



Nordic Council
of Ministers

Nordic co-operation programme for health and social affairs 2022-2024

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Foreword

We face a number of challenges that are common to the whole of the Nordic Region. In particular, the COVID-19 pandemic, which started in 2020, continues to exert enormous pressure on our health, care and welfare systems. We do not yet have an overview of the long-term consequences of the pandemic, but we do know that the crisis has exacerbated social problems such as loneliness, exclusion and isolation, especially among young, old and disabled people. Another worrying trend is the increasing number of young people with mental health issues. If early and preventive measures aimed at inclusion are not taken, there is a danger of much more serious mental and physical health challenges and social exclusion. More effective initiatives are required for the many young people not in work, education or training who are at risk of permanent exclusion.

The demographic trends towards an ageing population and large numbers of chronically ill people also increase the pressure on the welfare state. Another challenge for the Nordic Region is the rapid growth in the proportion of older people in large, remote and sparsely populated areas. We must address this through initiatives aimed at improving the quality of life and health outcomes and reducing social inequalities. The climate crisis and its socioeconomic consequences are topical and ever more pressing challenges. The necessary transition to more sustainable societies demands that we all work to ensure a greener and more climate-friendly future for ourselves and for future generations.

We must be more open to social innovation and new solutions and share knowledge about effective measures and experiences. This will allow us to promote welfare and health policies that provide social security and equal access to health and welfare services for all. As well as building knowledge, we must ensure that the staff and users of welfare services are involved in improving them and adapting them to different needs and life situations. We must also prepare for future health crises and incidents by working more closely together at Nordic level on health preparedness and developing the resilience of both individuals and societies. We must make more and earlier preventive efforts to promote both physical and mental health.

Social sustainability and competitiveness go hand in hand. Data from population surveys and health registers will be used, for example, in research projects related to disease and health and will provide knowledge about the biggest health challenges facing the population today and in the future. The "Nordic Commons" project is part of the action plan for *Our Vision 2030*. The idea is to develop a "health data community" that will identify, share, compare and analyse health data via Nordic projects, with a view to promoting innovation and enterprise. Another intersectoral project, "Integrated Healthcare and Care through Distance-spanning Solutions" (iVOPD), will focus on increasing access to welfare services via innovative digital and welfare technology solutions.

We will draw on the Nordic Region's unique sense of community to find the best and most sustainable solutions to common challenges. Together, we will build a green, competitive and socially sustainable Nordic Region by means of intersectoral initiatives and closer dialogue with civil society organisations and users.

Minister of Labour and Social Inclusion, Norway

Minister of Health and Care Services, Norway

The Norwegian Presidency of the Nordic Council of Ministers 2022

Our Vision 2030

A green Nordic region
Together, we will promote a green transition of our societies and work towards carbon neutrality and a sustainable circular and bio-based economy.

The Nordic region will become the most sustainable and integrated region in the world

A competitive Nordic region
Together, we will promote green growth in the Nordic region based on knowledge, innovation, mobility and digital integration.

A socially sustainable Nordic region
Together, we will promote an inclusive, equal and interconnected region with shared values and strengthened cultural exchange and welfare.



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Nordic Co-operation on Social Affairs and Health 2022–2024

The Nordic Council of Ministers for Health and Social Affairs' (MR-S) co-operation programme for 2022–2024 will generate knowledge and exchange information about shared challenges in the field of health and welfare throughout the Nordic Region. The main purpose is to generate initiatives and solutions that will contribute to the development of policy and guarantee the sustainability of the Nordic welfare societies at local, regional, national and Nordic levels at a time of limited resources. A basic precondition for co-operation is that it must generate Nordic synergy. Globalisation, demographic trends and COVID-19 have put the welfare state under pressure, and the Nordic countries must work together to address these challenges. Being open to social innovation and exchanging knowledge and experiences will help promote a welfare and health policy that provides social security and equal access to health and welfare services for all, includes vulnerable groups, and improves health preparedness in advance of future pandemics or other health crises.

Two strategic reviews form the basis for these efforts. In terms of social policy, co-operation will contribute to sustainable and secure welfare for all. The implementation of the 14 proposals in Árni Páll Árnason's review of the social field, *Knowledge that works in practice: Strengthening Nordic co-operation in the social field* (2018), will be an important step in this direction. At the same time, Nordic co-operation on health will continue to be informed by Bo Könberg's strategic review *The Future Nordic Co-operation on Health* (2014). The results of these efforts will be evaluated to meet current challenges and ensure the relevance of future health decisions. Even closer co-operation on health will maintain and improve universal healthcare systems that offer free and equal access for all. It will also focus on reducing health inequalities and addressing the various risk factors that affect public health.

The co-operation programme is anchored in the Nordic Council of Ministers' *Vision 2030*, which seeks to establish the Nordic Region as the world's most sustainable and integrated region, and its three strategic priorities – a *green, competitive* and

socially sustainable Nordic Region. The programme, therefore, implements the action plan 2021–2024 for the vision and its 12 goals and outlines MR-S's focus areas and what it intends to achieve by 2024. The emphasis will be on the strategic priority *a socially sustainable Nordic Region*, specifically "good, equal and secure health and welfare for all" (Objective 9 in the action plan). MR-S will also support the strategic priority *a competitive Nordic Region* by contributing to new technical, digitalised and innovative healthcare solutions. It will support *a green Nordic Region* by contributing to the implementation of a socially sustainable green transition.

MR-S will implement several initiatives aimed at further mainstreaming the Council of Ministers' general perspectives regarding sustainable development, gender equality, children and young people. This work will also incorporate a disability perspective. In addition, MR-S will engage in even closer dialogue with civil society.

During the programme period, Nordic co-operation in the social and health area will mainly focus on the following priorities, many of which are intersectoral in nature, and refer to the three strategic priorities for *Vision 2030*:



A socially sustainable Nordic Region:

- Maintain and further develop universal healthcare systems with free and equal access for all
- Promote preventive public health work with a focus on health equality
- Mitigate the negative consequences of the pandemic, e.g. for vulnerable groups such as children and young people, older people, and people with disabilities
- Improve health preparedness
- Develop Nordic co-operation to meet the challenges in sparsely populated areas and further develop joint solutions
- Work more closely with civil society organisations
- Enhance intersectoral co-operation.



A green Nordic Region:

- Contribute to the implementation of a socially sustainable green transition throughout the Nordic Region in a way that prevents the emergence of greater social inequalities
- Contribute to a sustainable Nordic lifestyle through initiatives that focus on health-promoting activities and sustainable food systems
- Contribute to climate-friendly solutions through the further development of welfare technology and integrated e-health and care solutions.



A competitive Nordic Region:

- Contribute to new technical, digitalised and innovative healthcare solutions
- Facilitate initiatives to share health data between the Nordic countries in a secure and efficient manner
- Develop and safeguard the Nordic welfare societies' sustainability through knowledge-based initiatives and social investments.

Social policy

The sector contributes to sustainable and secure welfare for all. An important part of this work will be to continue the implementation of the 14 proposals in Árni Páll Árnason's strategic review *Knowledge that works in practice: Strengthening Nordic co-operation in the social field* (2018). During the programme period, MR-S will follow up on the proposals that are already underway, make decisions on the proposals that remain to be implemented and seek to further develop co-operation on social policy.

The COVID-19 crisis has exacerbated social problems such as loneliness and isolation among young and old people, as well as the labour-market exclusion of people with disabilities. At-risk groups – including children and young people, vulnerable adults, older people, and people with disabilities and complex needs – will be the focus of tangible efforts to improve knowledge about the consequences of the pandemic and which measures are effective.

Co-operation to meet the challenges of demographic change will continue through initiatives in welfare technology, user-friendly and preventive solutions, dementia networks and the development of age-friendly cities.

Health policy

In the health sector, Bo Könberg's strategic review *The Future Nordic Co-operation on Health* (2014) remains important. Since 2014, a number of different initiatives have been implemented in all 14 areas identified in the report. Nordic working groups and networks work together in several areas, e.g. public health, mental health, antibiotic resistance, e-health and medicines. Funds have also been earmarked for special initiatives linked to the 14 proposals. However, there is a lack of overall mapping, and to date there has been no holistic assessment of the work carried out based on the proposals. MR-S will therefore conduct an evaluation to analyse how to further develop co-operation on health in areas such as primary care and public health, focusing more closely on the prevention of chronic illnesses, as well as how to best utilise experiences from the work that is already underway.

In order to address health inequalities and improve health and the quality of life, the sector must prioritise reducing social vulnerability, increase preventive efforts and maintain and further develop universal healthcare systems with free and equal access for all.

Closer working relations and Nordic solutions will be sought to prepare for future pandemics or health crises. The need for this has been made clear during the COVID-19 pandemic.

To meet challenges associated with an ageing population and sparsely populated areas, the sector will refine health policy with a focus on intersectoral initiatives to encourage joint work on e-health, remote care and digitalisation. In the field of medicine, the fight against antimicrobial resistance (AMR) will continue within the framework of the One Health perspective, and co-operation on security of supply will be stepped up.

The co-operation programme enters into force on 27 April 2022 and will remain valid until 31 December 2024.



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Strategic priorities

The Nordic welfare model has proven to be relevant and sustainable, but it faces a number of challenges associated with, e.g. working life and demographic trends. As the Árnason report shows, the social investments that underpin the welfare model enable both social mobility and social security in the Nordic countries. The sustainability of the Nordic welfare model's financing is ensured by high levels of employment, as well as by the added value created by innovative solutions developed in a competitive Nordic Region. A socially sustainable green transition is only possible if everyone has realistic opportunities to make sustainable choices. The Nordic welfare model, with its social and healthcare systems, forms the basis for a green, competitive and inclusive Nordic Region.



A socially sustainable Nordic Region

Together we will promote an inclusive, gender-equal, and cohesive region with shared values, increased cultural exchanges, and enhanced welfare provisions.

OBJECTIVE

Maintain and further develop universal healthcare systems with free and equal access for all

The health sector will be bolstered in order to maintain and further develop universal healthcare systems with free and equal access for all, address health inequalities, and contribute to lifelong good health and the quality of life. Priorities in this area include early preventive intervention with a focus on both physical and mental health and closer co-operation on pharmaceuticals.

Via the cross-sectoral project "Integrated Healthcare and Care through Distance-spanning Solutions" (iVOPD), MR-S will help make welfare services more accessible throughout the Region, especially in sparsely populated areas. The project focuses on digital solutions, innovation, environment and climate, regional development, enhancing skills in health and care, and profiling the Nordic Region at international level as a modern welfare model.

OBJECTIVE

Develop Nordic co-operation to meet the challenges in sparsely populated areas and further develop joint solutions

Co-operation on care for older people will be further strengthened. As mentioned above, initiatives such as welfare technology, user-friendly and preventive solutions, dementia networks and the development of age-friendly cities will continue. To address the increasing need for social and healthcare services, MR-S will implement intersectoral initiatives on health data, e-health, integrated care, remote care and digitalisation. In this context, it is also important to exchange experiences regarding the recruitment of healthcare staff.

OBJECTIVE

Learn more about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on vulnerable groups such as children and young people, older people and people with disabilities

COVID-19 has had a major impact on the Nordic countries and created enormous challenges for society as a whole and vulnerable groups in particular. To learn more about the consequences of the pandemic, MR-S will implement intersectoral

initiatives on how it has affected different population groups, such as children and young people, older people and people with disabilities. One focus area will be mental health. During the programme period, a new initiative will be launched (“Loneliness and isolation in a COVID-19 perspective: The consequences of the Corona crisis for children and young people, and labour-market participation of people with disabilities”) and efforts will be made to enhance co-operation with civil society organisations.

OBJECTIVE

Improve health preparedness

The Nordic countries will share knowledge from the pandemic and work more closely together on health preparedness in advance of any future health crises. The Nordic Group for Public Health Preparedness (the Svalbard Group) will play an important role in this work. This will create a basis for co-operation between the Nordic countries, with a view to preparing and developing health preparedness in connection with crisis management and disasters. The Nordic Pharmaceutical Group will also continue to work with emergency preparedness issues linked to security of supply.

OBJECTIVE

Work more closely with civil society organisations

In support of achieving meaningful outcomes for the people of the Nordic Region, MR-S will enter into even closer dialogue with various civil society actors, including through the Council of Ministers’ new civil society network. This is in line with the Árnason report, which proposes closer co-operation between Nordic civil society organisations and the public sector (proposal 7).



A green Nordic Region

Together we will promote the green transition of our societies and work towards carbon neutrality and a sustainable, circular, and bio-based economy.

OBJECTIVE

Bidra till genomförandet av en socialt hållbar grön omställning i hela Norden och motverka att klyftorna i samhället ökar på grund av omställningen

The climate crisis and the necessary transition to more sustainable societies will directly affect individuals. In order to strengthen the Nordic societies, initiatives that transcend sectors and promote a socially sustainable green transition will also highlight problem areas, analyse the socioeconomic consequences and account for effective practices and solutions. This will involve a number of intersectoral collaborations between different councils of ministers.

OBJECTIVE

Contribute to a sustainable Nordic lifestyle through initiatives focusing on health-promoting activities and sustainable food systems in collaboration with the food sector

In addition, the sector will contribute to climate-friendly solutions through the further development of welfare technology, as well as integrated and remote care, in collaboration with councils of ministers in other sectors.



A competitive Nordic Region

Together we will promote green growth in the Nordic Region based on knowledge, innovation, mobility and digital integration.

OBJECTIVE

Contribute to new technical, digital and innovative healthcare solutions

One of the action plan's priorities is to facilitate the sharing of existing health data between the Nordic countries in a secure and efficient way and to create an overview of existing data sources and how they can be combined. This will be of great benefit to research, innovation, healthcare and care services and will promote health and welfare both within and outside of the Nordic Region.

MR-S will contribute to "A vision of a Nordic secure digital infrastructure for health data: The Nordic Commons". This is an intersectoral project aimed at finding new solutions that will improve the conditions for a competitive Nordic Region in collaboration with, among others, the councils of ministers for business, digitalisation, and education and research. MR-S will have primary responsibility for the work done by NordForsk.

The sector will also run long-term projects on digitalisation, healthcare and remote care, with a focus on innovative solutions. In addition, the sector will further develop knowledge-based statistical tools, such as the Nordic welfare indicators.



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Co-operation on EU and international issues

The purpose of the Nordic Council of Ministers' international work is to contribute to achieving the sector's goals, strengthen Nordic influence regionally and globally, and create added value for both MR-S and international actors, e.g. by identifying and promoting common interests, exchanging experiences, forging new contacts and profiling Nordic work on social and health policy. This co-operation can complement other national or regional international initiatives, e.g. in countries close to the Nordic Region, where the sector also continues its joint work with the Baltic republics and North-West Russia.

The work will take into account *Agenda 2030*, *Our Vision 2030*, the priorities in this the co-operation programme, general perspectives (e.g. gender equality, children and young people, sustainable development) and current international initiatives. Where relevant and possible, the work will also take into account co-operation with other sectors and bodies outside of the Nordic Council of Ministers.

In this context, the emphasis will be on co-operation and co-ordination on EU-related topics. The social and health field has become increasingly important in the EU. However, co-operation with the EU, while wide-ranging, mainly takes place under national auspices.

EU initiatives in the social and health area are discussed at meetings in MR-S, ÄK-S and relevant working groups as deemed necessary.

The Nordic Convention on Social Security constitutes a Nordic anchoring of the EU rules on social security under EU Regulation 883 (2004). The work of adapting the Nordic Convention on Social Assistance and Social Services (the Aid Convention) to EU law continues.



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How the co-operation is organised

The Nordic Council of Ministers is the official body for intergovernmental co-operation. Co-operation between the Nordic governments on social and health affairs is the remit of the Nordic Council of Ministers for Health and Social Affairs (MR-S).

The Nordic Committee of Senior Officials for Social and Health Policy (ÄK-S), which consists of officials from the ministries of social affairs and health in the Nordic countries, the Faroe Islands, Greenland and Åland, heads up the work of preparing social and health policy proposals for consideration and decision-making by ministers. The Committee also determines the allocation of the sector's budget and coordinates project activities and Nordic working groups in this area.

The Secretariat to the Nordic Council of Ministers (NMRS) prepares the issues raised in the Council of Ministers and the Committee of Senior Officials and is responsible for ensuring that all social and health policy decisions are implemented in practice.

To intensify the work in specific areas and enable tangible co-operation and exchanges of information, approximately 20 Nordic working groups have been set up.

The Nordic Council of Ministers for Health and Social Affairs (MR-S) funds one institution – the Nordic Welfare Centre (NVC) – as well as a number of other bodies in the social and health sector that contribute to achieving the sector's policy objectives. MR-S also works with a number of other Nordic institutions, including NordForsk, Nordregio and Nordic Innovation.

The core mission of the **Nordic Welfare Centre** is to provide a platform for co-operation between various actors in the social and public health area in the Nordic countries, Åland, Greenland and the Faroe Islands.

The institutions' activities must contribute to the countries' national development work, exchanges of knowledge and experiences, and the development of knowledge in the area.

Strategic partners

- The Nordic Institute of Dental Materials (NIOM)
- Nordic Committee on Social Security Statistics (NOSOSKO)
- Nordic Medico-Statistical Committee (NOMESKO)
- The Council for Nordic Co-operation on Disability.

Integration of general perspectives

The Nordic welfare states are based on shared principles of equal opportunity, social solidarity and security, regardless of gender, ethnicity, religion, belief, functional capacity, age or sexual orientation. MR-S stresses the importance of intersectoral co-operation on a range of welfare issues.

Sustainable development, gender equality, and children's and young people's rights are perspectives that cut across sectors and are important for the Nordic Council of Ministers' work as a whole. Mainstreaming these perspectives is a prerequisite if the Nordic Region is to realise the vision of becoming the most sustainable and integrated region in the world by 2030. In practice, this means that these perspectives must systematically affect all activities in the Nordic Council of Ministers. They must be taken into account at all stages of planning, decision-making, implementation and evaluation.

To maintain the economic basis for our welfare societies and achieve social sustainability, it is also important that the Nordic Region is *green* and *competitive*. This can be achieved, for example, by promoting a welfare economics perspective that transcends sectors.

The gender-equality perspective is important in both the social and health areas. The use of healthcare services and preventive measures, including digital ones, as well as efforts to increase inclusion, can also include a gender and equality perspective. The COVID-19 pandemic has affected women and men differently in terms of unemployment, isolation and care work.

Systematically integrating a gender-equality perspective into all MR-S initiatives requires an evaluation of the work on gender-equality issues, with a view towards finding new ways of implementing positive solutions. The Árnason report is one source of support for this work.

MR-S supports a greater focus on the rights of children in general, and especially vulnerable children and young people. The Nordic Welfare Centre plays an important role in ensuring that the work of the Nordic Council of Ministers includes a children's and young people's perspective.

Good examples of inclusive measures must be analysed and disseminated within the sector. One such example is the Council of Nordic Cooperation on Disability, which includes young people in its work. A number of other current initiatives also directly involve children and young people.

To achieve sustainable development in the Nordic Region, it is important to analyse the consequences of the green transition. This will increase knowledge of how environmental and climate measures create or reinforce socioeconomic, cultural and geographical inequalities.



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Evaluation of the co-operation programme

The co-operation programme lasts for three years (2022–2024) and will be evaluated before the end of that period. This evaluation will consider, among other things, whether and how the defined goals have been achieved and how they have contributed to the realisation of the Nordic Council of Ministers' vision and its three strategic priorities: a *green*, *competitive* and *socially sustainable* Nordic Region.

About this publication

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Nordic co-operation

Nordic co-operation is one of the world's most extensive forms of regional collaboration, involving Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, and the Faroe Islands, Greenland and Åland.

Nordic co-operation has firm traditions in politics, economics and culture and plays an important role in European and international forums. The Nordic community strives for a strong Nordic Region in a strong Europe.

Nordic co-operation promotes regional interests and values in a global world. The values shared by the Nordic countries help make the region one of the most innovative and competitive in the world.

The Nordic Council of Ministers

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How the Co-operation Programme relates to Our Vision 2030

All activities in the Nordic Council of Ministers will contribute to fulfilling our vision that the Nordic Region will be the world's most sustainable and integrated region in 2030. The co-operation programme describes how the sector will work with the three strategic priority areas and contribute to reaching the 12 objectives in the Action Plan 2021–24 in the work to attain Our Vision 2030.

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