

A person with dark hair, wearing a green hoodie, is shown in profile from the side, writing on a large whiteboard with a marker. The whiteboard contains faint, illegible text. The background is a plain wall.

Public service delivery in the Nordic Region:

An exercise in
collaborative governance

POLICY BRIEF 2021:2



Nordregio



Abstract

Now, more than ever, is Nordic collaboration required across all levels of governance to help overcome the devastating socio-economic impacts of the pandemic and to solve the shared challenges posed by climate change and growing urban-rural divides. This policy brief examines six good practice examples of collaborative public service delivery from across the Nordic Region, highlighting the main drivers, challenges and enablers of collaboration and the replication potential of these Nordic collaborative examples. The policy brief finds that new and innovative models of Nordic collaboration are constantly emerging thanks to rapid technological developments that are helping to bring stakeholders together to solve common societal challenges. The high levels of cooperation outlined indicate that collaborative governance is continually evolving within the Nordic context.

Public service delivery in the Nordic Region

Nordic welfare states are world renowned for providing high quality public services. Indeed, regional and municipal authorities play a central role in the delivery of key public services within Nordic states in areas including social and elderly care and education. The ongoing Covid-19 crisis has also reinforced the important role of local actors in healthcare provision, where countries with decentralized systems of governance have proven more successful in implementing effective test, track and trace policies. In recent years, however, the delivery of public services in the Nordic Region has become increasingly challenging as capacity and resources at the regional and municipal level vary greatly, often making regional and local authorities dependent on national level support (Wiberg & Limani, 2015). Resource deficiencies have been exacerbated by periods of austerity following the 2008 financial crash; furthermore, rapid demographic changes, caused by an ageing population and increasing levels of immigration, have put pressure on the quality and effectiveness of public service delivery in the Nordics (Nordregio 2015). In response to these challenges, policy and decision-makers have embraced the idea of inter-regional, inter-municipal and cross-border collaborations to improve the quality and effectiveness of public service delivery (ESPON 2019).

Nordic collaborative governance in the delivery of public services

Collaborative public service delivery is becoming increasingly prominent in the Nordic Region due to highly decentralized systems of governance (Eythorsson et al 2018). This type of cooperation is grounded in the concept of collaborative governance which emphasizes the need for local and regional actors to pool resources to deliver public policies and services efficiently and effectively (Ansell & Gash 2007; Emerson et al 2011). Collaborative governance is regarded as particularly beneficial for smaller Nordic regions and municipalities as they can potentially increase financial resources and administrative capacities, reduce transaction costs, and establish economies of scale and critical mass (Andersen & Pierre 2010). However, there are multiple challenges in establishing collaborative ventures across jurisdictions, including different governance and legal frameworks, competing policy priorities and delivery methods, and an unwillingness to invest in horizontal coalitions or give up autonomy (Haveri, Nyholm, Roseland & Vabo 2009).

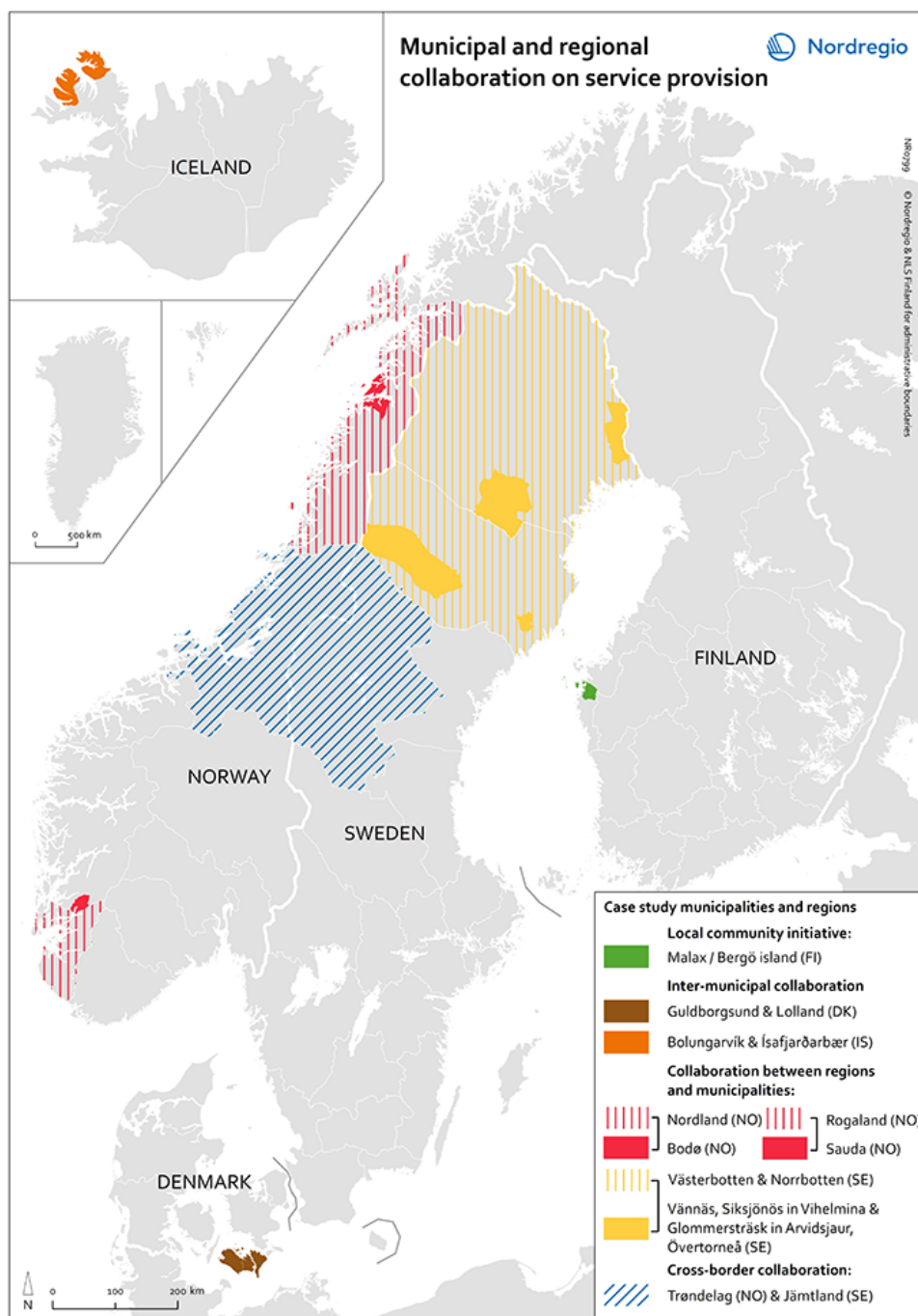
Six good practices of Nordic collaborative governance

The Nordic Region is a laboratory for collaborative governance, with Nordic countries renowned for high levels of cooperation and interaction between stakeholders both within and between different regions and across borders. This section of the policy brief analyses six good practice examples of public service delivery collaborations from across all Nordic countries and autonomous regions. The main geographical focus is on remote rural areas, with cases covering both local community initiatives, as well as inter-municipal, inter-regional and cross-border collaborations. Thematically, the case studies cover key areas of public service provision, including healthcare, welfare/social care, education and transport. Each case provides an overview of the main geographic and thematic focus on the collaboration, before examining the key drivers of collaboration, the stakeholders involved, and the main challenges and enablers of collaboration.¹

Case	Types of collaboration / levels of governance involved	Types of services covered
Denmark: Preparatory basic education and training in Denmark	Inter-municipal	Education
Finland: Local collaboration for service provision on the island of Bergö	Local community initiative	Education, health, elderly care
Iceland: Bolungarvíkurgöng tunnel	Inter-municipal	Infrastructure (road/tunnels)
Norway: HentMeg Sauda & HentMeg Bodø	Inter-regional	Transportation
Sweden: #fulltäckning	Inter-regional	Infrastructure (IT)

Table 1. Case study areas.

1. To access full case study reports individually, please read the report 'Public service delivery in the Nordic region: an exercise in collaborative governance'.



Map 1. Municipal and regional collaboration on service provision – case study areas.



Case study 1 - Denmark: Preparatory basic education and training in Denmark

The preparatory basic education and training scheme, *forberedende grunduddannelse* (FGU), was introduced by the Danish government in 2018. FGU brings together and streamlines the education on offer to those who are the furthest away from access to both education and the labour market. FGU is constructed to help prepare students for further education, whether vocational or academic, and to contribute towards ensuring that all young people are in education, training or employment by the time they are 25 years old. FGU is an additional tool for municipalities to anchor and develop their youth guidance obligations in collaboration with other municipalities. It also provides greater space for municipalities to connect the dots between their youth guidance mandate and the available education opportunities, and to collaborate on these issues. The municipal and regional mandate to work on youth engagement and guidance has been strengthened, placing the possibility of tackling local challenges closest to where they work.

Main drivers of collaborations & stakeholder involvement

The involvement of actors in the FGU board from across the regional labour market, including employers and employee organisations in developing the strategy and vision of the local FGU, makes the education programme more relevant. Being in close touch with these actors and other independent institutions is a further aid to municipal planning in addressing skills mismatches and skills development in the area, as well as working together to anticipate what skills are needed in the future. In this way, FGU is a catalyst for increased inter-municipal collaboration between Lolland and Guldborgsund municipalities. There are also other strategic benefits to the collaboration between the two municipalities, regarding the social responsibility factor, and the municipal mandate to take care of future inhabitants of Lolland-Falster.

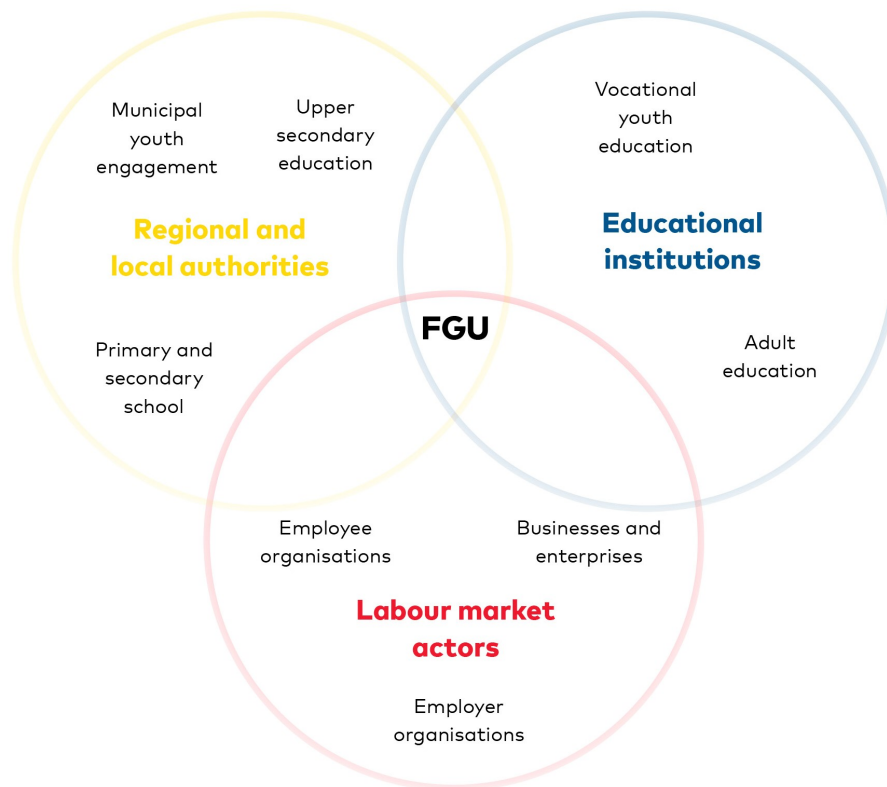


Figure 1. Actors and stakeholders involved in skills governance in FGU Lolland-Falster.
Source: Author's adaptation of figures in Lundgren, et al. (2020).

Challenging and enabling factors of collaboration

Being a newly established institution brings with it growing pains. Finding your feet may also be challenging in a new collaborative structure in making sure that the vision for FGU is coherent and well-communicated across the municipality and actors participating. The location of the schools has presented yet another challenge, in order to combine and offer the different educational programmes to students. The Lolland-Falster area is a little different from its Danish counterparts, with a relatively small ecosystem consisting of two municipalities. It has a strong network, people know each other, and the threshold for getting in touch with colleagues in the other municipality is low. Strong personal networks based on trust, mutual aspirations, and the objective of making the municipalities better equipped to meet the needs of young adults and young people are all important factors in shaping FGU's success. The FGU board is an example of the benefits of smaller ecosystems. Establishing a voluntary board with representatives from across the range of regional economic and social actors in Lolland-Falster is one indication both of the dedication involved and of the purposefulness of establishing FGU in the area.

Upscaling and replication

Although the school system itself might be difficult to replicate across the Nordic Region, due to the significant restructuring it requires at the national level, there are still lessons to be drawn for municipalities with regard to their newfound structures for skills governance. Providing a space for combining theoretical and practical training, not only means that there is a new opportunity for catching vulnerable students and ensuring that they are provided for by the system, but also that they have more time to determine their future by finding their own way. The Nordic education and social system are models that rest on the premise of equal opportunity. FGU is one step in addressing a broad range of vulnerable individuals from different backgrounds and with different abilities.



Case study 2 - Finland: Local collaboration for service provision on the island of Bergö

The island of Bergö is located in the Kvarken Archipelago and has a population of nearly 500 inhabitants. Islanders, through a locally-led initiative, successfully ensured adequate local service provision through bottom-up development. This was done through the creation and establishment of service housing for older people in Fyrgården, which grew into a combined solution also incorporating the municipal service provision of a primary school, a public library, a health station and mobile care facilities. The local working group behind the initiative has persistently advocated for local development, organising joint activities and seeking state funding to make the new service building possible. This case study illustrates a process in which locally-led service provision has been successfully designed through a combination of hard work, community spirit and collaboration – as well as long-term dialogue and collaboration with the local municipality.

Main drivers of collaborations & stakeholder involvement

This project, 'Fyrgården' or 'Majakkakoti', was realised after a long process of preparation which involved seeking funding, petitioning, and reaching out to decision-makers. A local group was determined to ensure and develop access to services for the viability of the island and its community, bridging the challenge with long distances to other municipal services on the mainland. Local residents forming the Bergö Island Council (Öråd) were the main drivers behind the initiative, forming a working group with local representatives working voluntarily on planning the project. When the municipality of Malax came on board, a solution opened for both a new primary school and service housing adjacent to each other - a shared solution between the municipality and the working group. The municipality agreed to build a schoolhouse if Bergö island council would provide a building for the service housing for the elderly. In 2016, the school opened; and in 2017 the first tenants moved into Fyrgården.

Challenging and enabling factors of collaboration

Local resources, networks, collaboration and a strong foundation for local organisation were key tenets in realising this local initiative, after more than two decades of hard work. This case proved successful and provides well-adapted, inter-generational services for local people, based on their needs and with a forward-looking attitude. The assiduous work carried out voluntarily by the local group has been a prerequisite, however, it also implies challenges. The engagement

process, alongside strategic and practical work, is time-consuming. Interviewees from the local initiative also elaborated on the challenge of gaining support from the municipality for a home for elderly people. At the same time, the dialogue and collaboration involved between local project initiators and the municipality was an important enabler for establishing the elderly care service housing, and the co-location solution with the primary school, public library and health station. Furthermore, funding from the Finnish Island Policy budget was a key enabler for the municipality, allowing it to invest in municipal service solutions established in collaboration with those involved in the local initiative.



Upscaling and replication

As illustrated in this case study, local community groups can be key stakeholders in initiating and mobilising local service provision and help solve social challenges through public funding and support mechanisms. Smaller islands, in particular, can benefit from such solutions, not least rural areas where centralization and long distances are crucial obstacles to the wellbeing of local communities and detract from the attractiveness of the location. Several factors should be taken into account in terms of possible replicability. On Bergö, the tight web formed by the local community, and access to competencies and networks, was a key principle for planning, applying for funding, negotiating and coordinating with the municipality, and ultimately supervising a large construction project. To a significant extent, the scope of influence and resources among the local communities required to advocate for local needs, and to organise for them, has been strong in this case. The circumstances involved in such enabling factors often differ across locations, particularly in terms of socio-economic, demographic and cultural structures. Furthermore, the locus of the mandate, governance structures, and policies for place-based and local development differ across regions and countries – which also frames the opportunities available to drive such projects forward in collaboration between a municipality and a local NGO. Challenges for locally-led development initiatives, and for running smaller service units, can be that they are more vulnerable to change (the loss of key people or staff involved, for instance). It is therefore important to ensure the long-term financing and support mechanisms needed to maintain the organisation. Policies targeting bottom-up, place-based and local perspectives and service solutions can be an important enabler to address areas that otherwise risk losing out when services are centralised.



Case study 3 - Iceland: Bolungarvíkurgöng in Northern Westfjords

The Westfjords region has long fought against the gradual fall in its population. In 2010, the whole Westfjords peninsula was described as a declining region, a trend that was linked to an inadequate transport system. In the case of Bolungarvík, the perspective was a little more optimistic because the new tunnels were about to open. This created the possibility of strengthening communities in the northern part of Westfjords. However, poor transportation between the southern and the northern part of the Westfjords has continued to impede cooperation and has reduced the importance of Ísafjörður as a service centre (Bjarnason, in Byggðastofnun, 2012). Bolungarvík is a fishing town on the Westfjords peninsula in Iceland. The only connection to other settlements there used to be comprised of one of the most dangerous sections of road in the country (Vegagerðin, 2010). Tunnels have now replaced the hazardous road section, with traffic safety the primary rationale for the costly construction project. There are multiple examples of municipal cooperation across the region, especially within transport areas.

Main drivers

When the tunnels opened in 2010, traffic safety increased considerably, but other opportunities opened up as well. At the opening of the tunnels, the mayor at the time spelled out how they could extend the labour market area, making a wider variety of jobs in neighbouring municipalities accessible to residents in Bolungarvík. Previously, many people had avoided driving more often than necessary due to perilous roads (Jónsson, 2010). The extended labour market is not the only factor but also increased access to services which are important aspects of viable communities, making infrastructure all the more salient. Iceland only has two administrative levels, national and local. Two municipal reform processes have been implemented after consultative referendums in recent times. Further mergers are considered necessary by the government to strengthen the local government level and to prepare it for receiving additional powers from the national level (Ministry of Transport and Local Government, 2017).



Challenges and enablers of collaboration

Rivalry and competition between municipalities is typical in Iceland, and this has also been the case in the Westfjords. However, according to participants, this rivalry has faded with the arrival of the tunnels, making the settlement one coherent area. This is linked with the mixing made possible by sports activities, which is supported by a leisure bus making five trips a day to facilitate training. These regular contacts, in which the two communities (Ísafjörður and Bolungarvík) come together for sports practice several days a week, has increased the sense of connection. The swimming pool is also an important contact point, directing the traffic to Bolungarvík, which has the better pool. This is seen as an additional quality-of-life factor in Iceland. Nevertheless, municipal mergers still remain a difficult topic.

The degree of municipal cooperation in Iceland varies by region, and each area has specific characteristics (Jóhannsson et al., 2016). The tunnel has contributed to widening the functional labour market and closer connections between residents. All-in-all, collaboration between municipalities in the Westfjords is quite extensive. It can be linked to how small the population is in many communities, which makes it essential to cooperate within the region, or within each transport area (Jóhannsson et al., 2016). Collaboration agreements are the most common form of collaboration in the Westfjords, often based on what is possible or economically feasible dependent on transport and geographical conditions.

Upscaling & replication potential

Improved transportation and increased transport links between different areas have created a foundation for closer cooperation and help meet competition from outside the area. Infrastructure, including digital infrastructure remains an important tenet for connecting people, but long-term visions beyond the four-year period of the local government is needed for creating sustainable communities in sparsely populated areas.



Case study 4 - Norway: HentMeg ("Pick Me Up") - The potential for microtransit services across small- and medium-sized cities

The case study looks at the provision of an on-demand microtransit mobility service called HentMeg in Norway. HentMeg roughly translates as 'Pick Me Up' and became the first service of its kind in Scandinavia when launched in Sauda municipality in mid-2018. HentMeg is operated by mobility and transportation agencies managed by counties across Norway. Currently, the service has been launched in five municipalities operated by individual agencies: Sauda, Rogaland (Kolumbus), Bodø, Nordland (Reis Nordland), Bø, Telemark and Vestfold (Farte), Kongsberg, Viken (Brakar), and Odda, Vestlandet (Skyss).

Considering the experience of Sauda, the case study highlights how multilevel collaboration and social innovation has contributed to the relative success of this microtransit service. Sauda is a small town in Rogaland, in the west of Norway, with a population of 4,475. With nine inhabitants per km² and 2,323 registered vehicles, it is evident that the local community relies heavily on cars as the main mode of transportation (Statistics Norway, 2020b). 430 people in Sauda commute to work in other municipalities, and 13.3% of the student population use transport services provided by the municipality (Ibid., 2020).

Main drivers of collaborations & stakeholder involvement

In Norway 'advanced' mobility has been identified as an important focus area, following national priority to improving accessibility for people and goods throughout the country (Samferdselsdepartementet, 2018). At the same time, there has been a growth in the use of public transportation in the country. To ensure that the need for accessible mobility options for most of the population is met, there is a focus on the implementation of new technology, and innovations such as real-time information services. HentMeg was first launched in Sauda, the result of a collaboration between technology company Spare Labs Inc (Spare), Geta (a digital design agency) and Kolumbus. HentMeg was a good fit for Sauda in 2018 because the municipality had struggled with lack of demand on one of its local bus route for some time. The solution arrived at has enabled other municipalities to adopt HentMeg quickly, while also making it easy for passengers to order and use the service.

Challenges of collaboration

In many cases, technological and digital advances within mobility services are further ahead than the capacity of local county administrations and their public agencies to absorb them into existing systems. The case study shows that approaches to new digital solutions often fell short when it came to handling cross-sectoral approaches. A better balance needs to be struck when it comes to how to meet strategic and political objectives while also managing the digital skills required to adopt and implement innovative solutions and new forms of collaboration.

A place-based understanding of the decision-making processes and procurement structures bringing together dedicated human resources. Other common denominators include strengthening data analytics, building awareness, and monitoring pilots. It is also key that municipalities are equipped with the skills to quickly identify the ways in which a given mobility service simply works better than the alternatives.

In fact, consideration also needs to be given to the less favourable aspects of an on-demand transit service like HentMeg replacing permanent services. What are the implications? While it has served local communities effectively so far, HentMeg might not necessarily be the best mobility solution for all places. On the one hand, it can re-energise public transportation in rural areas. On the other, it needs to complement existing services; otherwise, it will merely displace the traditional system, providing more convenient trips and taking passengers away. This produces inefficiency overall, as can be quickly noticed in rural areas.



Enablers of Collaboration

HentMeg is a novel way of thinking about and using local public transport. Especially for those living outside big cities in rural areas, ordering transportation online and boarding a minibus at the agreed time (all for the price of a regular bus ticket) has not previously been an option provided by local transportation services. While the concept exists in many forms, new technology allows for service routes to be planned in real-time. This means that when passengers order trips, the route is redirected, immediately guaranteeing connections. That the user is picked up either at their door or as close as possible to a given location, is considered a value-added service in itself for many people, in addition to being valued for its attractive pricing. As such, HentMeg can help transportation authorities to manage mobility networks and services more efficiently, and can also enable multimodal trip planning.

In the broader context of the provision of transportation services, HentMeg has relied on county agencies having resources available. In Sauda, Kolumbus cancelled three of its bus routes and allocated the funds towards implementing HentMeg. As such, it was able to earmark a budget specifically for the purpose of trying out new digital mobility solutions. For small-scale microtransit services such as HentMeg, it may be that earmarked 'lump sums' can act as an effective incentive for counties to collaborate with local municipalities and experiment with innovative solutions.

The role of local media reporting also seems to have been valuable for the HentMeg expansion process. Most online searches referencing the service a short time after its launch highlighted articles featuring positive coverage of its provision to the local community. This suggests that more public communication and marketing is perhaps needed around HentMeg – and it seems that the bottom-up approach to sharing the success levels of the service has been helping. Finally, key areas also include accessibility and sustainability, ensuring that an adequate service is offered to the whole community, designed to enhance social equity by providing public transport solutions at an affordable price, and facilitating access to jobs, resources and other amenities in rural or mid-density areas.

Upscaling & replication potential

HentMeg was one of the first public, real-time, transit-ordering services ever launched and has demonstrated potential for replication in many small- and medium-sized cities in Norway. Having started in rural Sauda, the service has since been rolled out to four other counties (and counting) within a period of just two years to national as well as international attention. The adoption of these service from one county to another has relied on the efforts (often at the level of individuals) of public transportation companies, working in collaboration with technological solutions, and in varying degrees directly with a municipality administration.

In an ideal context, overseeing all of the mobility services for all age groups, sectors and the local geography in small and rural municipalities should be coordinated as one single unit. Not thinking about these types of mergers and cross-collaborations could be expensive for the municipalities in the long term. Cooperative approaches also have the potential to contribute to sustainability goals and to a zero-emission future: something that is becoming more and more important for public services at all levels of governance.

Ultimately, the approach to service provision and the technology behind HentMeg is perceived to be both innovative and well-suited to particular local contexts. HentMeg can enable cities and transportation operators to plan, launch, operate and analyse new mobility services quickly and effectively, including integrated on-demand and fixed-route transit systems. Over time, more formalised knowledge sharing between counties and municipalities will be important for the replication of HentMeg across the country.



Case study 5 - Sweden: #fulltäckning - rural ICT testbed increasing mobile coverage in rural areas

Access to a well-functioning mobile broadband connection is essential for thriving rural areas – not least for good service provision, for wellbeing, and for the effective functioning of industries and businesses in regions that depend heavily upon mobile infrastructure and the coverage it provides. In this context, the #fulltäckning project has created a multi-actor platform in the regions of Västerbotten and Norrbotten, enabling collaboration across a broad range of actors and stakeholders. Central to this is initiating and testing solutions to counter the urban-rural mobile coverage divide. #Fulltäckning has, therefore, given visibility to local and regional needs among the rural households, businesses and key sectors in regions encompassed by the project.

Main drivers of collaborations & stakeholder involvement

The key drivers behind #fulltäckning are reflected in the notion that the lives of residents in rural areas should not be impaired by lack of mobile coverage. The Swedish Broadband Strategy broadly rests on market-driven development as its starting point, complemented by public sector efforts. A key challenge is to incentivise investments by mobile network operators in rural and sparsely populated areas. This requires coordination and joint endeavour across levels of governance. The conditions in rural areas in Norrbotten and Västerbotten, with vast distances between the mobile operators' masts is a key obstacle to improve coverage in sparsely populated areas. This requires innovative solutions to mobile coverage expansion (see Cedergren et al., 2021 on the project's technological strands). At the same time, shortcomings in the market-driven development and Swedish policy frameworks for improved coverage in rural areas are addressed.

The project has brought together partners spanning across academia, the regional authorities, mobile operators, industry and sectoral associations – conducting test pilots in close collaboration with rural communities, small-scale businesses, sectors and service providers which all depend on reliable mobile coverage. These test pilots have created a better understanding of the mechanisms and policies limiting the development of mobile coverage. #fulltäckning has, therefore, provided an important collaborative platform for development and has demonstrated the availability of hands-on opportunities to improve market deficiencies through innovative and heterogenous rural solutions. It has thus also served as a platform addressing policy-issues, not least concerning the urban-rural digital divide.

Challenging and enabling factors of collaboration

The challenges of improving mobile coverage in rural and sparsely populated areas are multifaceted and complex. As a result, the project has not just been about finding adequate technology to improve mobile coverage in such areas but has also involved a multi-disciplinary approach to addressing business models, governance and people. Although several ideas and possible solutions have been identified, established technical and national regulatory frameworks for implementing mobile coverage solutions adapted to rural needs has proved to be the main challenge for #fulltäckning overall. To address this, pooling resources, skills and cross-sector collaboration have been key enablers and the core strengths of #fulltäckning. Bottom-up approaches and developing test pilots in close proximity to the realities that the project seeks to address has been important. Involving the regions and municipalities through the work of regional broadband coordinators in Västerbotten and Norrbotten has enabled access to a wider network, as well as political platforms.

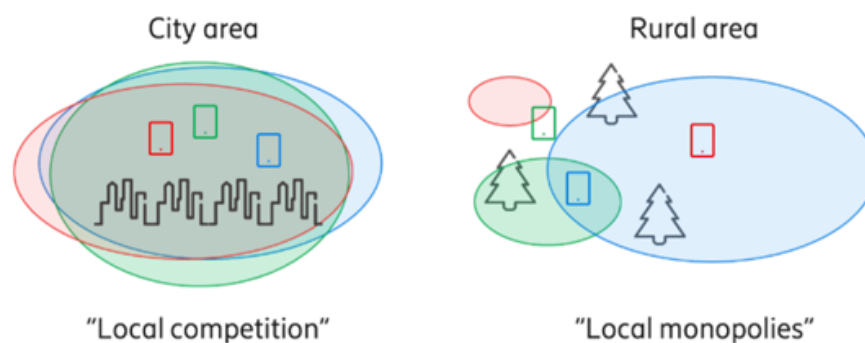
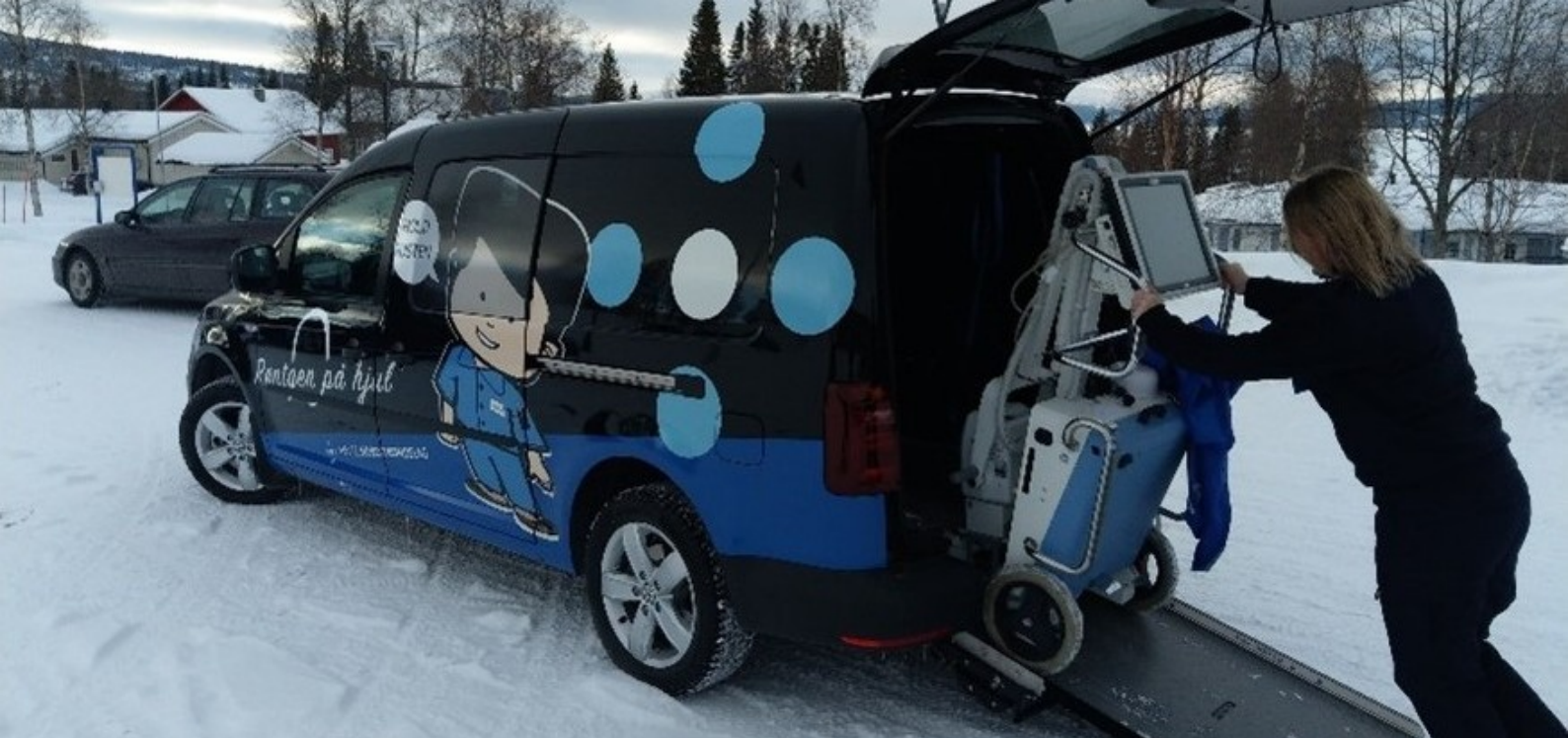


Figure 2. An illustration of local monopolies for mobile networks in rural areas, in comparison with urban areas where there is greater competition between operators.

Source: Trojer, Ragnarsson & van de Beek, 2019.

Upscaling and replication

Although #fulltäckning has been focused on and operating within Region Västerbotten and Region Norrbotten, the project aims are designed to identify technical solutions and promote market-models and policies tailored for a broader rural context, and to other areas facing similar challenges. Not least in the light of Covid-19, ensuring mobile coverage to all is an essential part of service provision and such collaborative solutions as provided here should arouse considerable interest. In terms of replication in a wider Nordic context, the particular role for regions or municipalities largely depends on the locus of responsibilities and mandate when it comes to coordinating and implementing broadband and mobile services for both people and businesses. In a similar way to Sweden, mobile coverage expansion is largely market-based across the Nordic countries; but the particular responsibilities and roles set out for local and regional authorities may differ. A key aspect to consider here is that #fulltäckning has benefited from a strong research and technology milieu and involving local communities and sectoral actors. At the same time, further national coordination, funding and steering mechanisms are vital, too. #Fulltäckning also opens a door to further investigation of how regional and local needs can be taken into consideration in national policymaking aimed at the future development of mobile coverage. With the potential deployment of 5G, the insights and data provided in #fulltäckning could prove very useful for Sweden and other Nordic countries.



Case study 6 - Sweden-Norway: VålTel – cross-border collaboration for developing and implementing welfare technology

The VålTel project (2016-2019) created a cross-border innovation arena with test labs involving small and medium-sized enterprises, municipalities and regions, promoting the development and testing of welfare technology solutions within and across the Swedish Region of Jämtland Härjedalen and the Norwegian county of Trøndelag. VålTel has created a platform for developing new working ways for local health care operations, established new networks and promoted collaboration between the Swedish and Norwegian regions and municipalities. The project has also highlighted the importance of co-producing knowledge and solutions across the public and private sectors, as well different disciplines. For rural, sparsely populated neighbouring areas, finding ways to develop mutually beneficial systems for coping with ongoing demographic changes can be both administratively and financially crucial.

Main drivers of collaborations & stakeholder involvement

Ageing populations, vast distances for citizens to access health care and care facilities in rural areas, and a shortage of medical staff are the key challenges that the Norwegian and Swedish project regions face. These have served as key drivers for setting out to find new and innovative solutions where welfare technology, collaboration and opening the health care operations to companies are important ingredients. Financed by Interreg Sweden-Norway, the project was started by Region Jämtland Härjedalen and Helse Nord Trøndelag and additionally involved around 30 companies as well as 14 Swedish and Norwegian municipalities in the project area. The added value in cross-border collaboration was, among other things, the possibility of pooling resources and tackling shared challenges. It was also thought that cross-border cooperation would expand the exchange of experience and inspiration, as well as offer a larger market for companies to test ideas and solutions.



Challenging and enabling factors of collaboration

The main challenges were related to overcoming differences in the healthcare systems, locus of responsibilities, mandates and organizational cultures across borders and organisations. An example was the legal challenge related to barriers and uncertainty about patient data storage and transferability, experienced when welfare technology products or solutions were tested and/or transferred across actors/borders. Enablers overcoming these challenges include mutual learning across involved actors about different systems, roles and routines. Furthermore, ensuring broad actor representation, involving different competencies as well as accessing people with a mandate in the addressed health care and care organisations were highlighted as key enablers overcoming these challenges. Another challenge was the heavy workload among health care and care staff which can hinder participation in such a project and the actual uptake of such new solutions or products. Taking a bottom-up approach, involving and engaging health care and care competencies were enablers to jointly develop and tailor welfare technology solutions with practical application in mind. One of the project managers also explained how the project has linked up with a variety of disciplines that also work as enablers for providing the digital or IT competencies that the health care sector might otherwise lack.

Upscaling and replication

Although the health care and care institutions in the respective countries do not fully integrate their health care and care systems, a project like VålTel can still enable learning, resource pooling and improved e-health practices through the collaborative test environment. Thus, multi-disciplinary, cross-border, mixed public and private test labs can be a good way to jointly develop welfare technology solutions anchored in existing health care and care systems. The model could also have potential for developing digital solutions for other types of thematic public service provision, as well – especially in rural municipalities and regions across the Nordic Region – to support citizens with accessible and high-quality public services. Regarding the upscaling potential, tackling eventual legal barriers related to data and patient information can be crucial. It is also important to overcome challenges related to financial and capacity restraints among local authorities and health care providers.

Conclusions

Stakeholders working in the cases outlined here all contribute, in one way or another, to reaching the main goals of the Nordic Vision 2030 to foster a greener, more competitive and socially sustainable Nordic Region.

In terms of social sustainability and keeping communities in the Nordic Region liveable and safe, access to services is fundamental. It is important to understand how (the lack of) access to services affects people's lives, feelings of security and trust, and the impact collaborative regional dynamics in the private and public sector has on the quality of service delivery. Our cases shed a light on both these key dimensions.

For strengthening competitiveness, strategies to mobilize marginalized groups outside the labour market to re-enter the market are needed. Here the Danish case provides good food for thought. Ultimately, as all cases have demonstrated, collaboration between companies, NGOs, research and civil society is of fundamental importance for a green and socially just transition. The upcoming work of Nordic Thematic Group on Green and Inclusive Rural Development (2021-2024) is geared towards fostering these goals.

This policy brief highlights that collaborative governance between different types of actors in Nordic countries and regions remains strong despite the disruptions caused by the current pandemic. Throughout the case studies, some common themes emerge in relation to the main drivers, challenges and enablers of Nordic collaboration in public service delivery.

Main drivers of Nordic collaboration

- **National Mandates:** National governments providing regional and local authorities with a clear mandate to collaborate in policy thematic areas where they think that local actors are better placed to pool resources and deliver efficient services to citizens.
- **Public Authority Leadership:** Entrepreneurial regional and local authorities are essential for proactively leading collaboration efforts and providing a platform for local stakeholders to discuss, develop and implement policies.
- **Shared Challenges:** The identification of common policy challenges is a key driver of collaboration. This is particularly the case in relation to shared socio-economic, demographic and environmental issues, including youth unemployment, high school drop rates and an ageing population.
- **Urban-Rural Divides:** Growing disparities between urban and rural areas is a common challenge across the Nordic Region. Efforts to reduce inequalities between urban and rural areas is a key driver of many of the collaborations examined in this report, particularly those collaborations focused on increasing accessibility and access to services within rural areas.

Main challenges of Nordic collaboration

- **Different governance and administrative structures:** Different governance, administrative planning and regulations between regional public authorities and countries can be a major obstacle for Nordic collaboration efforts. Competing stakeholder interests and priorities are also a regular source of tension that need to be overcome through effective deliberative and consensus building processes.
- **Public funding:** Nordic collaborations, whether between municipalities, regions or across borders, are reliant on public funding from national governments and the EU level, such as EU Interreg cross-border and transnational programmes. The lack of public funding will be further constrained by the economic impacts of the Covid pandemic, therefore, the long-term continuation of collaborations is restricted by funding availability.
- **Ad hoc collaborations:** It is very rare that Nordic collaboration projects are established on the basis of formal legalized agreement. The majority of such collaborations are ad hoc in nature and built around short-term nationally or EU funded pilot projects. This means that collaborations rarely continue after the period length of the project as there is not enough public or private funding available to keep collaborations going.
- **Stakeholder overrepresentation:** The project-based nature of collaborations is favourable to those stakeholders with the experience, time and resources to apply for national and EU level funding. This sometime leads to a concentration of funding around certain

stakeholders, particularly larger companies and higher education institutions.

- **Limited citizen involvement:** While Nordic collaborations are focused on providing opportunities for citizens and improving their quality of life, citizens need to be more proactively involved in the development and implementation of collaborative processes.
- **Data availability:** Interregional and cross-border data and information is often unreliable as there is little harmonization of data gathering methods. Consequently, collaborative activities are based on inconsistent data and information. Furthermore, the lack of interregional and cross-border data makes assessing the impact of collaborations challenging.

Main enablers of Nordic collaboration

- **Shared Resources:** The willingness of stakeholders to pool key resources was regarded as a key enabler across the case studies. Sharing essential resources including finances, knowledge, infrastructure and personnel increases the quality and efficiency of policy design and deliveries.
- **Local knowledge and expertise:** Local knowledge is viewed as a key enabler in Nordic collaborations. Place-based expertise is integral for ensuring that collaborative activities are carefully tailored to meet the needs of stakeholders and citizens within their specific geographic locations.
- **Technological innovations:** Rapid technological developments have opened up the opportunities for collaboration in new policy thematic areas. High quality ICT and broadband services are regarded as extremely significant enabling technologies, particularly in the delivery of collaborative online healthcare and e-governance activities.
- **Technical expertise:** The involvement of stakeholders with technical knowledge and expertise was considered a key enabler across several of the case studies. Technical expertise is essential, particularly in relation to implementation of collaborative activities driven by new online technologies.

Rapid technological developments are enabling new types of collaboration between Nordic countries and regions, with high quality ICT presenting new opportunities for actively engaging stakeholders and citizens in policymaking. The collaborative governance models examined in this report represent only a small number of these novel Nordic collaborations from which we can learn from and develop in the future. What is clear from the case studies, however, is that there is no one-size-fits-all model of Nordic collaborative governance. Indeed, collaboration must be approached on a case-by-case basis and is largely guided by geographic resolution (e.g. interregional/cross-border), place-based contexts and the policy thematic area in focus, which help determine which stakeholders should be involved in cooperative processes.



Policy recommendations

The Nordic Region is not resistant to global threats, such as pandemics and climate change, so Nordic countries and regions must work together and pool resources to help overcome these common threats. Collaboration is also essential for overcoming challenges faced across the Nordic Region, including growing urban-rural disparities, a rapidly ageing population putting pressure on health and social care systems, youth education and unemployment, shortages of housing, and the integration and inclusion of immigrants into Scandinavian society.

Common and shared challenges, however, need not be the only driver of collaboration, with Nordic countries and regions equally capable of working together to maximize the potential for regional economic growth and development presented by new policy thematic areas, such as, e-healthcare, blue growth and green growth opportunities. Indeed, the Nordic Council of Ministers ambitious climate change targets require concerted cooperation and collaboration across the whole of the Nordic Region. Collaboration is particularly important in the development of sustainable circular-economy and bioeconomy initiatives based on shared resources and materials.

Collaborative governance can contribute significantly towards solving common Nordic challenges and meeting the Nordic Council of Ministers policy goals for the next programme period. The following recommendations, targeted at Nordic policymakers and stakeholders, are designed to improve existing Nordic collaborations, and encourage the development of new long-term collaborative governance mechanisms in the Nordic Region. In the future, Nordic policymakers and stakeholders can foster more effective and efficient collaborative governance processes by:

- Exploring the possibility of replicating collaborative governance models in different Nordic countries, regions, and municipalities.
- Ensuring that all relevant stakeholders are actively engaged in collaborative activities to prevent overrepresentation of dominant groups and sectoral actors.
- Striking a balance between policy relevant stakeholders and technical expertise to maximize the potential of using recent technological developments in policy implementation and delivery.
- Investigating all public-private funding potentials to ensure that successful collaborations can continue beyond the life cycles of EU and nationally funded projects.
- Maximizing the potential of ICT solutions for engaging citizens in collaborative processes.
- Developing bottom-up collaborations built on local knowledge and place-based expertise.
- Considering how policies developed in regional and municipal level collaborations can be upscaled to the national and transnational levels.
- Ensuring that cross-border collaborations are not determined solely by geographic proximity, but on the basis shared policy priorities, challenges, and economic growth opportunities.
- Increase the quality and reliability of interregional and cross-border data availability by working with national and regional level statistical experts.

Acknowledgements

In the preparation of this policy brief, we would like to thank all the people from the case study regions who gave up their time to talk with us and we wish them well in their future collaborative efforts. We also express our gratitude to those members of the Nordic Thematic Group on Sustainable Rural development (2017-2020), who supported us with this research in several ways, including the identification of cases, providing contacts for potential interviewees, visiting case study areas with us or commenting on case study drafts. Without your support, this study would not have been possible. The findings do not necessarily reflect the positions of the TG members or their organisations.

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About this Policy brief

Research contact:

Michael Kull, Senior Research Fellow
michael.kull@nordregio.org

John Moodie, Senior Research Fellow
john.moodie@nordregio.org

Cover picture: Unsplash.com

Other pictures: FGU Lolland Falster, Josefin Torrkulla/Vasablade, Michael Kull, Páll Öundurson, Kolumbus AS, Unsplash.com, Roald Bergström, Pixabay.com

Layout: Marija Zelenkauskė, Nordregio

ISSN: 2001-3876

URL: <http://doi.org/10.6027/PB2021:2.2001-3876>

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