

Overview of the foster care system in Iceland – challenges and lessons

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Introduction

Kara Connect assembled resources from Iceland to build information on the system in general, the initiatives that are currently provided and other fostering services. Additionally, specifically aimed at this project we piled together a list of more than 10 tools that are being used. In the report we also found some strengths and weaknesses of our system - and an introduction to the new Children Prosperity Law that connects many systems together in the aim of not missing out on servicing a single child that needs support, either a foster care child or a child that needs educational support.

Alongside this report we also compiled together 10 suggestions to teach children about digital citizenship and matters connected which have been delivered in another form of report. Those 10 topics have already been set in motion in the second work package.

Regards,
Thorbjorg Helga Vigfusdottir

A brief overview of national legislation regulating children and young people in foster care in Iceland; how do foster care and foster homes work in Iceland?

In Iceland the foster care system is based on foster families. There are laws and regulations and legal representation for the children in all municipalities. ¹

Anyone can offer to be a foster parent, go through an assessment and there is ample information on what this means, and the duties included, for people who are interested. This is interesting since all genders can apply and all family forms are accepted, single parents, gay couples etc. There is no maximum age either and all applicants go through the same, thorough background check and assessment from CPS. The vetting process is strict, and all acceptable foster parents take a related course.

The reasons for children to be taken into care in Iceland are complex and varied. The main reasons being the social, psychological, or mental circumstances of the parents, drug use, poverty, other illness, abuse and/or neglect.

The process for this to happen is in short:

- The registration of a case, after it has been reported is directed to a team that investigates the case to find out all the details and background.
- All available information goes to the child protection team, who will work out an intervention program. Then the exact plan will be worked out, where the duties of all participants are outlined
- If the plan of interference is not successful, the case will be redirected to the child protection team.

After a child is placed in care, meetings are organized regularly – both parents (short term cases) and specialists from different areas are involved (sometimes also the child is invited). The duration of one meeting is 1.5 hours. The focus of child protection (on the level of local government) is to support the child in his or her own living environment. This is the reason why mutual therapy of children and parents has been stressed so much.

Legislation and systematic review

The Government Agency for Child Protection issues licences to foster parents, makes decisions, and assists child protection committees in cases of foster care as provided in Section XII of the Child Protection Act.²

¹ <https://www.bvs.is/media/barnahus/child-protection-in-iceland-and-the-role-of-the-GACP.pdf>.

² https://www.government.is/media/velferdarraduneyti-media/media/acrobat-enskar_sidur/Child-Protection-Act-as-amended-2016.pdf

The Government Agency for Child Protection has authority over homes and institutions which the state is legally bound to ensure and shall ensure that such homes and institutions be established. The Agency supervises the placement of children in such homes and institutions.

The rights of children who are placed outside the home based on the provisions of the Child Protection Act are safeguarded in several ways. According to the Child Protection Act, a spokesperson shall generally be appointed for a child before placement, and a child who has reached 15 years of age is an independent party to any such case. The Government Agency for Child Protection has issued standards for the placement or foster care of children to define requirements for procedures, quality of care and treatment, safety, and rights of children. The Agency has also set rules for cooperation between child protection committees and treatment homes concerning the placement of children which extend to the application process and preparations for placement.

Iceland is changing Children Prosperity Law

The United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) previously pointed out that the Icelandic government has lacked a holistic policy on the implementation of the CRC. Furthermore, such a policy would have to include the key role municipalities play in the implementation of the CRC. In February 2019, the Minister of Social Affairs and Children presented for approval of the government a proposal to start the task of developing policy on increased participation of children and young people in government policy-development³. Also, the development of a framework for institutionalisation of Child Rights Impact Assessments (CRIA) for all greater decisions affecting children made by the government, including legislative bills. The government agreed on that proposal. Based on this decision, the formation of a policy on the implementation of the CRC began. Its objective is to form a comprehensive frame around the implementation and steps that ministries in Iceland have already taken. Work on the policy is based on the General Comments of the UN's Committee on the Rights of the Child, as well as the committees' ⁴concluding observations towards the Icelandic government. The Strategy has been developed in cooperation with UNICEF Iceland, other ministries, and the Icelandic Office of the Ombudsman for Children, as well as the Icelandic Youth Council. It was placed into open consultation in June 2020 and is now being completed. In connection with the policy, in November 2019, the minister of Social Affairs and Children and the director of UNICEF Iceland signed an agreement on cooperation on the adoption of the project on Child Friendly Cities. With that, the Ministry and UNICEF Iceland became partners in assisting Icelandic municipalities in their implementation of the CRC. The goal of the cooperation is that at least 70% of children in Iceland will reside in a formally Child Friendly Municipality by the end of 2024.

The Minister of Social Affairs and Children in Iceland built a bill on the integration of services in the interest of children 's prosperity that now has been legalised and is now in

³ <https://www.government.is/media/menntamalaraduneyti-media/media/frettir2015/Stefnumotun-skjal-3-enska-vefur.pdf>

⁴ <https://www.stjornarradid.is/library/03-Verkefni/Felags--og-fjolskyldumal/Malefni-barna/Sk%C3%BDrsla%20um%20barnas%C3%A1ttm%C3%A1lann%20-%20enska.pdf>

implementation. The law is part of comprehensive changes in the interest of children that have been in preparation since early 2018.

The Minister of Social Affairs and Equality took office in 2017. Shortly after he proceeded to change the title of the ministry to better fit his main emphasis as a minister to the Ministry of Children and Social Affairs. He was very passionate about making the best place in the world for children and had a clear vision for how to make that happen. He noticed that in some cases, the changes needed are small, e.g., increased cooperation between service providers. In other cases, the changes needed to be on a larger scale, e.g., changing the child protection system in the entire country.

The minister of Children met hundreds of individuals, institutions and organisations that have contributed to this change. The journey of change was above traditional politics and included all political parties in the Icelandic Parliament.

Recently there was a major overhaul on the laws and regulations that concern children. The aim and vision that the Icelandic congress agreed on was to make sure a foster child or a child that had been reported to child protection authorities would not be lost in silos or red tape. The law is now approved, and different active protocols are being put in place.

Three tier level.

For the first time in Iceland, services in the interest of children's prosperity are, according to the law, divided into three stages. By doing so, service providers will have a better overview of systems providing services and a clearer image of how effective and comprehensive services can be ensured for every child.

Primary level services:

Include basic services and early assistance for all children and families. Its aim is to further each child's prosperity. Early assistance is provided in accordance with a preliminary assessment of a child's needs and systematic follow-up.

Secondary level services:

Include more targeted assistance and resources. Targeted assistance is based on a professional and/or preliminary assessment of a child's needs and a support plan for integrated services and follow-up.

Tertiary level services:

Include specialised assistance resources to safeguard instances where a child's prosperity is, or could be, endangered. These services shall be provided in accordance with specialised and thorough assessment and/or analysis of a child's needs and a support plan for integrated services and follow-up. All services shall be categorised and defined with these levels in mind.

Integration of Services – Coordinators – Case Managers and Teamwork

Children in need of early assistance, along with their families, are ensured access to a specific coordinator in the child's environment. This coordinator gives information and instructions on services, ensures access to assessments, organises, and follows up on integration of services,

if more targeted or specialised assistance than can be provided on the primary level is needed. The coordinator who works at the primary level will typically work within the health care, pre-school, primary school, college, or social services, wherever a child would seek services on a regular basis according to its age. If children, and their families, need more targeted or specialised assistance, i.e., move up to secondary or tertiary levels, they will be ensured access to a case manager with their municipality's social services. The case manager will advise and give information on services, assist with ensuring access to assessments and/ or analysis of a child's needs, be responsible for the creation of a support plan and leading the support team as well as following up on services provided in accordance with the support plan. The bill states that children and families shall be able to turn to a coordinator/case manager to lead their case within the system. At the request of a child, or its family, active cooperation is put in place within the child's service providers. Cooperation between the family and service providers could e.g., entail that the service providers connected to a child's case would be authorised to exchange relevant information on the child's circumstances and situation. Access to a coordinator and/or case manager is, according to the bill, ensured from the time a child is born until it reaches 18 years of age.

Rights of Children and their Families

All services in the interest of children's prosperity shall be provided based on what is in the best interests of the child. Service providers shall respect the rights, and obligations, of parents or other carers in the upbringing of their children and children's independent rights, taking into consideration the children's views in accordance with their age and development. Service providers shall work towards comprehensive and active cooperation with children and their families based on mutual respect and trust. To ensure cooperation with children and their families, and to ensure that the families' privacy is respected as much as possible, the processing of personal information based on the bill, is unauthorised without explicit and specific consent from the relevant child and/or its family.

Support and Supervision of Service Providers

At the same time as the Act on the integration of services in the interest of children's prosperity was presented to Parliament, two other bills were presented: A bill on The National Agency for Children and Families and a bill on The National Supervisory Authority for Welfare for integrating services in the interest of children's prosperity⁵. The National Agency for Children and Families is a central advisory centre. It oversees activities and work based on the Child Protection legislation as well as support authorities providing services in the interest of children's prosperity, both within state and municipalities. It will hold a "toolbox" for resources and support the processes of certain individual cases. It will also oversee the processing of information in databases and digital solutions supporting the integration of services for children's interests in general and more specifically within the realm of child protection.

⁵ <https://rm.coe.int/presentation-icelandic-minister-of-social-affairs-children-cdenf-plena/1680a2885a>

The National Supervisory Authority for Welfare for Integrating Services in the Interest of Children's Prosperity will supervise the quality of welfare services and the integration of those services. The Inspectorate will adhere to a coordinated supervisory system wherein it will have permission for supervision based on claims made by users as well as based on proactive supervision.

Dashboard on Children's Prosperity

To monitor children's prosperity in Iceland and support the adoption of the legislation, the Ministry of Social Affairs, have developed a dashboard on children's prosperity. The dashboard holds statistics that give an overview of the prosperity of children and young people in Iceland.

The dashboard consists of five dimensions that are based on the general principles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

1. Education
2. Equity
3. Health and Wellbeing
4. Security and Protection
5. Social Participation.

The dashboard provides information that can be used in the prioritisation of projects and funding as well as in policy development, by government and municipalities.

Everybody can apply to become a foster parent to the National Agency for Children and Families. This starts a vetting process and financial support.

1. The child in question has a legal representative from the municipality that serves as their legal guardian and is supposed to talk to them and be acquainted with the child. That same representative visits the child twice a year by law (really never possible to reach) and assesses the conditions they live in.
2. The foster family will need to have access to education and sports for the child before being accepted.
3. There are four types of foster care access, a trial, a temporary, a permanent one and support foster care (the last being seen as a full-time job for the foster parent)

Example : Trial foster home

This is when children are removed suddenly from their home and placed in initial care which is up to 1 month in length or whilst a temporary or permanent foster home is being found.

Example : Temporary foster homes

This is when the situation of the child's home is believed to improve with the aim of reuniting the child with their parents. The period is up to one year.

Example : Permanent foster care

This is when the state or foster parent takes permanent guardianship of the child up to the age of 18.

Example: Support foster care.

This is a full-time paid position to the foster parents. For children with complex difficulties, health problems (mental and/or Physical) that require special assistance.

As previously stated, most children in foster care in Iceland stay within a family home. In Reykjavík there are 2 temporary foster homes run by the city. They are both run when children cannot stay at their home. They stay there for a short period of time with the aim to either bring them back to a safe home or find permanent foster care. In one of them the family can, if all is clear, stay with them and get support and therapy to be a better parent or handle any issues that the child or family has. The homes are called Mánaberg and Hraunberg.

There are also a few “Family homes” for children aged 13-18 that have had to leave their foster family, or a foster home has not been found. Children live there for 1-4 years. This might be the closest to the Polish model.

Placements of children in foster care have increased in recent years. In 2017, the number of children in foster care was 420, thereof 256 in permanent foster care, 134 in temporary foster care and 30 in supported foster care. The action plan for child protection provides for improvements in matters of foster care. The number of foster parents is set to be increased through regular advertising. Courses will continue to be held to educate parents and assess competence for the issuing of licences to parents, as well as shorter courses for foster care with relatives. Preparation is also under way for an advanced general course for foster parents, as well as a course on the specific difficulties faced by children in foster care. Courses will furthermore be held for individuals who are interested in becoming foster parents for unaccompanied minors.

National and local authorities' initiatives, and programmes supporting education among children in foster care

There are no educational initiatives directed only at children in foster care. Foster children in Iceland attend public schools and their schooling, homework, attendance etc. is in the hands of the foster parents. Children in foster care, however, do receive free school meals, free after school care and sports fees are waived. Foster parents can in addition apply for funding for other recreational activities such as music lessons, dance classes, art courses etc.

Research carried out by the University of Iceland – School of Education has concluded that foster children are more likely to work in low-paying jobs and not obtain further or higher education. The results have been consistent throughout the years (1993, 1997 (Sigríður Jónsdóttir), 2001, 2004 (Guðrún Kristinsdóttir) and 2017 (Áslaug B Guttormsdóttir and Guðrún Kristinsdóttir) and do not appear to be changing.

The report published in 2017 (Áslaug B Guttormsdóttir og Guðrún Kristinsdóttir, University of Iceland) revealed the following after carrying out interviews with teachers, heads of schools and the children:

- Foster children are more likely to require special support within the classrooms and further counselling.
- It was clear that school staff lack information on the circumstances for specific students and the know-how on how to assist foster children.
 - Children reported receiving warm welcome in most cases
 - Empowering methods not conducted within the schools and foster children are treated the same as every other child.
 - All participants (children) expressed lack of information and discussion on:
 - Why foster care?
 - The foster home
 - What next?
 - All expressed the need for a spokesperson
 - Overview of the child's schooling was lacking in most cases or insufficient. Often due to frequent changes between schools.
 - School staff and management are hesitant with providing information and/or advice due to fear of legal actions.
 - „Quality “of foster homes and foster parents varied
 - Are they able to provide educational support?
 - Do they attend to the physical and psychological needs of the child?
 - CPS monitoring is scheduled twice a year. Does not always happen.

The main conclusion throughout the years is that cooperation is vital but always lacking. Cooperation from all parties involved, not excluding the child. Involvement of the child from the beginning is important.

Other fostering services supporting foster kids (healthcare, social, others?)

The Icelandic community is quite open and “Nordic „in all social aspects. Healthcare, schooling, access to hobbies etc. is the same for all children in Iceland. Healthcare is free for all, but foster children have additional:

- Free psychologists via local NHS – waiting lists long
- Referrals from health centres that might help them jump the que so to speak.
- Assigned case workers

Social support varies between municipalities. All foster homes undergo regular monitoring from the CPS. By law home visits should be carried out twice a year by case workers. However, this is not always the case. As previously stated, all foster children are assigned case workers and have access to social care. Trust seems to be a common factor, or lack thereof since foster children seem to prefer anonymous ways to ask questions and gather information.

The association of foster children, fosturborn.is, seems to be dormant. The purpose of the association was intended to act as spokespeople for children in foster care and previous foster children.

Some municipalities provide added support services for foster children, such as special support to increase their social involvement and participation. This could for example be in the form of a peer worker, who is another young person that meets the foster child for x hours a week and does social activities with them. This could also be with providing the child with paid internship within the municipality etc. This seems to be completely at each municipality's discretion.

Examples of digital tools being used in order to support services within foster cares

1. Common sense provides a digital citizenship curriculum⁶
 - Pre-K through 12th grade
 - Media balance and wellbeing
 - Privacy and security
 - Digital footprint and identity
 - Relationship and communication
 - Cyber bullying, digital drama and hate speech
 - News and media literacy
2. Kara Connect: An engine that builds secure access points between social worker and foster homes⁷

Customised marketplace for all units of support or homes for access to different professional and mentorship support.

In Iceland an access point to student psychologists for all high-school students (36 high schools)

In Denmark, an ecosystem to access women in business mentors.

In Ireland, an ecosystem that offers employees of 200 companies access to professionals in health, welfare, and support.

In Iceland, speech therapy access point for distance schools
3. Skema, is a unit within Reykjavik University setting that measures and learns how best able to teach children programming with games.

Skema teaches coding to kids through a unique methodology and is focused on adapting education to technological advances. Advocates technological education in primary and secondary schools.

Skema is a “franchise” system that could easily be implemented in other settings⁸
4. The CoderDojo⁹ movement believes that an understanding of programming languages is increasingly important in the modern world, that it’s both better and easier to learn these skills early, and that nobody should be denied the opportunity to do so.

CoderDojo is a global network of free, volunteer-led, community-based programming clubs for young people. Anyone aged seven to seventeen can visit a Dojo where they can learn to code, build a website, create an app or a game, and explore technology in an informal, creative, and social environment.

It works as a franchise volunteer network and offers systems to help establish a unit in towns and villages.
5. Saft¹⁰ - Stands for community, family, and technology:

⁶ commonsense.org

⁷ karaconnect.com

⁸ ru.is/skema

⁹ <https://coderdojo.com/>

¹⁰ Saft.is

A website that provides advice for parents and guidance on the safe internet use of children. Can be implemented right away.

Network Security: It's important to help children when it comes to online footing.

A balance must be found between countless communication tools and unlimited accessibility. Good communication is just as important online as anywhere else.

6. Barnaheill ¹¹– Safe the Children Part of the international organisation - Save the Children. A centre access point for professionals that support children in need of support.

Provide educational materials such as videos on various topics such as

- friendship,
- bullying,
- sexual violence and
- social media.

Offer free confidential advice to children via helplines.

7. Heimili og Skóli¹² (Home and schools, Lobbyist activity)

The association provides advice and support to parents and parenting organisations throughout the country. Publish a wide range of educational materials in support of parents.

Homes and schools also run the SAFT cybersecurity project, while SAFT represents community, family and technology and is a wake-up call for safe and positive computer and new media use by children and teenagers in Iceland.

8. Bergið¹³ – Headspace. Bergið is a support centre for the whole island that provides an offering of any service that bothers young people up to 25 years old. Their aim is to support, educate and consult.

60% of the youth that get help from Bergið do so through a digital access point, they get sent questionnaires and are then assessed and helped to the right kind of service provider, hospital, child protection unit, police etc. They are paid with funds from all municipalities and the state legislature.

¹¹ Barnaheill.is

¹² Heimiliogskoli.is

¹³ Bergid.is

Assessment of strength and weak points of the system, including precedents.

The main aim of child protection in Iceland is to provide support at the local level and the main believe is that children are best off within their family unit and the system goes through great lengths to strive for family unification. Often at a high cost, nevertheless. **Monitoring.** The Child National Protection Agency checks the local child protection agencies on regular intervals – how they fulfil their duties according to the law. This includes collecting data from the local commissions through the form of a regular annual report to analyse the number of cases and implementation of the legal regulations. This is very standardized. **Arrangement of special services on the national level.** Local commissions can apply governmental services, including foster-parenting services and monitoring. This is believed to ensure interactions on all levels. **Keeping a list of families/people willing to foster children and preparing and education those families.** The agency organizes campaigns to find more foster parents. The agency thoroughly checks the background of the people, offers the PRIDE-course, and provides support. According to the law, no exceptions are made when sending a child to the relatives – emotional bonds of the child are always especially important, so permanent foster care is a lengthy process. **Creating standards, directions, and suggestions to support the child protection on a local level.** The agency created an online manual with detailed information about how to act in specific situations – for local authorities. This includes regulations, laws, examples of cases, and a list of activities, which must be done before the child-protections-officer decides to move the child out of the family home. Those standards are mostly for guidance, not compulsory. To evaluate the issue of children at risk, a licensed Ester-evaluation model (created in Sweden) has been used¹⁴

Protection of interests in smaller municipalities, the services of child protection are often integrated with other social services. In larger places such as Reykjavik, the child protection unit is separate. On the local level, child protection services must fit into official regulations of the local authorities. Therefore, they are often connected with other areas like education, labour market, etc. It is a duty for everyone, especially for those who work with children (doctors, teachers, etc.) to inform the CPS about children at risk. If one does not share this information, the potential stipulated punishment according to the law is up to 2 years in prison. In practice, this has not been implemented. In most cases where mistakes are made, the mistakes can be found within the system. The main way of working on child protection is a **partnership** between a local cps, parents, and different institutions such as schools/kindergartens. In all CPS cases, two specialists from 'children's area' (like a social pedagogue, child's psychologist) are appointed to work with the judge. For example, if there is a case of the local CPS who wants to put a child into foster care (the reason could be alcohol abuse). The parent will be under surveillance for 2 months. Then further activities will be decided. In Iceland, there are various treatment-centres for people who suffer from alcohol or substance abuse, and the local authorities can make this a requirement from the parent/s.

¹⁴ <http://www.ester-bedomning.se/>

What must be perceived as positive is the fact that parents can request assistance themselves from CPS without risking losing their children and the CPS does provide help since keeping families together is seen as the best solution for all. However, children often must go through numbers of short-term foster care placements, change schools, even towns numerous times before they are provided with a secure environment. Some never experience this. There is no monitoring or overview on how foster children develop or end up even though the United Nations have twice in the last decade requested this information from the Icelandic authorities.¹⁵

What is controversial is this family unification but whilst in short term care children are isolated from their blood relatives. This is reported to be an act to provide peace and tranquillity but according to the UN convention on the rights of the child, a human rights violation.

The foster-care system is in general very well established and designed for bureaucracy and for the foster parents. There is ample support and information, courses etc available for foster parents but no specific services for the children themselves. Even though procedures are set by laws and regulations CPS between municipalities do not share information, resulting in no or truly little information that becomes available to the child’s new school for example.

The new 3 tier system is promising but it is clear that the children need to be heard.

The system in Iceland



The good

- „The true measure of any society can be found in how it treats its most vulnerable members.“ - Mahatma Gandhi
- Parents can request assistance from CPS
- Good welfare system provided to all
- Children placed in a family environment
- Society feels responsible
- New laws and regulations and a new ministry for children

Needs work

- Foster Children are excluded from their blood relatives.
- Foster Children lack advocacy and a voice
- CPS - case workers
- Violation of HR stated as an act to provide peace and tranquillity.
- Children can meet their parents for 2 hours 2 x per year.
- Designed for foster parents.
- Lack of communication between municipalities and schools - stability



Confidential

¹⁵ https://www.mbl.is/frettir/innlent/2022/03/15/hvernig_reidir_fosturbornum_af/