



# City of Reykjavik

## Intercultural Profile

### 1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Reykjavík is the capital and largest city of Iceland, and its latitude, at 64°08' N, makes it the world's northernmost capital of a sovereign state. It is located in south-western Iceland, on the southern shore of the Faxaflói Bay. With a population of around 120,000 (and over 200,000 in the Capital Region), it is the heart of Iceland's cultural, economic and governmental activity.

Reykjavík is believed to be the location of the first permanent settlement in Iceland, which Ingólfur Arnarson is said to have established around AD 870. Until the 18th century, there was no urban development in the city location. The city was founded in 1786 as an official trading town and grew steadily over the next decades, as it transformed into a regional and later national centre of commerce, population, and governmental activities. It is often lauded as being among the cleanest, greenest, and safest cities in the world.

Reykjavik had little experience of immigration and cultural diversity until the late 1990s when the Icelandic economy and labour market opened up to international exchange. For a decade its economy boomed and then famously crashed, leading to radical political and social reforms. However the crash did not drive immigrants away and, as the economy slowly recovers, Reykjavik is coming to terms with the fact that diversity is here to stay, and is adjusting its policies and practices accordingly, although the speed with which this adjustment is being made varies widely across different sectors.

### 2. Background to Migration and Diversity in Iceland

For centuries, Iceland was Europe's most isolated and probably most ethnically homogeneous community. It was first settled in the late 9th century, mainly by Norwegians with some Celtic elements from the British Isles. During the first centuries of settlement, there were frequent contacts with the Scandinavian peninsula and Britain, but as time went by they diminished. The main reason for this was that the building of ocean-going sailing vessels required large amounts of timber and the limited stocks on the island were gradually exhausted. New replacement growth was hampered by the pressure of grazing by the livestock upon which the settlers depended for their survival, so trees virtually disappeared from the landscape. Thus Iceland slowly withdrew into itself and its distinctive landscape, culture, language and democracy. Nevertheless, during this period Iceland established *Alþingi* (The Althingi) which was set up in 930 making it the oldest extant parliamentary institution in the world.

Iceland, however, was not so isolated that it was spared the depredations of epidemic disease, piracy (from as far away as the Barbary Coast), and exploitative colonial control by Denmark. Added to occasional catastrophic volcanic events, this all served to keep the population and the economy small. Partial sovereignty was granted in 1918 but it was not until 1944 that Iceland declared itself an independent

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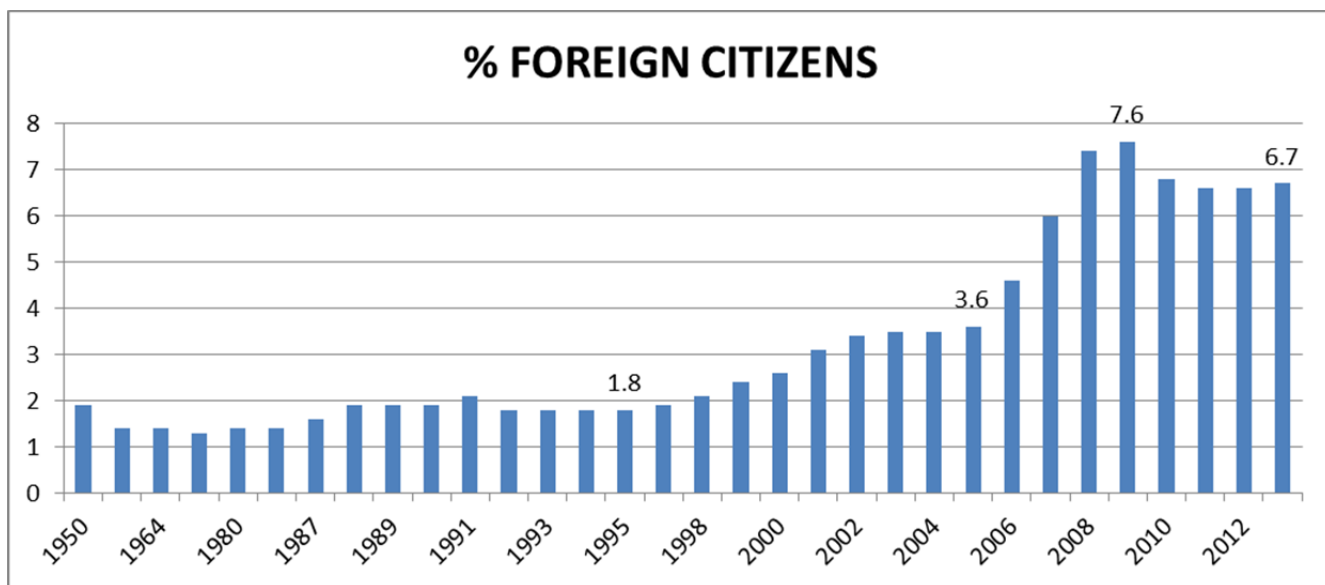
<sup>1</sup> This report is based upon the visit of the CoE inspection team on 16 & 17 October 2014, comprising Irena Guidikova, Oliver Freeman and Phil Wood.

republic. Wartime and American occupation had been good for the economy. The immediate post-war period was followed by substantial growth, driven by industrialisation of the fishing industry and the US Marshall Plan programme, through which Icelanders received the most aid per capita of any European country.

It also saw Iceland playing a much more outward-looking role in the world. The 1970s were marked by the Cod War disputes with the United Kingdom over Iceland's extension of its fishing limits to 200 miles offshore. Iceland joined the European Economic Area in 1994, after which the economy was greatly diversified and liberalised, and international economic relations increased further after 2001, when Iceland's newly deregulated banks began to raise massive amounts of external debt, contributing to a 32% increase in Iceland's Gross national income between 2002 and 2007.

Iceland hosted a summit in Reykjavík in 1986 between United States President Ronald Reagan and Soviet Premier Mikhail Gorbachev, during which they took significant steps toward nuclear disarmament. A few years later, Iceland became the first country to recognize the independence of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania as they broke away from the USSR. Throughout the 1990s, the country expanded its international role and developed a foreign policy oriented toward humanitarian and peacekeeping causes, providing for example aid and expertise to various NATO-led interventions in Bosnia, Kosovo, and Iraq.

In the years 2003–2007, following the privatization of the banking sector under the government of Davíð Oddsson, Iceland moved toward having an economy based on international investment banking and financial services. It was quickly becoming one of the most prosperous countries in the world but was hit hard by a major financial crisis.



It was this economic growth and opening of the market which started to create a demand for foreign labour and skills. The foreign population of Iceland had stood at less than 2% for decades but began to rise in the late '90s and really took off from 2005, peaking at 7.6% in 2009. However, by this time, the reason for immigration had already been undermined by an economic upheaval. The crisis resulted in the greatest migration from Iceland since 1887, with a net emigration of 5,000 people in 2009. Iceland's economy stabilised under the government of Jóhanna Sigurðardóttir, and grew by 1.6% in 2012. Many Icelanders, however, have remained unhappy with the state of the economy and government austerity policies. The centre-right Independence Party was returned to power in coalition with the Progressive Party in the 2013 elections, under Sigmundur Davíð Gunnlaugsson.

Nevertheless, Iceland was now irrevocably a nation of immigration and cultural diversity with residents of numerous countries of origin. The most recent figures from Statistics Iceland (2013) quote the total population of Iceland as 321,857, a slight increase of 0.7% or 2,282 persons from 2012. Immigrants comprise 25,926 persons, of which 6,664 have acquired Icelandic citizenship. The ten largest national groups within that total are as follows:

Country of origin	With foreign citizenship	With Icelandic citizenship
Poland	8,326	1045
Lithuania	1,313	76
Germany	762	231
Latvia	626	28
United Kingdom	543	146
Philippines	520	865
United States	511	203
Denmark	473	182
Thailand	439	496
Portugal	410	38

In January 2007 the Icelandic government issued its first ever policy on multiculturalism and integration<sup>2</sup>. The government realised that immigrants were not only coming to work short time but were settling down in numbers and some with families. Set against the backdrop of a previously strict immigration policy this represented a turning point in Icelandic immigration history. The policy document states:

*“The goal of the Government of Iceland for a policy on immigrant issues is to ensure that all residents of Iceland enjoy equal opportunities and are active participants in society in as many fields as possible”*

It is argued that valuing the contribution of immigrants in the labour market has no longer enough. Since immigrants generally have the intention of living in Iceland with their families for longer or shorter periods:

*“Society as a whole needs to be able to react to new and altered circumstances on the labour market and in the school system, the health care services and other welfare services provided by the state and municipalities”*

However it also emphasized that the key to society is the Icelandic language and when the minister of Social Affairs introduced the policy he said:

*Special emphasis is put on the preservation of the Icelandic language. It is important to make this clear. The Icelandic language is shared by the whole nation and preserves its history, culture and*

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<sup>2</sup> Government Policy on the Integration of Immigrants, Ministry of Social Affairs, January 2007. Accessed at [http://eng.velferdarraduneyti.is/media/acrobat-enskar\\_sidur/stefna\\_integration\\_of\\_immigrants.pdf](http://eng.velferdarraduneyti.is/media/acrobat-enskar_sidur/stefna_integration_of_immigrants.pdf)

*sense of self. It is also an instrument for social communication. Knowledge of Icelandic is the key to Icelandic society and can be the decisive factor regarding immigrant's integration into society.*<sup>3</sup>

One high profile and highly emotive aspect of Iceland's linguistic distinctiveness is that of naming. For decades, the law in Iceland stated that to become an Icelandic citizen you had to renounce your "foreign" name and adopt an Icelandic one. Thus a dual purpose was achieved: Firstly, the Icelandic language was saved from the risk of introducing foreign words which did not fit well into its grammatical system and might spoil the pure character of the language which had only recently been saved from the humiliation of becoming corrupted by Danish, the tongue of Iceland's earlier colonial masters. Secondly, by adopting an Icelandic name, a person was also becoming an accepted member of the community, blending in without effort, instead of announcing foreign origin on every occasion of introduction. The rigid demands of "enforced assimilation" became increasingly unpopular, however, and eventually the law loosened its grip, requiring only the adoption of an Icelandic name as a "middle name", thereby abandoning the requirement that new citizens should give up a personal name that had become a near-indispensable aspect of their identity.

The final release from the controversial clause came after Iceland joined the European Economic Area and now had to adapt itself to European legislation. In January 1997, a new Act of Parliament on personal names stated that in the event a person who has a foreign name becomes an Icelandic citizen, that person is entitled to keeping his/her name unchanged.<sup>4</sup>

Many of the immigrants living in Iceland are involved with Icelanders in a romantic relationship of some type. In January 2011, there were 64,656 registered couples in Iceland either married, or in a registered partnership or cohabitation. Of these, 6% were intercultural couples where one individual was a first generation immigrant and the other one did not have an immigrant background. Research in 2009 found that 36% of its sample of immigrants who were either married or involved in a domestic partnership (cohabitation) had an Icelandic partner.<sup>5</sup>

Attitudes towards immigrants in Iceland have been generally positive compared to other countries. Nevertheless, as the immigrant population in Iceland increases, and the economic situation of the country deteriorates, the attitudes of Icelanders towards foreigners have become increasingly negative<sup>6</sup> A longitudinal research was conducted between 1997 and 2004 that examined the attitudes of Icelandic adolescents towards immigrants in Iceland. The results of this study showed that the attitudes of Icelandic adolescents towards immigrants differ considerably depending on the gender of participants and their level of adjustment. Adolescent boys in Iceland appear to have a more negative attitude towards immigrants than girls. Worryingly, there are suggestions from some research that the highest level of prejudice against immigrants may be among the youngest age group, i.e. those aged 16-25, giving the authorities some food for thought.<sup>7</sup>

### 3. Local Diversity and Policy Context

The 2007 policy on multiculturalism and integration also made specific reference to the role of municipalities, stating that:

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<sup>3</sup> Magnús Stefánsson, quoted at [http://www.velferdarraduneyti.is/media/acrobat-skjol/auglysing\\_i\\_ahus-blad.pdf](http://www.velferdarraduneyti.is/media/acrobat-skjol/auglysing_i_ahus-blad.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Lagasafn. Íslensk lög 1. janúar 2005. Útgáfa 131a. Lög um mannanöfn. Website: <http://www.althingi.is/lagas/nuna/1996045.html>

<sup>5</sup> Cardenas, P. (2012). *Intercultural Couples in Iceland. A pilot study*. MA Thesis, University of Iceland

<sup>6</sup> Önnudóttir, E. H. (2009). *Viðhorf Íslendinga til innflytjenda á Íslandi*. Bifröst Journal of Social Science, (3), 67-95.

<sup>7</sup> Kjartansson, R. (2005). *Intercultural communication: A challenge to Icelandic education*.

*Municipalities and municipal institutions play a key role in encouraging immigrants to participate in society through their close proximity to residents and the basic services they provide. Such proximity provides substantial opportunities in the field of immigration issues. The independence of municipalities generally ensures that they have sufficient flexibility to meet localised needs, given that the origin and number of immigrants in municipalities differs widely. [Whilst] it is recognised that municipalities must determine their own ways to achieve such goals in accordance with local circumstances.*

*The government encourages municipalities to formulate policies for immigration issues, to determine where the category shall be located within the administration and to seek ways to encourage immigrants to participate in the issues of the municipality and in its social infrastructure. Such policies should provide for the dissemination of information to the residents of the municipality who are not fully fluent in Icelandic and should establish guidelines with respect to interpreter services. Moreover, municipalities are also encouraged to improve information collection relating to immigrant issues and to strengthen local co-operation with employers' associations, organisations, NGO'S and institutions for the benefit of immigrants and for society as a whole.*

*The goal of social services provided by municipalities is to ensure financial and social security and to develop residents' welfare on the basis of social assistance. This shall be done by, among other things, improving the standards of living of those in the poorest circumstances, ensuring the developmental security of children and adolescents and taking action to prevent social problems.*

- *Municipal authorities shall ensure that immigrants have the same access to social services as other residents of the municipality*
- *Municipal authorities shall employ available measures to prevent the social isolation of immigrants, both children and adults.*
- *In cases where municipalities establish preventive measures policies, it is vital that such policies also cover children and adolescents of foreign origin.*
- *Municipalities shall play an active role in all education that is aimed toward preventing prejudice.*

The City of Reykjavík's approach to cultural diversity is grounded in its commitment to human rights. The city's Human Rights Policy was approved in 2006 and revised in 2013. It is based on the principle of equality and aims to allow all persons to enjoy their human rights regardless of origin, nationality, skin colour, religious and political beliefs, sex, sexual orientation, age, financial situation, heritage, disability, medical condition or any other status. Through working towards a uniform human rights policy, emphasis is placed on a coordinated vision for the benefit of city inhabitants, inasmuch as many of them belong to more than one of the groups it covers. The common thread or the main emphasis is however on gender equality. Municipalities are according to the equality law in Iceland required to work on gender mainstreaming in all areas. The Human Rights committee and Human Rights Office are responsible for enforcing the policy. The Human Rights Policy is available in several languages<sup>8</sup>.

Its section on 'Origin and nationality' states that:

*It is not permissible to discriminate against city inhabitants on the basis of their origin, skin colour, cultural background or any kind of classifications based on racial ideology. Each and everyone's contribution shall be evaluated according to its own merits and everyone has the right to a fair reception, regardless of origin or nationality. Care should be taken not to lump all those who fall under a certain category into a single group; it is necessary to distinguish in particular between women of foreign origin on one hand and men of foreign origin on the other and take action should any disparities arise.*

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<sup>8</sup> <http://reykjavik.is/mannrettindastefna-reykjavikurborgar>

#### 4. Education and training

The City Council controls all compulsory education between 2 and 16 and private education is negligible. Although kindergartens are not obligatory, 98% of children attend to it. About 80% of children with an immigrant background commenced college in 2010, compared to 96% of indigenous children with no foreign background and proportionally fewer immigrants complete their secondary education than their Icelandic counterparts.

From 1993 to 2001 Reykjavík run *Miðstöð nýbúa* Information and culture center for foreigners. Schools were among the first institutions to respond to the rapid rise in foreign residents in Reykjavík - well ahead of the health and welfare systems. There has been a big effort to realign the education system from one which has catered for cultural uniformity within a Nordic egalitarian framework (at least in some schools) to a position of super-diversity. Schools have responded at varying speed to this transition, but the leading is *Fellaskóli Elementary School* in the Breiðholt district, which we visited. Traditionally this has always been seen as Reykjavík's most challenging neighbourhood and has recently been settled by large numbers of minority families.

The school has 360 pupils (70% of whom have Icelandic as a second language) and its principal is Kristin Jóhannesdóttir, who has transformed it into a dynamic place for testing new ideas about diverse education within the Icelandic context<sup>9</sup>. She says multiculturalism is at the heart of their ethos and diversity is seen as a strength. Students arrive at the school with different needs and assets and the school aims to reflect them, equally in arts and sport as well as academic subjects. Values are at the basis of the work, and every staff member must be trained in the reception of migrants, including administrators.

They start by finding out about each pupil's interests. Every kid is given a one-to-one interview and parents are consulted. This is now part of a city-wide school reception plan. Many foreign kids experience a culture shock on arriving in Iceland and the school is sensitive to this. For example, we were told of one child who was quiet and withdrawn on arrival. Through the interview they discovered that in Poland he had been the national junior dance champion, but he had been refusing to dance since in Iceland. The staff used this as the foundation upon which to help the child build a new identity for himself. It is seen as the responsibility of all staff to believe that every child has quality, no matter if concealed, and these should be the basis upon which to build an interest in education.

The education of newcomers falls into 3 stages: Reception, the learning of Icelandic and becoming part of normal school. However, there is no concept of the 'mainstream education' here and everyone is considered special. What they are considered to have in common is that they are beginners in Icelandic language. Staff are encouraged to learn something about each child's country of origin and culture, and they must build their approach upon the child's past experience. Many foreign parents are accustomed to a clear home-school division and so find it difficult to adjust to this system, so the staff accept the need to work with parents as much as children.

Traditionally *Fellaskóli* was always fallen behind the rest of the city's school in performance indices, but extra investment by the council is now starting to show results. For the first time it has scored above average. For the Council the big challenge ahead is how they can mainstream the experience of *Fellaskóli* across the whole city. Its approach has been opposed by many traditionalists who want to defend the old Nordic system of treating everyone the same. Another problem is that some school principals see *Fellaskóli* as a

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<sup>9</sup> <http://www.fellaskoli.is/>

convenient place to transfer pupils who they consider to be different or difficult. The Council is anxious to avoid Fellaskóli becoming either an isolated beacon of excellence or a dumping ground for problems.

There is dissatisfaction with the quality of teacher training in Iceland. The University offers a five year course but does not include any cultural competence or diversity awareness training. The council controls in-service training for teachers and is trying to counteract this deficiency.

Ösp is a multicultural pre-school<sup>10</sup> situated near to Fellaskóli and its principal is Nichole Leigh Mostyn, an American. 46 children out of 57(80%) are of foreign descent with 17 nationalities, and 5 staff members of 15 (33%) are foreign nationals. Staff prefer to use the term diversity, regarding everyone as individuals with their own special form of culture. They say it is important to be aware of our subconscious beliefs or prejudices and continually analyse and work to change/improve them if they are negative. These beliefs are brought alive through daily communication with parents and families. Ösp expresses its philosophy and its offer to parents thus:

- First interview with a translator available if wished for
- Participatory adjustment period where parents are here with us 3 days while their child adjust to preschool
- Informatory meetings regarding mother language and school policy/practice
- Daily communication, comfortable and almost always in accordance with parents' wishes
- Parents Coffee/ Waffle/Christmas
- Open School
- International-smorgasborg/ summer festival/Country trip/Christmas party/Graduation ceremony for children leaving for school are all shared projects
- Invite family members whenever we have a happening or event
- Staff and Administration are always accessible
- Administrators often take on additional roles to assist parents when needed
- Parents are always welcome stay/play/take part or teach us



The ethos of Ösp is inspired by the early years approach developed in Pen Green, Corby, UK which was established in 1983 and became the basis of the British Sure Start model. They offer free language classes to parents and, because Breiðholt has the lowest educational outcomes in the city they emphasise lifelong learning for parents too. There are about 80 kindergartens in the city and parents generally pay 20% of the cost. The council believes a preschool should be fully integrated into the community.

Reykjavic operates the international K-PALS system (Kindergarten Peer-Assisted Literacy Strategies). It is a 20-week program that helps kindergarten teachers ensure students are getting a solid foundation in early reading skills. A daily workbook includes teacher training lessons, daily direction cards, and student games which double the amount of practice students get with phonemic awareness and alphabetic knowledge. Students are paired for activities, increasing early reading gains for all, even those at risk of reading failure.

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.leikskolinn.is/osp/>

Because many people, both Icelanders and foreigners did not complete their full-time education, the city places a high priority on lifelong learning. We visited *Mímir Lifelong Learning Centre*<sup>11</sup>. It was set up in 2002 as a public non-profit company by the Icelandic Federation of Labour, as a response to the fact that 30% of people did not finish full time education. It offers return-to-study courses for workers and multicultural education for all.

It is seen as a priority to offer diversity education for Icelanders who only have a basic education as they are seen as the high risk group for adopting prejudiced attitudes against foreigners and other minorities. *Mímir* also offered outward bound adventures for migrants to enable them to get out of the city and to better understand Icelandic culture. They also train foreigners who are doing child and elderly care but whose Icelandic language skills are not to a sufficient standard.

According to *Mímir* companies say they are impressed with how well language develops when their employees attend *Mímir*. Many people in Iceland take only about 200 hours language training but then stop, and may restart later. This is not felt to be an efficient way of learning and people run the risk of developing a pidgin Icelandic, particularly if they do not have a strong grasp of English too. *Mímir* believes it is much more effective for people to be given an intensive programme of 500 hours, as is the system in Scandinavia

## 5. Employment and business

The Icelandic labour market consist of 183,000 active individuals, 14,800 (8,1%) of which are immigrants, but almost every fifth unemployed person is a foreign national. It is estimated that foreign nationals deliver considerably more to the country in fiscal contributions than they receive from it in welfare benefits. According to data from the Directorate of Internal Revenue, foreign citizens with tax domicile in Iceland contributed almost ISK 10 billion in taxes last year. Reduced by welfare costs, the surplus created by immigrants was ISK 4.3 billion.

85% of the total workforce is unionised and trades unions are trying to reach out to minorities, who often suffer because contracts of employment are written in very difficult legalese and can be exploitative. The Icelandic Confederation of Labour has the highest membership of ethnic minorities and always tries new ways in which to reach them and understand their special needs. Its concern is that there are many workers at risk of social dumping. There is a need to extend the worker ID system for hospitality workers, many of whom are undocumented. The fishing industry does not participate in the ID system as an ILO convention gives immunity.

The Efling (Empowerment) Union has 33% foreign membership. They have an educational fund and after a month's membership everyone can benefit and receive subsidised language teaching. They also ensure that many legal and safety documents are translated..

People who we spoke to felt there was no surprise that Reykjavik did not score well in the category of migrant business development in the Intercultural Cities Index. The representative of the Chamber of Commerce himself was honest in admitting that his organisation does not really address migrants at present. He personally represented the service sector with 45,000 workers, many of them migrants in low paid jobs, and regretted that there were no programmes to help them start businesses. He felt employers were willing to put money into educating migrants but there are many obstacles to moving forward.

He pointed out that there is a very simple procedure to start a business in Iceland but could not understand why there was such a low level of new business start-ups by migrants in Iceland. Others commented that

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<sup>11</sup> <http://www.mimir.is/mimir/about-mimir-english/>



whilst it may be easy to start a business it was very complicated to maintain it. For example the Icelandic tax law was not even easy for the locals to understand, and it was very hard and expensive to get advice. People compared it to hitting a brick wall. Unless entrepreneurs were prepared to pay for an accountant to help them negotiate a way through the system it was considered to be almost impossible. A possible answer would be more employers offering mentorship programmes.

Some people felt the National Innovation Centre should be taking the lead in this regard but it was falling down. There is a huge demand for help in many languages, language being the major impediment to business start-up. Most foreigners want to get a job where they can work with locals so as to improve their language and make friends, but most can only find work with other foreigners so their language does not develop so well. The Labour Department is trying to remedy this by organising workplace mentorships but the introspective nature of Icelanders was described as being unhelpful here.

The Council's public procurement department would like to make its services more effective in support of diverse employment and business practices. It would be grateful to receive examples of documents and procedures from other countries through ICC.

## 6. Governance and democratic participation

Although they have the oldest established parliamentary democracy in the world, Iceland and Reykjavik experienced a tumultuous political period in the wake of financial crisis of 2007/8. Following extensive public protests in 2009<sup>12</sup>, the government fell and a three year process to revise the Constitution ensued. Although the new constitution has not been finished yet, the process released many new experiments in democratic process and led to the creation of several new political parties at the local and national levels.

Better Reykjavík was one of these pioneering direct democracy projects. It claims that by harnessing the collective wisdom of the crowd and the internet, it enables people to connect directly with political power, make political proposals and take part in participatory budgeting schemes. Better Reykjavík did not have an automatic translation feature but immediately included it during the ICC expert visit, having realised the opportunity it would represent for migrants to take part in political life. In 2009 it created the online platform Your Priorities, and during the 2009 elections for mayor of Reykjavik, each candidate was given an equal space to use the site. The newly-created Best Party (led by comedian Jón Gnarr) used the platform most effectively, and went on to win the election. Since then, the new mayor continued to implement citizen-led legislation and brought many new voices into the political process

Since the retirement of Gnarr, the Best Party has reformed as Bright Future (*Björt framtíð*), and a new party the Pirates (*Píratar*) has also emerged. Both won seats in the most recent council elections (June 2014), but the largest party is now the Social Democratic Alliance (*Samfylkingin*) and holds the mayoralty in the person of Dagur Bergþóruson Eggertsson, who will serve for four years. These three parties, plus the Left Green Movement (*Vinstrihreyfingin – grænt framboð*) work in close cooperation in the new Council, making the political centre gravity somewhat to the left. Meanwhile, Iceland's national government is run by a right wing alliance of the Independence Party (*Sjálfstæðisflokkurinn*) and the Progressive Party (*Framsóknarflokkurinn*).

It takes 5 years legal domicile for a foreigner to acquire voting rights in the local election. It was suggested to us by a person of foreign origin who is now an elected member of the Council that there is still a serious deficiency in knowledge about this issue. She estimated that 90% of migrants had no idea what their voting rights were.

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<sup>12</sup> Widely known as *Búsáhaldaþytingin* (the Kitchenware Revolution) because protesters gathered outside the parliament rattling pots and pans.

## 7. Civil society and religion

The Multicultural Council of Reykjavík was formed in 2010 and consists of 7 representatives from civil society. It acts as an advisory board to the Human Rights Council and other departments in the city that deal with immigration issues and everybody who seeks help to them. It describes its role as being the ear and voice of the immigrants in Reykjavik and beyond. Its definition of culture is not limited to nationality, but also includes a wide range of experiences and backgrounds; and its definition of immigrants also includes short-term residents.

The Council is formed during Multicultural Congresses which are held every two years. Those elected to the current Council are: Aleksandra Chlipala (Poland), Juan Camilo Roman Estrada (Columbia), Candace Alison Loque (the Philippines), Harald Schaller (Germany), Jessica Abby VanderVeen (the U.S.), Tung Phuong Vu (Vietnam) and Josephine Wanjiru (Kenya).

One of the companies which develops innovative educational initiatives and offers a broad spectrum of multi-disciplinary expertise and training activities is InterCultural Iceland which is a non-profit consortium. Founded in 2003 in Reykjavík, its main aims are:

- To work against any kind of prejudice and discrimination by purposeful consultation and education and by offering practical teachers training
- To strengthen the awareness of the advantages of diversity and of migrants as enriching for every society
- To offer professional interpretation and translation services, improving migrants' access to information and active citizenship.

It was suggested that many Icelanders are totally unaware of the extent of the ethnic minority civil society in Reykjavik and that it was time that the sector achieved a higher profile in the public imagination.

There is a Faith Group Forum at which 15 groups meet regularly. Until quite recently, religion had also been a low profile issue in Reykjavik but it was catapulted to the top of the political agenda in the municipal elections. There are two groups of Muslims each with about 300 followers in the city. One group has applied for land from the municipality upon which to build a mosque. Designs suggested that it would be a prominent site, making it the first explicit mosque construction in the country. Icelandic law says that municipalities must provide land for the National Church of Iceland if requested. It does not make provision for the granting of land to other denominations but nor it does not prohibit it. The City Council also proposed to grant land for places of worship for the Buddhists, Russian Orthodox and Pagans but, following an intervention by the Progressive party, it was the issue of the mosque that suddenly became a political hot potato. 5000 people joined an anti-Muslim Facebook site, which attracted a lot of hate speech, and the issue became the key issue in the municipal elections. This is now a challenging issue for the new Council to resolve.

## 8. Culture

Cultural institutions in Reykjavik have approached the diversification of the population with varying degrees of seriousness and success. Libraries are at the forefront of activity being the first to remodel their services and to issue an explicit welcome to minorities. The Library Service has produced a Manifesto<sup>13</sup> in which it states that a multicultural library should:

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<sup>13</sup> [http://www.borgarbokasafn.is/desktopdefault.aspx/tabid-3175/5097\\_read-16708/](http://www.borgarbokasafn.is/desktopdefault.aspx/tabid-3175/5097_read-16708/)

- develop culturally diverse and multilingual collections and services, including digital and multimedia resources;
- allocate resources for the preservation of cultural expression and heritage, paying particular attention to oral, indigenous and intangible cultural heritage;
- include programmes supporting user education, information literacy skills, newcomer resources, cultural heritage and cross-cultural dialogue as integral parts of the services;
- provide access to library resources in appropriate languages through information organization and access systems;
- develop marketing and outreach materials in appropriate media and languages to attract different groups to the library.
- The staff of a multicultural library should reflect the cultural and linguistic characteristic of the community to ensure cultural awareness, reflect the community the library serves, and encourage communication.

The central library has a designated member of staff and has provided a Study Café in partnership with the Red Cross. Other projects include the Magic Carpet<sup>14</sup> which hosts Intercultural gatherings in pre-schools, compulsory schools, colleges, workplaces and other places. Also Café Lingua, which is a meeting place for people to introduce their languages to each other. In partnership with W.O.M.E.N. in Iceland working with minority groups it has produced a multicultural map of Iceland which is now used as branding for a well-known coffee company which gives it widespread coverage.<sup>15</sup>

The Sports and Leisure Department is very active in the city. Particularly through its successful Leisure Card scheme designed to widen participation. Kids from 6-18 receive the Leisure Card which gives them access to many services. It also gives the Council a lot of data about participation, although it is not able to distinguish between majority and minority users. However, every third year they do a survey and ask questions on language, which suggests that they are currently under-performing on minority take-up of the Leisure Card, so they are trying to push it harder. The department recognises it needs to do more to build relationships with ethnic minority sports clubs and integrate them into the system.

## 9. Language

Language is considered to be a key issue. Icelandic is a complex language which is not widely spoken outside the country. English is spoken widely by most Icelanders as is Danish. However, many foreigners arriving in Iceland are unfamiliar with any of these three so the city of Reykjavik recognises it faces a challenge.

There is no obligation for schools to offer mother tongue tuition and it is seen as an expensive luxury. However, second generation children have been shown to perform less well than newcomer kids because they don't learn their home language well. 6000 children of foreign origin now attend preschool and primary, and a test showed that 60% are doing worse than their Icelandic counterparts. It is feared that many may be 'between languages' without complete confidence in any.

Many foreigners who actively wish to master Icelandic say they face a challenge because of the prevalence of English. They find that on perceiving a foreigner, most Icelanders will default to English, thus making it difficult for newcomers to gain conversational confidence in Icelandic. There is a proposal for people who are learning Icelandic to wear badges indicating they would like people to speak Icelandic rather than English to them.

<sup>14</sup> [http://www.borgarbokasafn.is/desktopdefault.aspx/tabid-4442/7602\\_read-26555/](http://www.borgarbokasafn.is/desktopdefault.aspx/tabid-4442/7602_read-26555/)

<sup>15</sup> [http://projectsforpeaceiceland.files.wordpress.com/2014/06/1970653\\_10152314844247432\\_1408070634\\_n.jpg](http://projectsforpeaceiceland.files.wordpress.com/2014/06/1970653_10152314844247432_1408070634_n.jpg)

The University organises Equality Days, which are two weeks of events to promote integration<sup>16</sup>. This includes 'Icelandic Village', which has been internationally acclaimed as a success in helping migrants to learn Icelandic<sup>17</sup>.

Danish is still offered as the third language in schools. We were told of an interesting phenomenon whereby Polish families were refusing the chance to have their children taught Polish and expressing a preference for Danish. This was explained as a case of migrants seeing the future as uncertain and making the calculation that Danish might be more useful to them. It also expresses the difficulty of persuading some that Icelandic should be an essential language for them. It was also suggested that because there is such a high level of investment in foreign language interpretation, the need and incentive to learn Icelandic is diminished.

During our discussion with the City Council Members, the importance of a multi-lingual approach was discussed, as opposed to the current polarisation of views on the dichotomy Icelandic vs mother tongue, and hopefully the language debate in the city will shift towards the recognition that multilingualism is an asset to be cherished and enriched.

## **10. Welfare services**

Welfare, and the equality of access to services, has lain at the heart of modern Icelandic society. Based upon an assumption of cultural uniformity, it now faces the twin challenges of facing up to a diversifying population within a climate of financial austerity.

There are 6 district welfare offices in the city of Reykjavik delivering all kinds of services to kids and families with special needs. One of them specialises in services to immigrants, asylum seekers and homeless. They have specialist working with teachers who works children with Icelandic as a second language. Quota refugees have a one year programme with Icelandic lessons, schooling, healthcare.. Undocumented migrants in need receive a minimum service. They are given an interview with a welfare office who will then send an application to the Ministry of Welfare for support. Generally the Ministry can be expected to process these applications quite quickly.

The asylum process can take 2 to 3 years but the Ministry of Interior are trying to speed this up. Registered asylum-seekers who have an ID can apply for a work permit, but only if they have a job offer.

The government has created a national Multicultural Information Centre with a particular emphasis on managing this transition. It is located in Ísafjörður, an isolated part of Iceland about 6-7 hours from Reykjavik, but it does provide a good website which breaks down services to municipal and neighbourhood levels.

## **11. Public space, neighbourhoods and ethnic mixing**

There is a growing concern with a perceived divergence between the city centre and the suburbs. With growing immigration there is an increasing need for services in these outlying areas yet the city centre is felt by many to receive priority provision.

Social housing is not as extensive in Iceland as it is in other northern European countries, but it is significant in Reykjavik. It is run by an arms-length management organisation, with about 1500 homes which are heavily over-subscribed. Renting is not a strong Icelandic tradition but the younger generation is finding it harder than their parents to buy property so there is increasing pressure on the system. There is evidence of discrimination in house lettings, with some landlords preferring migrant tenants and others who don't.

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<sup>16</sup> [http://www.hi.is/sites/default/files/flyer2014\\_jafnrettisdagar\\_dwnld.pdf](http://www.hi.is/sites/default/files/flyer2014_jafnrettisdagar_dwnld.pdf)

<sup>17</sup> [http://english.hi.is/frettir/icelandic\\_village\\_receives\\_european\\_label](http://english.hi.is/frettir/icelandic_village_receives_european_label)

We were taken to visit Breiðholt, the city's largest area of social housing which was built in three stages from the 1960s to meet growth in the city. In 1999, Breiðholt was the most populous neighbourhood in Reykjavík with 22,030 inhabitants, but as of 2012 the population had fallen to 20,546. It is the side of the city that the tourists do not see and, as is often the case with large housing schemes, has been given a fearsome reputation which it probably does not deserve. It includes the longest house ever been built in Iceland: 320 m long, with a total of twenty staircases, for 7–800 people. This house is located in Norðurfell, next to Fellaskóli, and has acquired the nick-name *Langavitleysa* ("Long Nonsense") which is still in use.

In 1977, 15% of single parents in Reykjavík lived in this area—indeed, in some apartment buildings weren't inhabited by a single adult male. Despite of the "ghetto" stamp Breiðholt was given in the '80s, its reality did not conform to its image having, for example the fewest incidents of crimes per capita in the city. Nevertheless investment was put into ameliorative schemes such the first teenage social centre in Iceland (*Fellahellir*), a sports club was established (*Leiknir*), the only culture house outside the city centre was built (*Gerðuberg*), the first community college in Iceland was established (*Fjölbrautarskólinn í Breiðholti*) as well as the preschool and elementary school already discussed.

However, Breiðholt is still under suspicion from certain quarters—now because of a different kind of segregation. In Breiðholt, 10.2% of the inhabitants have non-Icelandic nationalities compared to 11.2% for Reykjavík as a whole. From our viewpoint, it seemed that the area's principal deficiency was a lack of public transport in all Reykjavík (which is said to be a wider problem in Iceland) which must lead to many people, particularly migrants without private transport, feeling isolated.

## 12. Security, conflict and mediation

In its 2011 report on Iceland, the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) reported that it was "pleased to note that there appear to be no particular racist violence problems in Iceland [although] there are rare and isolated incidents". Three years of difficult economics and polemical politics may have ensued since then, but the atmosphere still remains relatively calm in Reykjavík.

The Police have a department for immigration and the border and are in regular communication with the Red Cross over asylum seekers. Many foreigners are fearful of the police because of their home country experience, but Reykjavík's police are trying to reach out to all minorities and young people through various means including social media and Instagram<sup>18</sup>. They have over 100,000 followers and have gained a reputation in some quarters as the 'the only good cops in the world'.

However, Iceland is in the opinion of some, rather too laid-back on the topic of hate crime, which is becoming more prevalent without too much official action being taken against it. Recent research on hate speech in news stories in the Icelandic online media suggested that racist comments based on stereotypes are common and that immigrants who participate in the dialogue often fall victim to hate speech themselves. The analysis was conducted by Bjarney Friðriksdóttir, a PhD student in European Law, and found that of the 14,815 comments analysed, 75 percent were written by men and 25 by women. Most prejudiced comments targeted Muslims and comments characterized by nationalism or neo-racism were also common.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2782393/Candy-floss-skateboarding-course-lots-selfies-s-bizarre-Instagram-account-Reykjavik-s-police.html>

<sup>19</sup> [http://reykjavik.is/sites/default/files/ymis\\_skjol/skjol\\_frettir/greining\\_a\\_hatursordraedu\\_i\\_islenskum\\_fjolmidlum\\_.pdf.pdf](http://reykjavik.is/sites/default/files/ymis_skjol/skjol_frettir/greining_a_hatursordraedu_i_islenskum_fjolmidlum_.pdf.pdf)

### 13. Media

It seemed to us that there is still a great deal of progress to be made in the field of media. The mainstream print media has thus far maintained a reluctance to engage directly with the issue of diversity, preferring to concentrate upon stories which portray migrants as a source of welfare need or a perpetrators of crime. The Icelandic media has been criticised for its lack of a media policy on cultural diversity<sup>20</sup>. However, it is claimed that after a research study which produced a shocking account of media prejudice, there has been a positive change in the attitude of many journalists.<sup>21</sup>

However, there is still considerable room for improvement with the media. We were told of one radio station - Saga Radio – which adopts a ‘shock jock’ style that regularly agitates public opinion with negative and hateful coverage of migrant issues. We were also given the testament of one black lady’s experience of the media. A newspaper story about her, in which she gave a positive account of her experience was, nevertheless, headlined ‘Not here for suspicious purposes’. When she objected to this portrayal she was accused of being ungrateful by the journalist.

Also, our encounter with the representative of the Icelandic Federation of Journalists did not inspire us with confidence. When asked whether the mainstream media had plans to open up employment opportunities to journalists of migrant origin, he said that Icelandic is a tricky language so it is difficult for minorities to work in the media. It seems to us that if these attitudes persist at the highest levels in the Icelandic media, then change will be a long time coming. It was suggested that locals would be surprised to know how many trained journalists there are amongst the migrant population in Iceland, but few got the chance to put their skills to use and there are few funds available for community media.

Presently there are few people of migrant background who can be considered to be media personalities or opinion formers to a wider audience. The Japanese pastor is one of the few who is a familiar face in local media.

### 14. Summary of the Intercultural Cities Index

The Intercultural City Index analysis is based on a questionnaire involving 69 questions grouped in 14 indicators with three distinct types of data. Indicators have been weighed for relative importance. For each indicator, the participating cities can reach up to 100 points (which are consolidated for the general ICC Index).

These indicators comprise: commitment; education system; neighbourhoods; public services; business and labour market; cultural and civil life policies; public spaces; mediation and conflict resolution; language; media; international outlook; intelligence/competence; welcoming and governance. Some of these indicators - education system; neighbourhoods; public services; business and labour market; cultural and civil life policies; public spaces are grouped in a composite indicator called “urban policies through the intercultural lens” or simply “intercultural lens”.

According to the overall index results, Reykjavik has been positioned 57th among the 64 cities in the sample, with an aggregate intercultural city index of 37%, the same as the city of Valletta in Malta, between the Romanian city of Constanta (35%) and the city of Cartagena (40%) in Spain. Reykjavik has been ranked 30th among cities with less than 200,000 inhabitants and 30th among cities with less than 15 per cent of foreign-born residents.

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<sup>20</sup> <http://grapevine.is/mag/articles/2011/12/09/media-policy-intergration-and-immigrants-participation/>

<sup>21</sup> Ólafsson, H., & Zielińska, M. (2010). *“I started to feel worse when I understood more.” Polish immigrants and the Icelandic media.* University of Iceland.

When it comes to Reykjavik's intercultural efforts, with reference to the survey, the city could enhance them in the sectors below by introducing different initiatives:

- **Commitment:** Reykjavik might consider ameliorating its intercultural commitment by adopting a public statement about being an intercultural city, by implementing an intercultural strategy, an action plan, as well as by assessing the possibility of having a dedicated body/cross-departmental coordination structure to lead the implementation of the intercultural strategy. The city may also implement an evaluation process. The city may also provide an official webpage that communicates its intercultural commitment, and include clear references to the city's intercultural commitment in official speeches and communications.
- **Education:** Reykjavik might consider ameliorating its intercultural education approach by encouraging schools to make an effort to involve parents from migrant/minority backgrounds in daily school life more often.
- **Public services:** Reykjavik may wish to consider, in its effort to ensure the matching between the composition of the population and of the public employees, the experience of other cities of the network.
- **Business and labour market:** Reykjavik may wish to ameliorate its policies in this field by creating an umbrella organization which has among its objectives to promote diversity and non-discrimination; encouraging business from ethnic minorities to move beyond ethnic economies and enter mainstream economy; encouraging 'business districts/incubators'. It may be also interesting to give priority to companies with a diversity strategy in the procurement of goods and services.
- **Public space:** Reykjavik may wish to reach out to all the citizens when the authorities decide to reconstruct an area.
- **Language:** Reykjavik may wish to ameliorate its language policies by providing financial assistance to minority press, radio and TV programmes.
- **Media:** Reykjavik may wish to further explore possible media policies, for instance, by providing advocacy/media training/mentorships for journalists from minority backgrounds and by introducing monitoring mechanisms to examine how media portray minorities.
- **International outlook:** Reykjavik may wish to ameliorate its international outlook policies by setting up an explicit policy to encourage international cooperation, as well as an agency to monitor and develop the city's openness to international connections. The city may also encourage co-development projects with migrant groups' countries of origin.
- **Intelligence and competence:** Reykjavik may wish to further explore carrying out surveys including questions about the perception of migrants and minorities, as well as mainstreaming the findings and information about interculturalism and diversity to inform the process of policy formulation.
- **Welcoming:** Reykjavik may wish to ameliorate its welcoming policies by creating a comprehensive package of information to aid newly-arrived foreign residents; and by designating an agency to act as a first contact and welcoming point with the new-comers. The municipality may also wish to have a special public ceremony to greet newly arrived persons in the presence of the local government's officials.

- **Governance:** Reykjavik might establish a standard for the representation of migrant minorities in mandatory bodies supervising schools and public services.

Reykjavik may wish to look into further examples implemented by other Intercultural Cities as a source of learning and inspiration to guide future initiatives. Such examples are provided in the Intercultural cities database<sup>22</sup>

## 15. Conclusions

Whilst the Index does express, in rather bald terms, that Reykjavik has much still to do in comparison to most other cities within the sample, this does not tell the whole story. Iceland is a country which has been through a tumultuous decade in which it has encountered, and had to deal with, many complex issues which, in other countries, have taken much longer to manifest themselves. In the light of this, some of the time Iceland feels like the last refuge of a Nordic/European welfare egalitarianism which, for better or for worse, has elsewhere been swept away by individualism and neoliberalism. Once recent sign of this is that, for the sixth consecutive year, Iceland has come out best in the World Economic Forum's gender-gap index. Another example was that, unlike almost any other city we have considered, the labour unions had much to say on the topic of interculturalism, and believe themselves to have a leading and positive role to play. Reykjavik is a large public administration with an ambitious sense of its scope and responsibilities, and seems committed to retaining a leading strategic role in the direction the city takes. This sense of purpose, which is grounded in fundamental principles of human rights, has wide cross-party consensus giving confidence that if the Council makes a commitment to an intercultural strategy, it will be able to deliver it.

Most commentators are making encouraging noises about the revival of the Icelandic economy, although one note of caution that is expressed is with the speed and potential volatility with which the property market of west and central Reykjavik is growing<sup>23</sup>. Doubtless the city administration has ambitions to project the city as a booming, innovative and 'cool' place which is open for international business, but it must face the challenges this will present. One, which was raised several times, is the growing disparity between the dynamic city centre and the neighbourhoods and the fear that this might undermine social cohesion and restrict intercultural integration.

We observed several examples of work which would merit consideration as good practice at the international level demonstrating the city has the capacity to not only generate intercultural innovation but to recognise and valorise it. The challenge for Reykjavik now is to take these isolated cases and build them into the mainstream of its practice. Because resources are limited it cannot simply 'throw money' at making these reforms, but must build through winning the hearts and minds of officials and service users.

One factor which emerged on several occasions during the visit was that several key individuals, institutions and perhaps whole sectors, seem to remain unaware, unconvinced, or seriously 'behind the pace' on intercultural issues. This is perhaps to be expected given the recentness, and speed of growth, of immigration. However, in a small city such as Reykjavik the presence of obstacles in key sectors could prove to be disproportionately disruptive. The ICC model requires a process of systemic change.

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<sup>22</sup> [http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/cultureheritage/culture/Cities/guidance\\_en.asp](http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/cultureheritage/culture/Cities/guidance_en.asp)

<sup>23</sup> Global Capital. *Iceland enters a New Era*. 7 October 2014.



## Appendix

### PROGRAMME

**16. October 2014**

08.00 **Meeting I**

Welcome to Reykjavik – breakfast with the City Council and Department and Division heads  
**Location: Reykjavik City Hall, Room: Borgarráð.**

09.00 **Visits**

- Fellaskóli Compulsory School in the Breiðholt neighbourhood (09.00-09.30)
- Ösp Pre-school in Breiðholt the neighbourhood (09.40-10.10)
- Mímir Lifelong learning centre (10.20-10.50)

11.00 **Meeting II**

Meeting with project directors

**Location: Höfðatorg. Administration Building. Borgartún 12-14**  
**Room: Stekkur, 6th floor west wing.**

**Lunch**

13.00 Introduction of Intercultural Cities

**Location: Reykjavik City Hall, Room: Tjarnarsalur**

15.00 **Meeting III**

Grass Roots Organisations/Religious organisations/journalists/individuals

**Location: Reykjavik City Hall. Room: Borgarráð.**

This meeting concludes at 17:00.

**17 October 2014**

09.30 **Meeting IV**

Meeting with representatives from the City Council.

**Location: City Hall, Room: Bárubúð.**

10.30 **Meeting V**

Department and Division Heads, Labour Unions, Business, Police, Grass Roots Organizations University and others.

**Location: City Hall, Room: Borgarráð**

12.00 Lunch

13.30 **Visits**

Miðborg & Hlíðar City Social Services Centre

(13.00-13.30)

Austurbæjarskóli's Youth Centre

(13.40-14.40)

15.00 **Meeting VI**

Debriefing session with project leaders and politicians

**Location: City Library**

16.00 **End of Programme**