

May 18th 2021

Ladies and Gentlemen, dear colleagues. Good morning to all of you, and thank you for the invitation to contribute to this important event! I understand that many significant matters are on the agenda here in the next few days, including the Council's new strategy for the rights of the child. I have had the honor of reading the strategy draft, and I must state how impressed I am with its progressive and innovative tone.

The strong emphasis on innovation particularly hit home with me. As we build back better in a post COVID world, innovation must be at the heart of how we govern, develop policy, and implement human rights. I want to congratulate all of you, the children's rights division, Ms. Regina Jensdottir, and the Council of Europe and share sincere support for the strategy's approval on behalf of the Icelandic Government.

Child rights have always been, and always will be, a priority of the Icelandic Government in our cooperation with the Council of Europe – at least while I am Minister! We have benefitted from our collaboration with the Council and appreciate your work and follow it with great interest. Iceland has strived to be a contributing member of the Council, and I am delighted that our Barnahus model has been tried and tested in many of the Council's Member States, giving us valuable lessons on how we can improve the model further.

The Barnahus originated from a strong desire in Iceland to break the mold of our justice system to fit the needs and rights of children. During its development, we sought to innovate, think outside the box and learn from the experience of others, building a justice system with child rights at heart, as it should be! Showcasing how innovation and child rights go hand in hand!

Iceland is often among the countries considered to be the best places for children to live. However, as many of our neighboring countries in Europe, we have been facing complex challenges in early intervention and family support, digitalization, and the mental health of children and young people. For some

time, there has been a need to restructure our systems to better fulfill the needs of children and families in the times we live. The COVID pandemic has underlined this need even further.

I have always been concerned about the long-term consequences of children not receiving the support they need and how it can impact their entire lives. When I have discussed difficult matters with adults, I have often found that their difficulties started at a young age. This has for example been the case for many prisoners, people who suffer from addiction, and so on. When they look back on their childhood, they see situations that were not dealt with or not dealt with soon enough. I see the same pattern when I discuss matters with children and families that need significant support. In many of these cases, children are dealing with consequences that could have been significantly reduced, even prevented, with early intervention methods. In some cases, the changes needed to improve our system are small, for example, increasing cooperation between service providers, but in some cases, the changes are on a much larger scale, including restructuring the child protection system in the entire country.

In November 2017, I assumed the office of Minister of Social Affairs and Equality. As a minister for the first time, I was determined to achieve big steps toward Iceland becoming one of the best places in the world for children. I also had a vision in my mind of how to make that happen.

Shortly after this, I had a meeting with my prime minister and told her I wanted to change the title to fit my main emphasis as a minister. From the beginning of 2019, I have been Minister of Social Affairs and Children.

From day one, we have been working towards revolutionizing services in the interest of children's prosperity, and hundreds of individuals, institutions, and organizations have contributed to this effort.

In my view, this journey had to be above traditional politics, and therefore we included all political parties in the Icelandic Parliament in the work. On this journey, we stood on the shoulders of the Barnahus model, building on its legacy of bringing sectors and systems together - for children's wellbeing.

This work has resulted in four bills presented to the Icelandic Parliament, and there are more to come.

The four draft legislations that have been presented are the following:

1. Act about integrating services in the interest of children's prosperity.
2. Act on the National Agency for Children and Families.
3. Act on the National Supervisory Authority for Welfare for integrating services in the interest of children's prosperity
4. Act on Child Protection Services

During this term, we have also introduced Iceland's first policy and action plan for the implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

In the following presentation I would like to present to you the main aspects of the legislation and give you a preview of a new tool we are developing to monitor child rights and child-wellbeing in Iceland, our child-wellbeing dashboard.