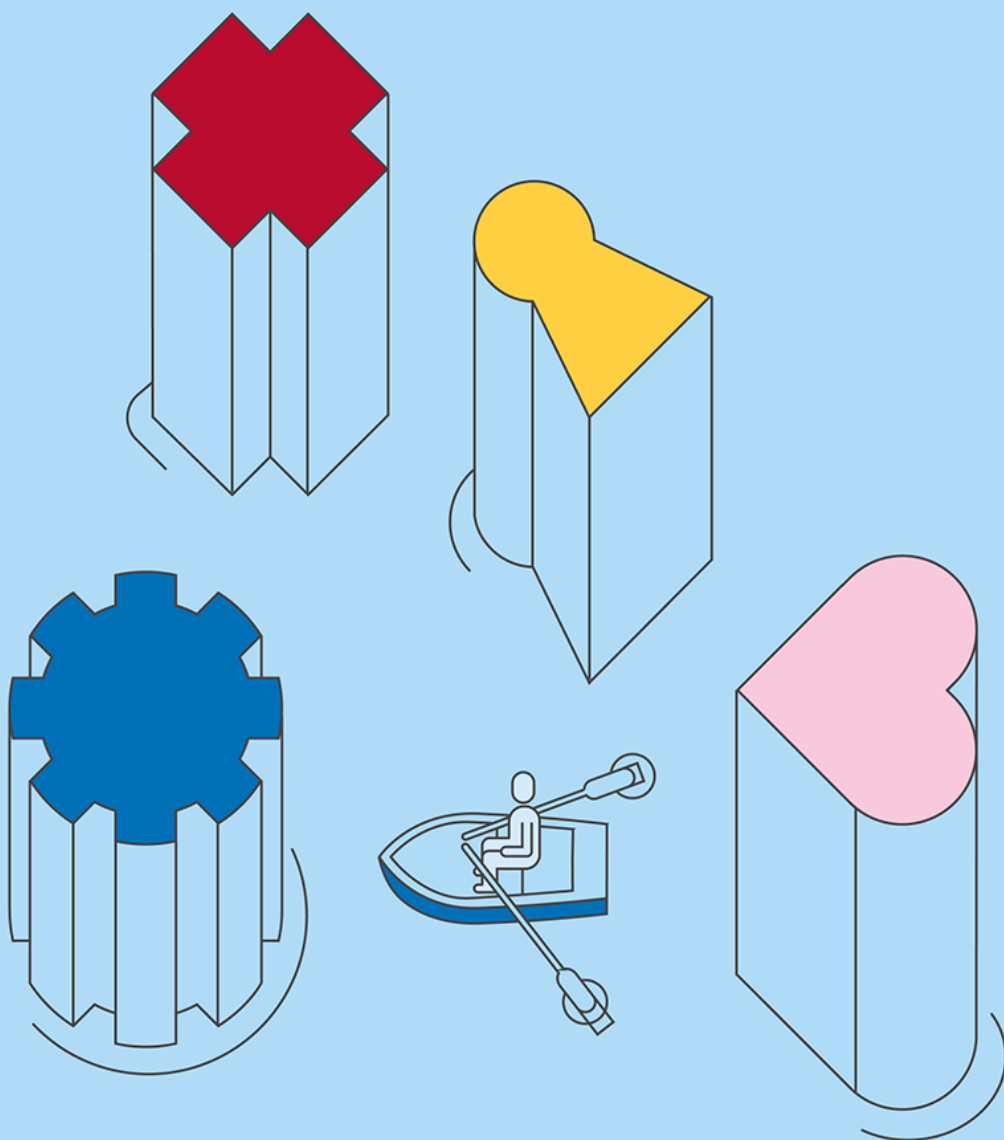




Nordic Council
of Ministers

Complex welfare services in Nordic countries



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Introduction

The Nordic countries have well-developed welfare systems, yet even the best systems have cracks. Individuals, depending on coordinated efforts from multiple actors, risk slipping through them. Not because support is missing, but because support is divided. Services may work in parallel rather than together. Rules, responsibilities, and structures can create barriers instead of solutions.

What is striking is that these challenges look remarkably similar across the Nordic region. Despite differences in laws and organization, the problem is shared—and so is the opportunity to learn from one another.

The Nordic Network for Complex Welfare Services was created to meet this need. It offers a space for reflection, dialogue, and knowledge sharing across countries, municipalities, and national actors. The network has explored how welfare systems can be structured and coordinated better, so that no one falls through the cracks.

This report builds on that work. It asks:

- Why is cross-sector coordination so hard to achieve?
- At which levels do the Nordic countries face challenges when coordinating complex welfare services for people in need?
- How can national actors support municipalities in meeting the needs of people who require help from several services at once?
- How can we move beyond silo thinking and promote cross-sectional collaboration?

The answers are not simple. But the discussion is essential—because behind every policy, structure, and service is a person who deserves to be seen, heard, and supported.

This report describes the primary results from the mapping of complex welfare services carried out in 2023–2025 by the Nordic network on complex welfare services. In addition, the report describes the background to the mapping, including the purpose and tasks of the network, the context for the mapping and the theoretical as well as the methodological approaches for the mapping.

Photo Anja Bergersen

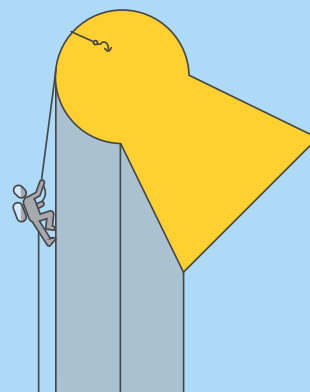


Jonas' story

This is the story of Jonas, a person facing many challenges in life who needs support from several different services. Instead of receiving coordinated help, he is constantly passed from one agency to another, with no one taking overall responsibility. Jonas' situation clearly illustrates what happens when the welfare system is not properly coordinated – the individual risks falling through the cracks.



Watch the video here: <https://pub.norden.org/nord2025-027/jonas-story.html>



1. Five findings in the cross-Nordic welfare challenges

The mapping shows that the same challenges are repeated across the Nordic countries – regardless of the organisation and legislation in the different Nordic countries. The mapping has summarised the cross-Nordic challenges in these five headings:



The overall welfare needs of the individual citizen tend to receive insufficient attention



Competence strategies are often underdeveloped



Incentive structures provide limited support for prioritisation of coordinated services



Lack of responsibility and shared ownership can make coordination challenging



A guidance overload can create demanding conditions for (de)implementation



The overall welfare needs of the individual citizen tend to receive insufficient attention

The mapping shows that a lack of coordination and collaboration between service providers can lead to users experiencing a fragmented process and not having a coordinated service. This can lead to uncertainty among users about who are responsible for what, often meaning they must repeat their story several times to different services. In addition, a lack of user involvement creates a sense of unpredictability, and users experience services as standardised and do not take their specific situation into account.

The services are often rigid and diagnosis-centred, failing to recognise that users' needs do not fit into clear diagnoses or categories. Actors in different sectors lack a common plan and therefore work independently of each other. This leads to inefficient use of resources and lack of coordination, which can mean that users receive contradictory or incomplete solutions.

Furthermore, how one talks about the different user groups has an impact on all system levels. This is expressed, for example, in the narrative of the social services compared to the health services. For example, one does not want to talk about cancer patients as a "burden on society".



Competence strategies are often underdeveloped

The mapping shows that competence challenges are multifaced. It is hard to recruit the right skills, both for employees and managers. Keeping and developing these skills is also difficult. Using the full knowledge of the team can be a challenge too.

Challenges related to competence are multifaceted. It is not only difficult to recruit the necessary skills, both among employees and managers, but also to retain and further develop competence and to utilise the collective expertise effectively. This includes the need to consider both generalist and specialist skills. Increasing specialisation heightens the need for collaboration, yet service providers often avoid collaboration due to limited time and resources.

Furthermore, the mapping highlights a lack of comprehensive competence strategies across municipalities and services, as well as insufficient structures and capacity to support initiatives aimed at developing and implementing such strategies.



Incentive structures provide limited support for prioritisation of coordinated services

The mapping manifest that financial considerations and budget restrictions are often prioritised over professionalism, and that interdisciplinary collaboration is downgraded because each sector defends its own budget. In other words, there is no strong incentive to collaborate and share resources across organisations. Metaphorical spoken this is a "sow-and-reap problem", where one sector has no strong incentive to make a given investment because the benefits cannot be reaped in the same sector.

In addition, politicians' desire for visible results in the short term can conflict with the need for long term and strategic plans for development and implementation. This can lead to political decisions not always being in line with the actual needs, and therefore the measures become populist rather than necessary.



Lack of responsibility and shared ownership can make coordination challenging

The mapping points out that lack of management support and unclear goals leads to frustration, because the employees experience that they are solely responsible for the services. Furthermore do managers not have sufficient time to make the necessary decisions to coordinate. No one takes responsibility for the overall coordination need. The lack of ownership for coordination can lead to a "not my responsibility attitude".

Furthermore, a lack of overview across local services as well as national authorities causes that the employees do not know who does what and which resources and competences are available. This prevents effective collaboration and holistic follow up, and it is not clear how services should be integrated to meet complex user needs.

Municipalities are often organised in several sectors that operate in silos with limited cross-disciplinary collaboration. When you stick to your own professionalism, it can be difficult to collaborate. It is difficult to commit to each other, and there is a lack of "chain responsibility". This applies both at the local level in the municipalities and at the national level. The sectors see their areas of responsibility as "isolated islands", and there is a lack of strategic leadership that coordinates across the sectors.

There are different governance mechanisms and sectoral logics, each with its own perspective, where legislation is aimed at different levels and not always coordinated. Also, there is political pressure within each sector and a desire to define solutions leading to uncoordinated solutions. The operations at the outermost level end up with the problem when the problems cannot be solved cross-sectoral at the national level.

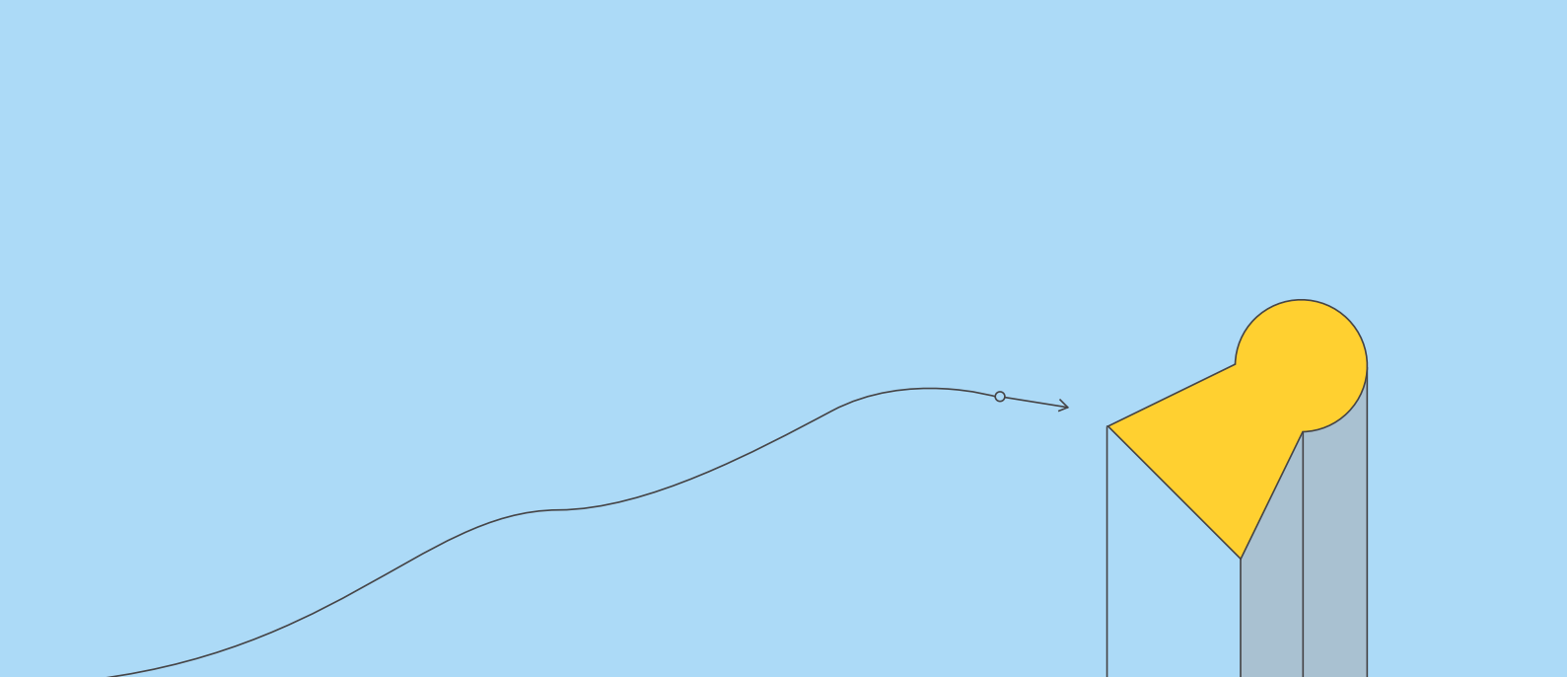


A guidance overload can create demanding conditions for (de)implementation

The mapping shows that municipalities experience continuous pressure from new requirements and guidelines from national authorities that follow sector specific lines and can sometimes even appear contradictory. This leads to "change fatigue" and makes it difficult to collaborate across sectors. Conversely, it is a challenge at the national level to prepare guidelines, because it is difficult to "oblige municipalities with anything other than their good will".

In addition, resource limitations make it difficult to meet all expectations at the same time, and therefore municipalities do have to prioritise what they can implement. It is rarely stated what needs to be de-implemented when a new guide is implemented.

Furthermore, it is difficult to find the right level in the guidelines. If they are too general, they become "fluffy", and if they are too specific, it may be difficult to apply them across sectors. In addition, different professional languages are used across national authorities and sectors, which further complicates cooperation.



2. Approaches to holistic welfare services

Several national and local approaches are suggested below to respond to the cross-Nordic welfare challenges from the mapping. It is based on a review of reports focusing on identifying approaches from Norway, Sweden, and Denmark. In addition, Sweden has included AI generated suggestions in its findings, outlining how national authorities can support municipalities in following up on the overall challenges.

Approaches at the national level

Strengthen national and local coordination and cooperation by

- Implementing a national strategy with shared goals and roles across sectors.
- Establishing arenas for cross-sectoral and strategic dialogue.
- Developing cooperation models between municipalities, regions, and authorities.

Build a common language and knowledge base for cooperation by

- Developing a shared conceptual framework (e.g. a dictionary).
- Publishing long-term forecasts and indicators, and comprehensive guidelines
- Sharing effective initiatives and cooperation models via digital platforms
- Providing multilingual guidelines on the welfare system, individual rights, and support access

Coordinate government signals and requirements by

- Coordinating and prioritising the requirements and expectations for municipalities of the state level actors so that conflicting or overlapping requirements do not arise – to avoid contradictory guidelines.
- Supporting both implementation and phasing out of initiatives.
- Establishing arenas where state and municipalities agree on goals, roles, and priorities focused on user needs.
- Offering financial incentives and long-term support for interdisciplinary municipal teams.

Support management and implementation

- Providing easy access to support materials, checklists, and sample collections for municipal strategic leadership.
- Creating arenas for long-term, cross-functional collaboration, e.g. targeted programs for frontline social work managers.

Approaches at the local level

Strengthen leadership for change and quality by

- Anchoring coordination and competence development in strategic management promoting innovation and flexibility.
- Changing incentive structures and ensuring coherence between citizen perspectives, strategic direction and methods in the strategic leadership.
- Ensuring cross-organisational and interdisciplinary collaboration through shared goals and strong leadership.

Prioritise cross-organisational collaboration, common goals and support by

- Building a shared mindset and strategic coherence across all management levels.
- Integrating coordination into management systems, budgets, and strategies as part of core operations.
- Supporting long-term efforts with financing models and reward systems, and clear responsibilities.
- Promoting shared understanding and experiences exchange across meetings, networks, and applicable tools, e.g. coordinators, mentors, and case managers.
- Fostering a culture of trust, openness and respect for professional skills to enable effective communication and knowledge sharing.
- Strengthening collaboration with joint plans, follow-ups and tools for coordination and dialogue.

Ensure strategic competence development and professional support by

- Developing long-term competence plans for both employees and managers, covering both organisational and individual growth.
- Prioritising broad competences, continuing education, and specialised support, including interdisciplinary cooperation, user participation, and relationship work.
- Supporting professional development through interdisciplinary supervision, sparring, and collegial communities.

- Establishing regional networks and arenas for reflection, learning, and sharing across disciplines and levels.
- Promoting interdisciplinary cooperation to ensure better solutions for citizens and their families.

Place the user perspective at the centre by

- Integrating the user perspective into management systems, strategies, and management practices as part of quality development.
- Using participatory methods that give citizens real influence in both interventions and decision-making.
- Creating arenas for citizen voices in both system design and individual cases.
- Providing services based on citizens' overall needs, goals, and life situations.
- Engaging citizens through trust, co-ownership, accessibility, and coherent plans.
- Reducing contact points creating coherence across departments, e.g. citizen consultants and coordinating case managers.



3. About the Nordic network on complex welfare services

The Nordic network on complex welfare services is an arena for government actors in the Nordic countries for reflection, discussion and knowledge sharing on how to structure and coordinate efforts in the face of wicked problems.

The network's target group is users of welfare services with complex needs – regardless of age and diagnosis. Therefore, the network's focus is not limited to a specific service area as the network is concerned with the organisational and structural level of the entire spectrum of welfare services.

The discussions in the network are based on a user perspective and examine how systems, rules, structures and forms of cooperation promote or hinder holistic services. The main challenge is regarding organisation, responsibility, coordination and cooperation between the state, regions, municipalities and other relevant public actors.



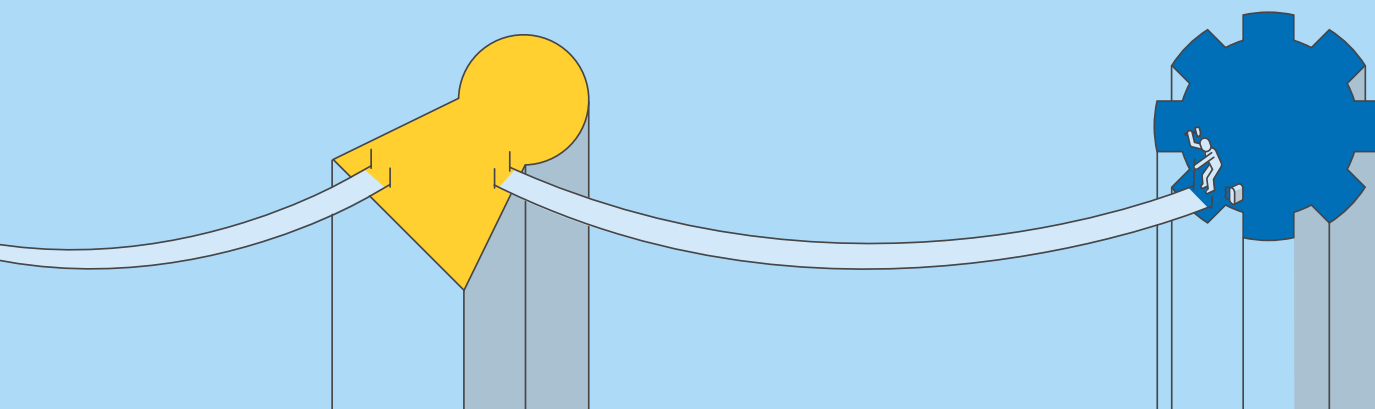
Photo Anja Bergersen

The network is supported by the Nordic Council of Ministers in the period 2023–2025, and the participants is representatives from government organisations from Greenland, Iceland, the Faroe Islands, the Åland Islands, Norway, Sweden, and Denmark.^[1] Finland contributed to the network preparations in 2022 but withdrew for resource reasons.

The network's working group has carried out a mapping of complex welfare services. The entire network has met twice – once in October 2023 in Reykjavik, where the mapping was launched, and once in Tórshavn in May 2025, where the preliminary findings of the mapping were discussed.

In addition, the network hosted a network seminar in Copenhagen in November 2025, where the results of the mapping were presented, and where several speakers discussed different solutions and perspectives on the complex challenges facing the Nordic welfare model.

1. The Greenlandic Social Agency (Isumaginninnermut Aqutsisoqarfik, Greenland), the Ministry of Social Affairs and Housing (Félags- og Húsnæðismálaráðuneytið, Iceland), the Department of Social Services (Almannaverkið, the Faroe Islands), the Social and Environmental Department of Ålands Provincial Government (Ålands landskapsregering, the Åland Islands), The Directorate for Children, Youth and Family Affairs (Bufdir, Norway), the Directorate of Labour and Welfare (Arbeids- og Velferdsdirektoratet, Norway), the Directorate of Health (Helsedirektoratet, Norway), the National Board of Health and Welfare (Socialstyrelsen, Sweden), and the Danish Authority of Social Services and Housing (Social- og Boligstyrelsen, Denmark).



4. The context for the mapping

The network is supported by the Nordic Council of Ministers because the network seeks to contribute to the fulfilment of both the Nordic Council of Ministers' Vision 2030 and the strategic review of Nordic cooperation in the social field. In other words, the network is part of a strategically important agenda for Nordic cooperation.

With Vision 2030, the Nordic Council of Ministers has a declared goal of making the Nordic region the most sustainable and integrated region in the world. This is achieved by prioritising three strategic areas: A green Nordic region, a competitive Nordic region and a socially sustainable Nordic region. The latter aims to promote an inclusive, equal and cohesive region with shared values and strengthened cultural exchange and welfare.

In parallel with Vision 2030, Nordic cooperation in the social field has undergone a strategic review. Árni Páll Árnason^[2] set a clear direction for improving and strengthening future cooperation in the area. Among other things, Árnason points out that the most difficult social challenges cannot be solved in isolation within one sector. When no one has a holistic responsibility, we risk that people will not receive the help they need. There is therefore a need to build bridges between the sectors to create holistic solutions.

2. Árnason, Árni Páll (2018). *Knowledge that works in practice: Strengthening Nordic co-operation in the social field*. Nordic Council of Ministers.

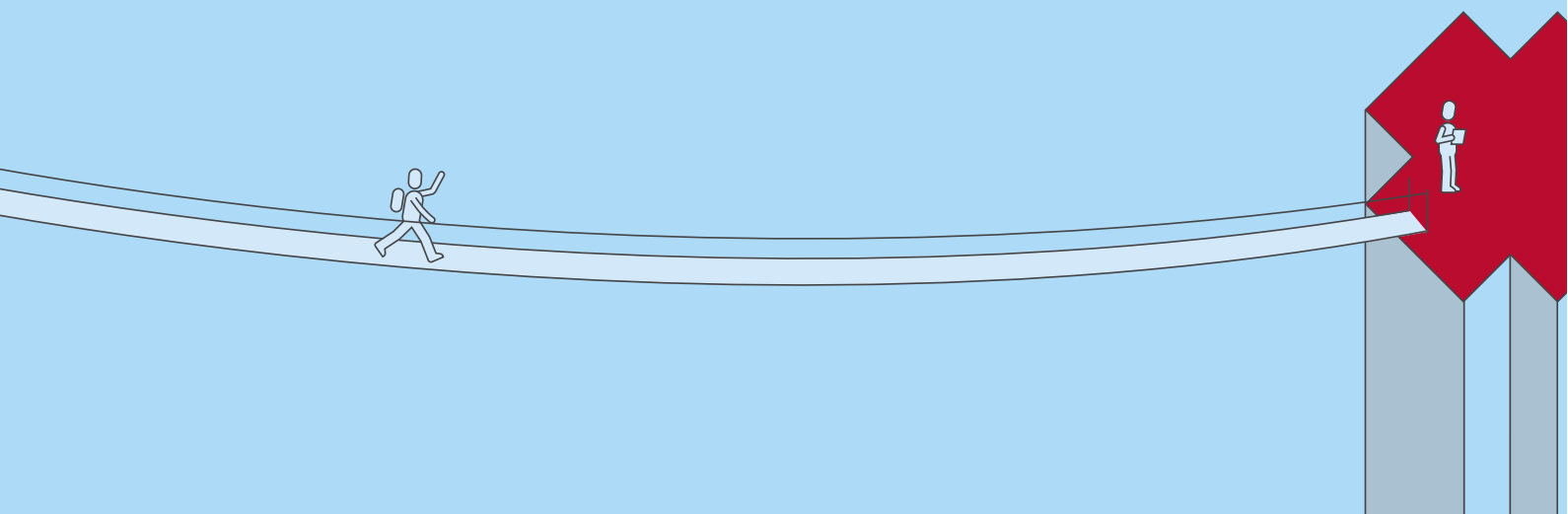
In 2021, VIVE^[3] conducted a comparative analysis of the organisation of the social field in Norway, Sweden and Denmark. The analysis was based on six themes to describe how the social area in the three countries is organised legislatively, including descriptions of authority, operational and financing responsibilities. The analysis also focused on specialisation and professional management.

The mapping of complex welfare services builds on VIVE's results from 2021 and contributes with increased knowledge about how the Nordic countries meet the need for coordination of complex social efforts. In addition, the mapping presents an overview based on desk research of concrete proposals for Nordic efforts and the basis for cross-sectoral initiatives that coordinate efforts from different sectors via desk research.

The mapping indicates that the Nordic countries – despite differences in legislation, organisation, financing and governance models – face a very similar set of challenges. This underlines the need for common Nordic perspectives and innovative approaches. In this context, the network constitutes a strategic platform where complex issues can be addressed across sectors and national borders.

The mapping also aims to arouse interest among researchers who can investigate why the system challenges are difficult to solve and what can be done to get closer to a more functioning system.

3. VIVE (2021). *Det specialiserede socialområde i de nordiske lande – komparativ analyse af områdets organisering i Danmark, Norge og Sverige*. VIVE – Det Nationale Forsknings- og Analysecenter for Velfærd.



5. Theoretical framework and a systemic approach

The network met in October 2023 in Reykjavik to initiate the mapping of complex welfare services, including discussions of the theoretical and methodological approaches under advice from director Morten Hulvej Rod from the Danish National Institute of Public Health.

It should be noted that the network has not conducted research with the mapping but has sought to focus on some systemic errors and thereby arouse interest among researchers and practitioners in the field. However, the network and the working group have tried to be as thorough in the theoretical and methodological setup as possible.

The Ecology of Human Development

The mapping is inspired of Bronfenbrenner's developmental ecological model, which addresses multiple system levels, and based on that the mapping has divided the Nordic welfare models into four system levels with a view to examining how the systems function as a whole:

- The micro level (individual level) includes the users and their networks and families.
- The meso level (service level) includes the various sectors' implementing companies, institutions or offers that deliver the welfare services to the users.
- The exo level (authority level) includes the municipal actors who exercise authority and make decisions about the welfare services - both the municipal management and the employees who prioritise and make decisions.
- The macro level (national level) includes the state administration of the areas, including legislative frameworks.

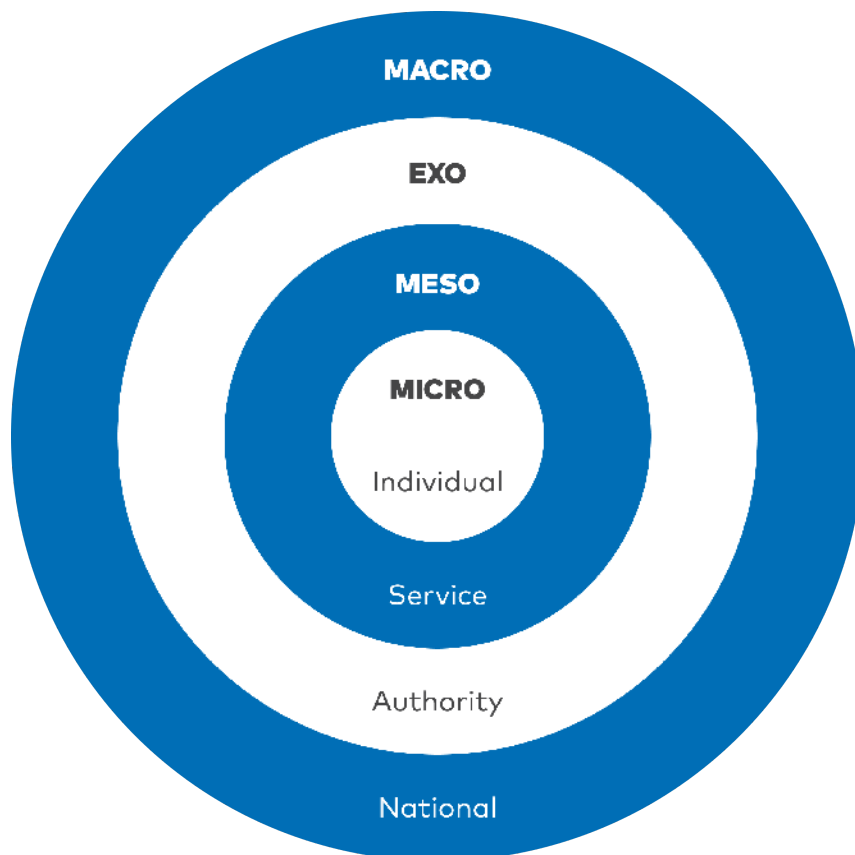


Figure 1 illustrates the four system levels with the microsystem – and thus the citizen – at the centre.

Operationalisation in hypotheses

As part of the operationalisation of the four system levels, the microsystem was described in exemplifying cases from each country, focusing on the transition from youth to adulthood. This formed the basis for the formulation of the hypotheses at the three other system levels:

- Overall hypothesis: People in need of cross-sectoral and coordinated welfare services slip through the cracks – how is this expressed at the three system levels and in the three identified challenges?
- Hypothesis at meso level: There is a lack of local leadership and cooperation in prioritising and organising holistic services across sectors.
- Hypothesis at exo level: Municipalities have different prerequisites for implementing national guidelines.
- Hypothesis at macro level: There is a lack of incentive structures for cooperation between sectors at the national level.

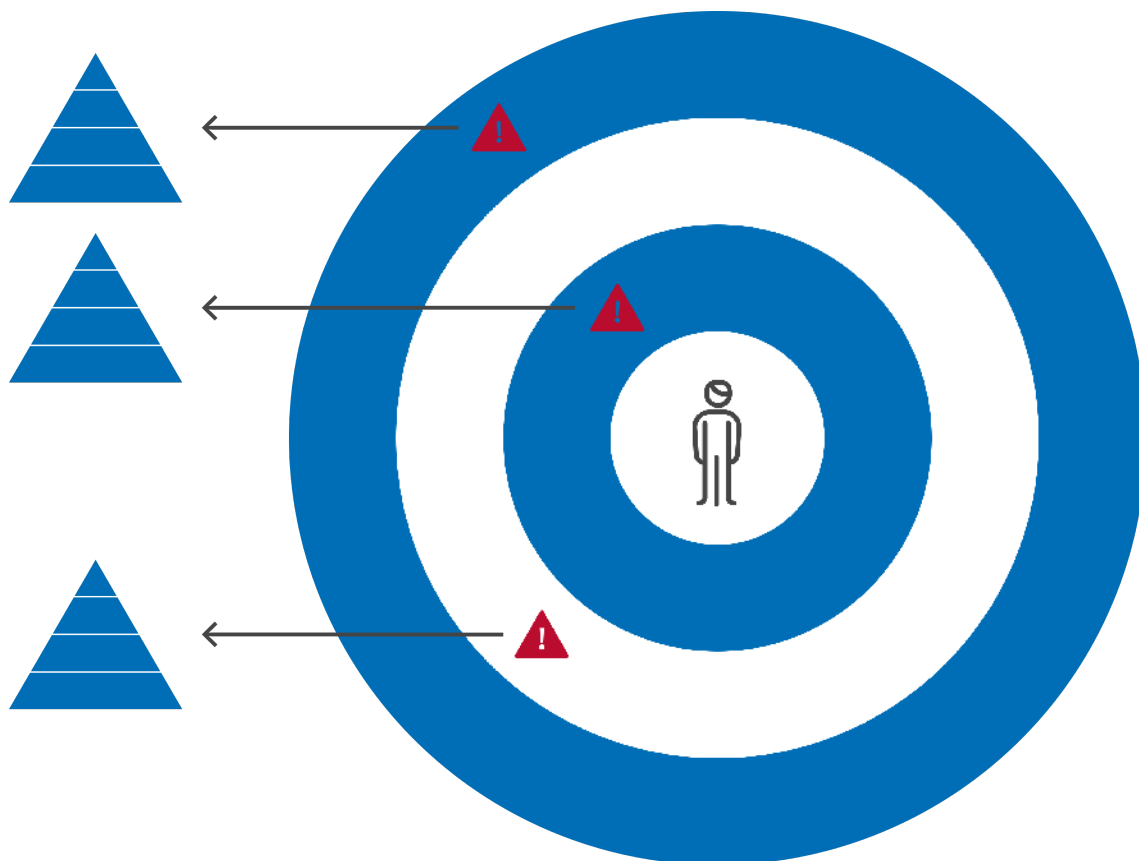
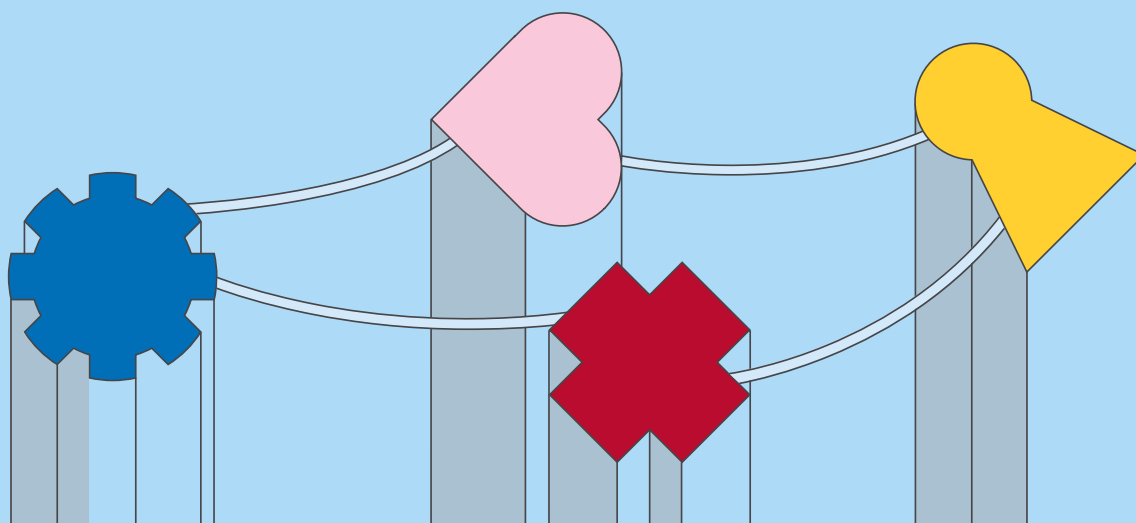


Figure 2 illustrates that a challenge has been identified at each system level.



6. Methodological approach and procedure

Based on the four system levels, the network has investigated the root causes of the identified challenges, with a particular focus on why coordinating complex welfare services across sectors remains so challenging.

Examination of micro, meso and exo levels

A selection of case municipalities was examined in more detail through a series of workshops at the micro, meso and exo levels. The purpose was to shed light on how the generic problems are expressed in practice and how the municipalities attempt to address them through organisation, cooperation and prioritisation.

During the autumn of 2024, workshops were conducted in Norway, Sweden, and Denmark. Greenland, Iceland, the Faroe Islands, and the Åland Islands were unable to allocate resources to host workshops. Instead, their perspectives were incorporated through a validation process, where they contributed input to the findings, as described below.

Case selection and workshop participants

Norway, Sweden, and Denmark each selected one municipality based on a set of criteria, including population size, socioeconomics and geographical accessibility. To ensure comparability, municipalities at extremes of these criteria (e.g. the smallest or largest in the country) were excluded.

The chosen workshop format, focusing on one municipality in each country, had a consequence for representativeness. The network attempted to take this into account by choosing an "average municipality" as described above. Furthermore, the risk of bias was reduced across countries, since the findings are not based on a single case, but on a pattern of findings from different national contexts.

In each selected municipality, relevant employees, middle managers and top managers were invited to represent the exo level. It was also relevant that several hierarchical levels across the different services/administrations were represented. Additional relevant service providers were invited to represent the meso level. Finally, local user and/or relative representatives were invited to contribute by sharing experiences and insights from users at the micro level.

Structuring the workshop day

The workshop used an iceberg model to explore on the underlying causes of the identified challenges. This methodological approach was decided with the involvement of the National Institute of Public Health in Denmark. The model enabled the challenges to be assessed from four different levels:

- Visible challenges – What is happening? What can we see/observe?
- Practice (working methods, processes, actions, patterns, etc.) – What is the basis for the challenges?
- Rules and structures (policy, organisation, management, etc.) – How are the challenges affected by the organisation's organisation, priorities, economy, rules?
- Mental models and culture (actions, mindsets, culture, etc.) – Which points of view, assumptions, values and mindsets govern the system?

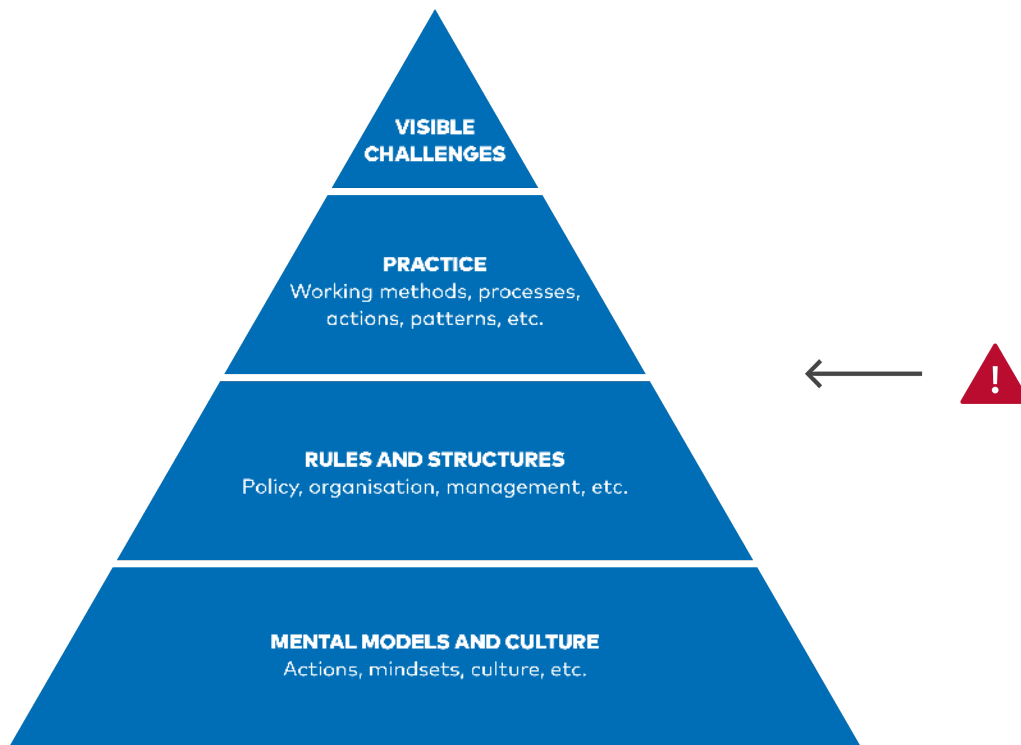


Figure 3 illustrates that the hypotheses are analysed from an iceberg with the aim of examining the root causes of the visible challenge.

Based on experiences from Norway, the first country to host a workshop, an empathy mapping exercise was later introduced to gather more data at a micro level.

National analyses of findings from the workshops

The data collected from the workshops were structured, coded, categorised and analysed using the same procedure in each country. This approach enabled the compilation of findings across the Nordic countries.

Each country began by structuring the data collected from workshops held in the case municipalities. The starting point was the various statements, either something direct quotes from the participants or interpretations of what had been said. The data structuring was based on the same template with fields for notes at each of the three system levels.

Each country then proceeded to code and categorise its own material. To enhance reliability, each employee in the different countries conducted individual coding before comparing their results. The initial codes were based on categories agreed upon by the working group, but there was also an openness to emerging categories, allowing empirical data to possibly show new perspectives.

The material was divided into ten categories based on the coding:

- Unequal power relations
- Alienation
- Lack of collaboration
- Anxiety and fear
- Bureaucracy
- Overload
- Unclear organisation
- Prioritisation
- Unequal conditions
- Positive experiences
- Other

Finally, each country summarised the material using a matrix that reflected what the data revealed within each of the ten themes, across the micro, meso, and exo levels. Each of the 30 fields in the matrix contained one to three meaningful sentences that distilled the statements assigned to the respective codes at each system level. The three national analyses were subsequently validated by the participating case municipalities.

Cross-Nordic compilation and validation of Greenland, Iceland, the Faroe Islands, and the Åland Islands

The working group developed a draft for a cross-Nordic compilation based on the three national analyses. It consisted of two core elements – a shared matrix derived from the three national analyses, and a common Nordic challenge overview at the micro, meso and exo levels.

The draft for the cross-Nordic compilation formed the basis for validation in the other countries of the network (Greenland, Iceland, the Faroe Islands, and the Åland Islands). The purpose was partly to validate the main points in the cross-Nordic compilation, including whether the trends were also recognisable in the Greenlandic, Icelandic, Faroese and Ålandic contexts, and partly to supplement the cross-Nordic compilation with any unique perspectives from the local contexts that should also be included in the mapping.

It turned out that these countries were also facing similar challenges, and that the overall picture was, in other words, highly recognisable.

Network discussion of findings at the micro, meso and exo levels

The discussions at the network meeting in Torshavn on 1 May 2025, prioritised the preliminary findings from the mapping, and a common point was that the communication of the results should focus on the connections between the system levels to understand how they interact. The discussion condensed the preliminary findings at the micro, meso and exo levels and resulted in five headings.

Examination of macro level

In addition to the workshops held in the case municipalities, Norway, Sweden and Denmark have also explored perspectives at the macro level. The coverage was carried out at a meeting with key national stakeholders in Sweden and Denmark, respectively. The meetings focused on the five headings that the network had agreed on and a discussion of the challenges at the macro level.

In Sweden, the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SALAR) and the National Board of Health and Welfare participated. In Denmark, Local Government Denmark (KL), Danish Regions, the The Danish Agency for Education and Quality (STUK), the Danish Health Authority, and the Danish Authority of Social Services and Housing participated.

In Norway, several national initiatives have addressed challenges in coordinating complex welfare services. A cross-sectoral collaboration involving ministries and 13 national agencies aims to improve service integration for vulnerable children and youth by building on previous efforts and promoting co-creation with key stakeholders. Regular workshops and collaborative processes ensure ongoing dialogue and shared understanding. Given the well-established structures and shared knowledge, organising additional workshops with the same participants was considered unnecessary. Therefore, the macro level perspectives from Norway in other words stem from discussions in this cross-sectoral collaboration.

Desk research on approaches to holistic welfare services

Norway, Sweden and Denmark conducted desk research to explore how each country has sought to strengthen cross-sectoral cooperation through legislation and other national initiatives. A primary focus was on publications from the period 2020–2025, although earlier materials were also included when relevant. However, the period is extended to include older publications, if there have been important national campaigns or similar launched before 2020.

In the three countries, the search targeted reports and articles with a practice-oriented focus. Specifically, the research was limited to grey literature, which is understood as publications from state actors and authorities, from regional and municipal actors and from interest organisations, etc. Within this framework, it is ensured that the following type of materials were included:

- Knowledge base: Reports from research, evaluations, studies, and relevant literature.
- National guiding documents: Such as white papers, national strategies, and policy reports.
- National development initiatives: Including ongoing or completed reforms, programs, and measures.

Keywords like holistic, coordinated and cohesive efforts, interdisciplinary and cross-professional coordination and process were used in the search. Based on the searches, the most relevant and most interesting publications were selected in relation to the focus of the mapping. A maximum of 30 publications per country was set as the selection limit.

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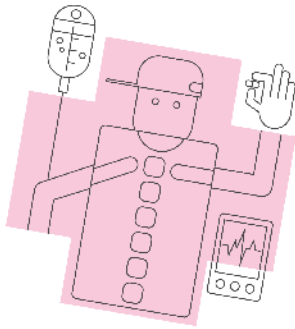
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General description of the Nordic welfare systems

The Nordic Welfare Systems – A Summary

In the Nordic countries, welfare policies are largely implemented by regional and local authorities, often funded through taxation. While each country has its own structure, the systems share common goals: universal access, equality, and shared responsibility between the state, municipalities, and in some cases, the labour market.

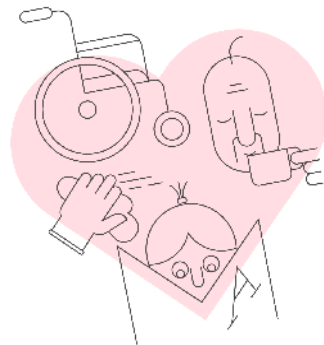


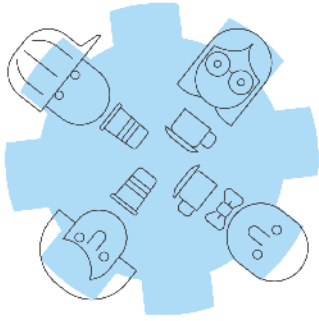
Health and Medical Care

Health services are primarily publicly funded and universally accessible. Regional or local authorities often run hospitals and primary care, while private providers complement the public sector in some countries.

Social Services

Municipalities typically provide core social services such as childcare, eldercare, and support for people with disabilities. National or local governments administer cash benefits like pensions, unemployment benefits, and sickness allowances, with financing models differing across countries.



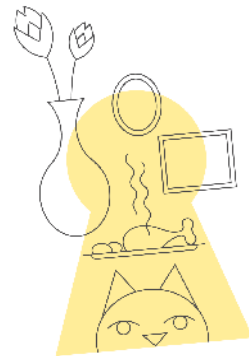


Employment and Income Security

Unemployment schemes combine public responsibility with labour market involvement. In several countries, employers and employees co-finance unemployment insurance and pension funds. Active labour market policies emphasize both support and obligations for the unemployed.

Housing

Housing support varies, but access to secure and affordable housing is seen as part of welfare policy. Benefits may include housing allowances, subsidies, or municipal responsibility for social housing.



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Complex welfare services in Nordic countries

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