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Iceland**

**Launching event**

**Barnahus: a European journey**

**28 September 2023**

**Opening remarks *(to be checked against delivery)***

**Zaruhi Gasparyan:**

Dear members of the CDENF and the Lanzarote Committee, dear partners, dear colleagues,  
I want to warmly welcome all of you to this event where we will be launching the Mapping study on multidisciplinary and interagency child-friendly models to respond to violence against children in member States, that we have called "Barnahus: a European journey". I also want to thank the Icelandic Government for the voluntary contribution that has allowed for the preparation of the mapping study and for a promotional video that will be screened in some minutes.

And without further ado, let me introduce Ólöf Ásta Farestveit, General Director of the National Agency for Children and Families of Iceland. It is a pleasure to have you today with us, given that the European journey that is presented in the study started in Iceland, with the set-up of the first Barnahus in 1998. We've come a long way during the last 25 years, and we wanted to know, looking back to the 25 years of Barnahus implementation, what are your first thoughts, what were the most exciting moments and maybe what were the most discouraging challenges in the whole process. Can you elaborate a bit on this?

**Ólöf Ásta Farestveit:**

It is a broad question, there are so many exciting moments that come to mind.

One moment that pops first into my mind is when Queen Silvia from Sweden came to visit the Icelandic Barnahús in 2004. She was supposed to visit for 30 minutes but she stayed for over an hour. She saw how important and crucial Barnahús was for children in Iceland and she asked the important question "why don't we have Barnahús in Sweden".

Other exciting moments I would say were around 2010-2011 when Barnahús was trying to get the Ministry to invest in a new property and we collaborated with UNICEF and formed a group of children that met all the ministers of the government. The children were victims of

sexual abuse, and their purpose was to inform the Ministers about how important it was for them to have Barnahús in their life. The significance of children's participation and their stories proved invaluable and left no one untouched. The new Barnahús was then fully funded.

We meet new challenges every year and that is why it is so important that we are always on our toes regarding changes in laws and working habits. The most challenging part was when the courthouse in Reykjavík decided to interview all children in a specially equipped room in the Court. The Icelandic criminal law only mentions that the interview should take place in a specially equipped child-friendly room. From the year 2003 until the year 2013 all children in Reykjavík were interviewed in this room in the courthouse. But now we have all the interviews in Barnahús where children feel safer and more at ease.

Just to give you our latest challenge is that a group commissioned by the Ministry of Health is working on a report on medical examinations of children who are victims of sexual violence, then the question arose in the group whether it would not be best to examine all children in the Children's hospital since the hospital is open 24/7. After all those years we needed to inform them about the basic value of medical examinations in Barnahús and that not all cases are acute cases. It is easy to let the interests of criminal investigation take over the interests of the child. We need to be aware of the fundamental principles of Barnahús.

I perfectly recall when the Lanzarote Committee visited the Barnahus in Reykjavik in 2012. Then it was later recognised as a promising practice by the Committee in 2015. I am curious to know how that visit 11 years ago has affected the work of the Council of Europe on the outset of the creation of the Lanzarote Convention?

**Zaruhi:**

The Lanzarote Committee was impressed by such an innovative and encompassing example. Now we are all used to speaking about multidisciplinary approaches and various agencies working cooperatively, but when the Lanzarote Committee first visited the Barnahus, these concepts were not as common as they are now. The Guidelines on Child-friendly Justice had just been adopted in 2010, and the recognition of Barnahus as a promising practice was paramount in promoting the model as an effective response to child sexual exploitation and abuse on one hand, and a child-friendly justice setting on the other. We can somehow say that the stars aligned and these processes gave impetus and pushed other states to commit to scaling up their fight against sexual violence of children and start exploring innovative ways of accomplishing justice for children that is accessible and adaptable to their needs. This further shaped our work both on standard setting and providing technical support to our member states. We have included interagency models in our Strategies and helped states in their endeavours to draft new bills to ensure smooth implementation of Barnahus, trained professionals on forensic interviewing based on evidence-based protocols adapted to national contexts and raised awareness about ways to fight child sexual exploitation and abuse and the new Barnahus service in their country.

And I want to revert this question. We've talked about how the visit to Barnahus shaped the work of the Council of Europe, but how have Council of Europe standards contributed to the development of Barnahus in Iceland throughout the years?

**Ólöf Ásta:**

It was extremely interesting to meet the Lanzarote Committee in Iceland over a decade ago and a great honour.

The standards and recommendations of the Council of Europe are of great significance in Iceland, this applies to the standards of the Council of Europe on Barnahús, but the Icelandic government was also an active participant in the conversation when they were formulated at the time. Quality standards and quality work in connection with Barnahús in Iceland have been very important in scaling up its activities and its development over the years and will certainly continue.

We have used these standards to help other countries implement Barnahús and it is good to be able to point to the Council of Europe and they have taken the Icelandic Barnahús as a model for child friendly justice. Council of Europe standards also support professionals and the government and guides them in the right directions. It has also been helpful to point out standards from the Council of Europe when you get new professionals onboard. We can say that the Council of Europe is leading the way in assisting countries to set up Barnahús to help children.

It is important to point out the advantages of Barnahús and the fundamental principles. The Council of Europe has written international documents which have accelerated the implementation of Barnahús in Europe and supported the Icelandic professionals in the implementation process.

It is always necessary to point out the advantages of Barnahús and also on the national level, and the standards of the Council of Europe help a lot there too when we think about the fundamental principles of Barnahús.

In Iceland we are very satisfied and happy to see how the model is expanding and having a positive impact in the lives of so many children. Can you tell us a bit more on how the Council of Europe is helping member States in implementing the Barnahus model? Which projects do you currently have in place?

**Zaruhi:**

Well, as I already mentioned, the Council of Europe supports a number of states in establishing and implementing the Barnahus model. The support varies from fully-fledged cooperation projects to ad-hoc activities and advice. Our first experience was with Ukraine where the request came from the General Prosecutor's office and the Ministry of Internal

Affairs which were most interested in the model. They wanted to know how the procedures could be improved because the results and rates of convictions were very low and the prosecutors were not able to win child sexual abuse cases.

In Slovenia, it was the Ministry of Justice, together with the EU Structural Reform Support Services that approached the CoE to support the process. There was a need for guidance on “what to do, when and by whom”, as well as a lack of coordination of stakeholders and identification of best practices from other countries. Hands-on experts from Sweden, Iceland, Norway and the Netherlands participated in the process, which was particularly successful. Learning by doing and peer review-approach is much appreciated by our counterparts in member states. The CoE never arrives with all the answers, but the best solutions are discovered and negotiated together with national and international stakeholders.

We mainly support the countries under three areas: legal and policy reform, capacity building of professionals and awareness raising of both professionals and the general public. We develop legal analyses, draft bills, recommendations, training materials, investigative interviewing protocols adapted to the national context and communication strategies and action plans.

What we are seeing from our experience in the cooperation projects as well as through the mapping exercise is that the Barnahus model is being used for a varied number of situations, so we wanted to know, in the specific context of Iceland, which new directions Barnahus is taking. First there was a change from targeting only children victims of sexual violence to targeting children victims of all types of violence. But I can imagine that emerging challenges have made you react and adapt the model to, for instance, other types of violence such as violence perpetrated online or other groups of children, like children in migration or in conflict with the law. Can you refer to the new challenges that Barnahus is taking up and how the future of Barnahus looks like in Iceland?

### **Ólöf Ásta:**

When Barnahús got larger premises, we could hire more staff and, in that way, provide services for wider client groups like children who were victims of violence or domestic violence. When the trust was established, others started to request services from Barnahus. We also learned that the forensic interviewing technique could be helpful in other situations around children who had been suffering from violence or were traumatized. In 2016 we developed protocol for forensic interviews for unaccompanied minors and refugee children in suspicion of violence. The child friendly settings and the way of interviewing children with open ended questions with just one professional in the interview is very helpful to get a holistic disclosure from the child.

We have also learned that therapy for children who are victims of physical violence and domestic violence need other kinds of therapy programs. The importance of working with the whole family is crucial. We are now developing evidence-based therapy for children and their parents, not only non-offending parents. The funding is now in process in our parliament.

Barnahús must be in constant professional development and consider the best possible knowledge at all times. If we look at the development in online sexual abuse cases. We saw huge changes in the number of victims in Covid pandemic time. If we look at children who meet the offender through the internet it is seven times more children 2021 than the average 5 years before Covid and if we look at children who send nude pictures of themselves the number is fivefold the time before covid. We have also learned that one offender online has many more victims than in other cases. We had one offender with more than dozens of victims. We have also learned that the consequences of online sexual abuse can be as severe as in hands on sexual abuse. Children have many trauma symptoms and one of the reasons can be that online sexual abuse never stops, the child doesn't know where the pictures are and they are not in charge of who knows about the abuse. That can be very traumatizing for children. Our therapist had to recognize that the child could have Post traumatic stress disorder.

Challenges are constantly changing and will become bigger over the years, but we need to protect the basic concept of Barnahús. We need to educate our professionals constantly and be able to think outside the box but never lose sight of what the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the child includes.

Although the challenges are huge it is a pleasure to see the results of the work. A new youth study published in September covering children in 8<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade in all schools in Iceland found that the group disclosing about sexual abuse is growing. In the first years of Barnahús we were talking about less than the top of the Iceberg but now we see the numbers are rising, now 32 % of children in 8<sup>th</sup> grade have told someone about their abuse and 44% of the children in the 10th grade. Girls disclose more than boys. Now we want to aim higher in the future.