statistical data on the amount of green spaces is from the year 2003 and indicates 39.11 m<sup>2</sup> green spaces for public use per town resident. Based on data that are from the

respective real estate registers of all Hungarian towns, it can be stated that, contrary to the expected increase, the green spaces per town resident decreased by 2.5 percent, in 2008 and it was merely 22.25 m<sup>2</sup>.

The green spaces owned in 2008 by the audited local governments of towns and Budapest districts fell considerably short of the NEEP II objective, even if the whole area owned by communities and covered by permanent vegetation was taken as basis. The achieved per-resident value was merely 28.4 m<sup>2</sup> on average (compared to 24.4 m<sup>2</sup> in 2005), which was subject to a large variation (ranging from 0.49 to 144.06 m<sup>2</sup>).

The public service to maintain green spaces was provided by the local governments in a multiple way: through the Mayor's Office or through an institution or corporation of the given local government, or with the involvement of an independent corporation, or a sub regional association of several local governments. A combination of the above forms of service provision was also possible. A decree by the government ministry in charge required local governments to maintain green spaces, but failed to specify the technical issues, highlights of and the individual tasks, assignments falling under maintenance.

The efforts made under the maintenance and development of green spaces were constrained by financial means available to the local government from their respective budgets and the nation's central budget. Consequently, in the different fields of green space management a different amount of effort was invested in the performance of the related tasks.

Fifty eight percent of the local governments did not devote due attention to the planning of tasks, since they failed to specify the individual tasks of green space management. These local governments planned their tasks and calculated their expenditures on the basis of the experiences of previous years, respectively the expenditures of the previous year. It was not a typical practice to back up the green space management plan with other planning documents on the needs for technology, time, raw material, staff and machines. Only a quarter of the local governments surveyed the needs of residents in respect of green spaces.

The total expenditure of the audited local governments in the period 2005-2008 for the maintenance of green spaces amounted to a total of HUF 5.4 billion that was 1.7 percent of the their total operational expenditures. In this period the operational expenditure per m<sup>2</sup> increased from 72 to 79 HUF at the local governments of communities and decreased from HUF 162 to HUF 155 at those of the towns and Budapest districts. The amount of working hours devoted to the maintenance of green space rose by 9.6 percent form 2005 to 2008. Within the maintenance of green spaces of local governments the upkeep of the lawn areas accounted for the most of working hours and budgetary means. In the 4 years 35 percent of the operational expenditures for green spaces were spent on lawns.

Some form of 'supportive public employment' was used by nearly every local government in providing the public service of green space maintenance and

management. This practice took into account the seasonality of green space maintenance and the financial assistance from the central government for supportive public employment. Sixty-six percent of the maintenance work was arranged for supportive public employment. The average number of those persons involved in supportive public employment for green space maintenance during the audited period was 1 425 and, on average, in a year they performed a total of 781 thousand working hours.

With reliance on the seven categories of maintenance works, the audited local governments altogether efficiently performed the tasks falling under green space maintenance since, beyond a 23-percent increase in the green space addressed by maintenance, a bigger (by 9.3 percent) green space was managed in 2008 than in 2005 with the use of the same amount (thousand HUF) of maintenance-purpose budgetary means. (From 1.51 hectares in 2005, to 1.65 hectares in 2008.)

A third of the audited local governments implemented in the audited period some green space developments, nearly 90 percent of which aimed at an improvement in the quality of green spaces. However, capital expenditures of this sort fell back in 2008 to the half of the 2005 value and to the third of the 2006 value.

In the audited period 80 percent of the local governments had some playgrounds, while the number of playgrounds was decreasing from 448 to 362. But, regarding those 'more advanced' playgrounds that have individual playing facilities being surrounded with some buffer soil layer to alleviate the impacts of a possible 'hitting the ground', the period 2005-2008 witnessed an increase in their relative share from 30 to 54 percent. An annual checking of the playing facilities, as required by law, was done by 28 percent of the local governments. According to the law, each playing facility (of a playing ground) should have a compliance certificate. Forty percent of local governments fully satisfied this requirement. At 53 percent, some facilities did not have such certificate. At 7 percent not a single playing facility had any compliance certificate.

Budgetary means and work efforts devoted by local governments to the maintenance and development of green spaces have contributed to the achievement of goals set out in the respective economic programs, communal development plans, environmental protection programs and several technical annual plans of the local governments. Further results were the preservation and, sometimes, the improvement of the natural state of green spaces and their territorial increase. All these improvements led to an improvement in the quality of human life, and to the mitigation of adverse impacts from the climate change.

Based on the site audit findings, the SAO recommended the government agencies to prepare, for the sake of an unambiguous definition of the tasks, a separate draft act as a regulatory framework as well as a pertaining implementation decree that are to address green space management and specify

the related compulsory tasks of local governments. Further recommendations for government agencies included the review of, and making amendments in the real estate registers of local governments and the requirement to include in the report addressed to the Parliament on NEPP II implementation an investigation regarding the implementation of the goal regarding the 'public green space per-resident'.