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# Green Paper on the Matters of Immigrants and Refugees – Status Assessment and Strategic Options

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# Status Assessment and Strategic Options

This assessment of the status and strategic options, i.e. Green Paper, presents an analysis of a specific issue which the government has decided to examine in more detail, either as a prelude to policy making and/or drafting of a bill of legislation. The status assessment can be placed in an [open consultation portal](#) on the [website of the Icelandic Government](#), where the public and interested parties are invited to participate and present their views on the assessment.

The Status Assessment and Strategic Options contains information about matters of immigrants and refugees and the current situation. Available statistics on the subject have been gathered on the national situation, together with comparative statistics on other countries. The status assessment gives a good overview of the key issues ahead and the main approaches or priorities for resolving them.

In the preparation of a green paper, implementing parties, partners and stakeholders are always invited to participate and share their views and expertise on the issues.

**Fig1 - The Green Paper is part of the government's strategic planning process**



**The Status Assessment and Strategic Options is part of the government's strategic planning process**

Legend:

Stöðumat og valkostir - Status assessment and strategic options

Opíð samráð – Open consultation

Drög að stefnu – Draft policy

Opíð samráð – Open consultation

Stefna – Policy

Following the consultation on the status assessment and strategic options, the results are summarised and a strategy is formulated setting out a future vision for these issues and objectives that mark out the route forward together with priorities. The strategy is usually followed by an action plan. The status assessment and strategic options can also be used as a basis for drafting a bill of legislation.

Once a draft strategy or bill is available, the public and interested parties are normally given the opportunity to present their suggestions and viewpoints in a formal consultation process before a final position is formulated.



# 1. Introduction

The Agreement on the Platform for the Coalition Government of the Independence Party, the Left-Green Movement and the Progressive Party states that a clear and coherent policy shall be formulated in matters concerning people of foreign origin aimed at ensuring that persons who settle in Iceland will have the opportunity to integrate and actively participate in society and the labour market. In addition, the Icelandic parliament Althingi approved, in Parliamentary Resolution No. 29/152, on a National Action Plan for Matters of Immigrants 2022-2025, the drafting of a strategy for immigrant, refugee and multicultural issues, as stated in the first action of the plan. A proposal for the establishment of a steering group to draft a policy on the matters of immigrants and refugees was presented to the Ministerial Committee on Immigrants and Refugees on 23 August 2022 and approved by the government three days later. Subsequently, the Minister of Social Affairs and the Labour Market requested nominations for the steering group.

## 1.0 Framework and organisation of strategic planning

Work on a policy on matters of immigrants and refugees has emphasised in particular broad consultation with different stakeholders and ensuring that as many and as diverse voices as possible are heard. A steering group for drafting the policy was appointed in mid-January 2023 and began work later that same month. The steering group has met regularly for a total of eight times until the publication of the green paper. The members of the steering group and alternates also took part in working groups focusing on specific themes. Five working groups were appointed to deal with society and social issues, family and health issues, education, the labour market and matters of refugees. In order to broaden the knowledge base of the working groups, additional experts were asked to sit in individual working groups, and numerous guests participated in their meetings, depending on the topic. Each working group met six to seven times and a total of 32 meetings were held by the working groups. Added to this was a workshop for co-ordinated reception of refugees, a four-day review visit by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and two focus group discussions (see Appendix 1 for details).

The green paper is based on material from all the meetings that have been listed above, as well as material in the reports and documents submitted during the process.

## 1.1 Defining the subject

The steering group to draft a policy on the matters of immigrants and refugees commenced its work officially in January 2023, and its subject matter is defined principally by the group's mandate (see Appendix 2). The discussion on

immigrants and refugees touches most areas of society, as it is intended to address opportunities for integration and active participation both in society and in the labour market.

The work of the steering group was based on the following definitions of key terms and concepts:

In discussion of immigrants, the definition of Statistics Iceland is used. According to this definition, an immigrant is defined as “a person who was born abroad, has parents who were both born abroad, and grandfathers and grandmothers who were all born abroad.” A second-generation immigrant is “a person who was born in Iceland but whose parents were both born abroad, and grandfathers and grandmothers who were born abroad.” A child of an immigrant who was not born in Iceland but moved to the country as a child is defined as an immigrant.<sup>1</sup> It is therefore important to keep in mind that the definition is not related to citizenship.

The discussion on refugees covers both persons who, according to the Act on Foreign Nationals, No. 80/2016, are defined as applicants for international protection, and those who have received such protection under the same Act. It also includes persons who have come to Iceland at the invitation of the government, so-called quota or resettlement refugees.

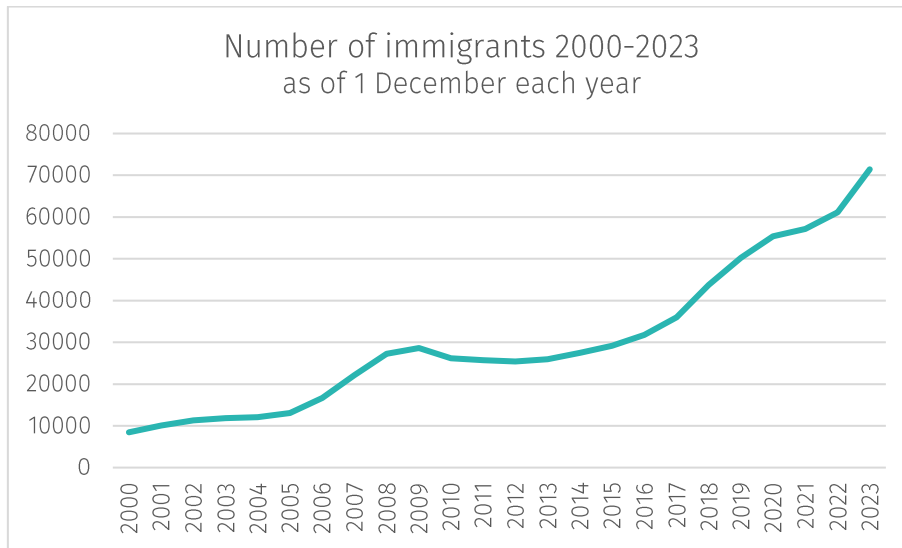
The terms multiculturalism or multicultural society refer to a type of society where people from different cultural areas and of different origins live together in one society. Participation and possibilities for participation are discussed under the term inclusion. Inclusion refers to a pattern of interaction and a framework that aims to mobilise all people to participate and to enable a diverse group of people to participate in decision-making in all areas of society. Inclusion implies respect for diversity and recognition that diversity must be assumed in all services and work.

## 1.2 Occasion of the strategic planning

Immigrants in Iceland form a diverse group of people who have moved to Iceland for various reasons. Changes in the composition of the population began to appear after the agreement on the European Economic Area (EEA) entered into force at the end of 1993. The percentage of immigrants then grew slowly, but since 2012, when immigrants comprised about 8% of the population the percentage has grown fairly steadily and immigrants currently make up 18.4% of the population. The growth in the proportion of immigrants in Iceland is among the most rapid in any OECD country, with the increase attributable in particular to opportunities in the Icelandic labour market. According to forecasts from the Confederation of Icelandic Employers, the labour market’s need for more working hands is not expected to decrease: an estimated 12,000 additional workers will be needed in the next four years, more than half of them from among university

graduates. Therefore, by all indications the number of immigrants in Iceland will continue to increase in coming years.

**Figure 2 - Number of immigrants 2000-2023**

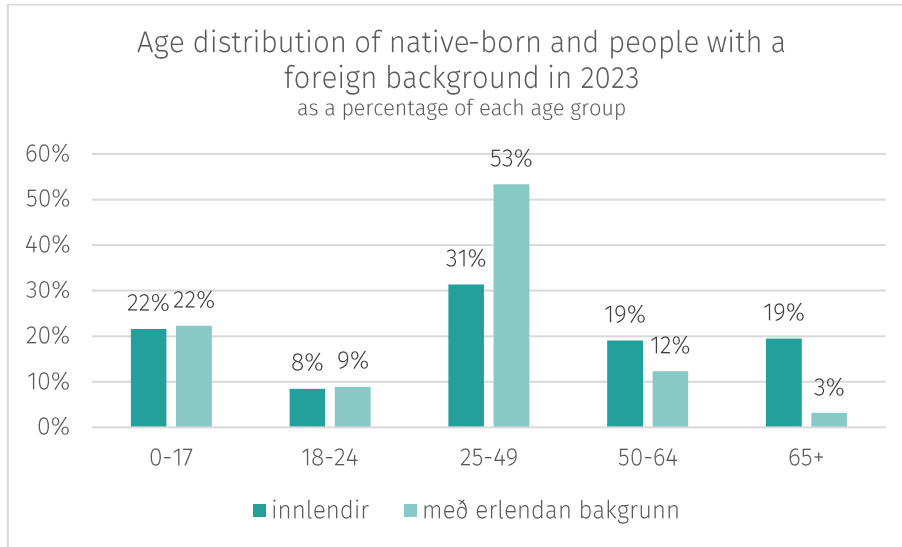


Source: Statistics Iceland 2023.<sup>1</sup>

An examination of the demographic aspects of immigrants in Iceland shows that the age distribution of the group differs from that of the native-born. Most immigrants are between the ages of 25-49, and relatively few are considered senior citizens. There are indications that in the coming years the number of children among immigrants will increase, the number of second-generation immigrants in Iceland will grow especially (more than half of immigrants are of child-bearing age) and that the number of immigrants among the elderly will increase. Immigrants aged 65 and over are currently about 2,700, while over 10,500 people are aged 50-64.

<sup>1</sup> Statistics Iceland (2023) Population by background, sex and age 1996-2023, online news and database on the Statistics Iceland website.

**Fig. 3 - Age distribution of native-born and people with a foreign background in 2023**



Source: Statistics Iceland 2023<sup>2</sup>

Legend:

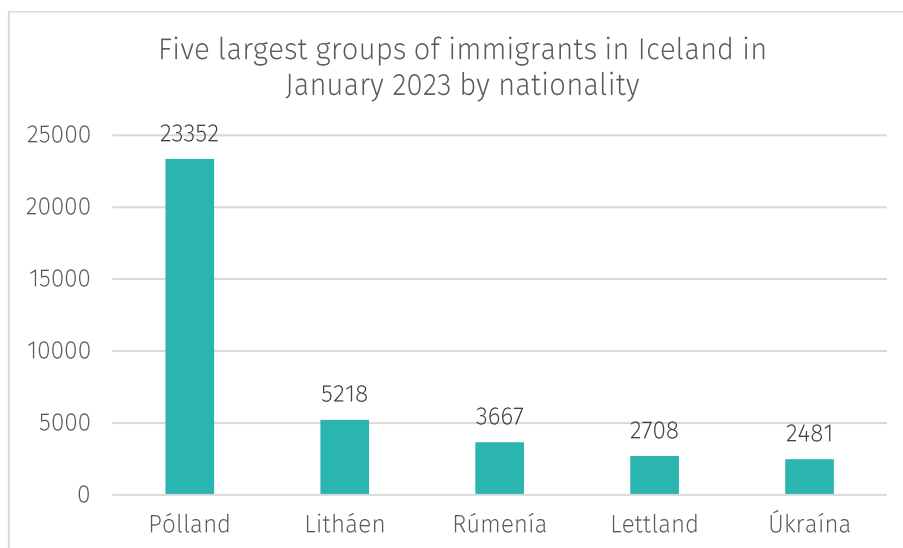
Innlendir – Native-born

Með erlendan bakgrunn – with a foreign background

An examination of the origin of immigrants in Iceland shows that the great majority of them, about 80%, come from countries within the European Economic Area (EEA). One nationality dominates here, as persons with Polish citizenship comprise over one-third of all immigrants in Iceland.

<sup>2</sup> The figure includes first- and second-generation immigrants, persons who have one foreign parent or who were born abroad.

**Fig. 4 - The largest groups of immigrants in Iceland in January 2023 by nationality**



Statistics Iceland 2023<sup>3</sup>

Legend:

Pólland – Poland

Litháen – Lithuania

Rúmenía – Romania

Lettland – Latvia

Úkraína – Ukraine

In many ways, immigrants require special services and a specific approach in providing services, especially during the first years of their residence in Iceland. It is essential to make it clear what is expected of people who move to Iceland, that the necessary support is provided for the first steps in the new country and that the society assumes diversity. Immigrants in Iceland are a human resource, and in order to create an inclusive society, the authorities need to establish a clear policy on the specific matters of immigrants and in so doing promote a successful inclusive society, based on diversity and equal opportunities for participation.

In the past, immigrants were mainly considered as manpower in the labour market. Immigrants were migrant workers who came to this country to work for a shorter period of time. This attitude has changed, however, as it is clear that immigrants have become a permanent part of the country's population and participants in Icelandic society.

<sup>3</sup> Statistics Iceland ([2023](#)) Population by nationality, sex and age on 1 January 1998-2023, database on the Statistics Iceland website.

Up until now, the Icelandic government has not had a specific policy on the issue; however, a National Action Plan for Matters of Immigrants for the years 2022-2025 is still in effect. This replaced an older plan covering the years 2016-2019. At the end of 2012, a specific Act on Immigrant Affairs was adopted, forming the first framework for these issues. However, the Act was primarily formalisation of the framework that had already developed regarding immigration and mainly concerns public administration. In other Nordic countries, the legal framework surrounding immigration is in all cases much more detailed than in Iceland and covers many more aspects of society. In a rapidly growing society where population growth can be attributed mainly to the increased number of immigrants, formulating a comprehensive policy is an urgent task. It is also clear that establishing a new comprehensive policy on matters of immigrants and refugees will require reinforcing of legislation on matters of immigrants.

The policy on matters of immigrants and refugees is intended to be comprehensive and to benefit society as a whole. With a clear vision, the competitiveness of Icelandic society and industry can be increased, while stronger foundations can be laid for a diverse society that bases its values on equality and respect for human rights and Iceland's international obligations. With a clear policy, society will be better equipped to deal with the challenges that accompany increased migration and the mobility of people across borders and continents.

## 2. Consultation

Consultation with stakeholders, especially immigrants themselves, is an important part of the preparation of the Green Paper and the status assessment of matters of immigrants and refugees. This is the first status assessment carried out in this field. This section provides an account of the consultation which took place as part of preparations for this Green Paper.

Following the consultation on the contents of the Green Paper, work will begin on the preparation of a white paper, setting out a first draft of the government's policy on matters of immigrants and refugees. In drafting the policy, the comments received in the government's consultation portal will be taken into account. Open meetings will also be held around the country where immigrants will be especially invited to participate and discuss the policy making from their perspective. Once a draft white paper is available, it will go into open consultation. A proposal for a Parliamentary Resolution on a policy on matters of immigrants and refugees is expected to be submitted to the Althingi in the autumn session of 2024.

### 2.1 Steering group and subgroups linked to specific themes

As previously mentioned, a steering group for the drafting of the policy was appointed in mid-January 2023 and commenced its work later that same month. The Ministerial Committee on Immigrants and Refugees reviewed which representatives would take a seat in the steering group, with the selection later confirmed by the government. The work was led by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour, and the Minister appointed the steering group and its chair as well. The group included representatives of five ministries: in addition to representatives of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour, they came from the Prime Minister's Office, the Ministry of Finance and Economic Affairs, the Ministry of Justice and the Ministry of Education and Children. In addition, there were representatives of the Icelandic Confederation of Labour (ASÍ), the unions BHM (Confederation of University Graduates) and BSRB (Confederation of State and Municipal Employees), Women Of Multicultural Ethnicity Network in Iceland (WOMEN), the School of Humanities of the University of Iceland, the Immigrant Council<sup>4</sup>, the Icelandic Teachers' Union (KÍ), the Icelandic Red Cross (RKÍ), the Confederation of Icelandic Employers and the National Association of Local

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<sup>4</sup> For details of the role of the Immigrant Council see Art. 5 of the Immigrant Affairs Act, No. [116/2012](#).

Authorities. The steering group has met regularly for a total of eight times until the publication of the green paper.

All members of the steering group, including alternates, participated in working groups on specific thematic issues based on the five pillars of the National Action Plan for Matters of Immigrants for the years 2022-2025. The groups dealt with society and social issues, family and health matters, education, the labour market and matters of refugees. Health issues are not one of the pillars of the above-mentioned National Action Plan, but it was the opinion of the ministry that it was important to discuss these matters in the strategic planning. A few additional members were added to the working groups to broaden their knowledge base. The working groups on labour issues and refugees were joined by representatives from the Directorate of Labour, and the latter group by a representative of the social services of Akureyri. The working group on family and health issues was increased by three representatives from the Ministry of Health, Árborg municipality social services and Icelandic Church Aid. In addition, a large number of guests attended the meetings of individual working groups, including persons from preschools, compulsory and upper secondary schools, ENIC/NARIC (European Network of Information Centres/National Academic Recognition Information Centres which carries out academic evaluation of foreign studies for institutions), the Housing and Construction Authority (HMS), the Ministry of Infrastructure, the National University Hospital, the Suðurnes Commissioner of Police, Mímir Continuing Education Centre, the Nordic Welfare Centre, the OECD, the National Broadcasting Service (RÚV), private experts in the field of psychology and children's issues, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration and VIRK Vocational Rehabilitation Fund, as well as experts from the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour in the fields of adult education, matters of persons with disabilities and labour market programmes. Each working group met six to seven times and a total of 32 meetings were held by the working groups.

## 2.2 Focus Groups

To ensure the involvement of immigrants themselves in the status assessment, two focus group discussions were held. The goal of these meetings was to obtain the views of immigrants on the support needed when people move to Iceland and to gain a better idea of where there are opportunities for improvement in the reception of and services for immigrants from their perspective. Two groups participated in such focus groups. One of them were the Ambassadors of Residents of Foreign Origin, who work on behalf of the City of Reykjavík. It is the task of these people to bridge the gap between different nationalities and cultures in the city, and they advise the community service centre in Breiðholt on services for immigrants in the district. There were five participants in that focus group. The other focus group participants were from the seven-person English-Speaking Council of the municipality Mýrdalshreppur. The council was specifically established to increase the influence of immigrants on management of the



municipality and to encourage immigrants to participate in committee work and policy making.

## 2.3 Involvement of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)

The Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour decided at the beginning of the policy work to co-operate with the Organization for Economic Development, OECD, in order to reinforce the professionalism of the strategic planning process as a whole and include external perspectives. Throughout the process, OECD experts have provided advice and gathered information that will be used in this Green Paper concerning the status of immigrants and refugees in Icelandic society. An analysis was made from the OECD database, "*Settling in*", which shed light on Iceland's position in comparison to other OECD countries in basic aspects of society and the labour market. The comparison was presented to both the steering group of the project and the subgroup on labour issues in the spring months of 2023.<sup>5</sup>

On 5-8 June 2023, OECD experts visited Iceland to meet stakeholders, gather information and have a conversation about challenges and successes in the inclusion of immigrants and their participation in Icelandic society. That visit played a key role in the policy work, and the OECD is expected to publish a country review report on immigration in Iceland in the spring months of 2024. The report will make an important contribution to consultation on a white paper laying out a draft policy for Iceland.

## 2.4 Other consultation

The consultation also included, firstly a workshop on co-ordinated reception of refugees, in which representatives of eleven municipalities, the Directorate of Labour and the Red Cross participated. Secondly, consultation with the Immigrant Council was increased: a draft of the Green Paper was sent to the Council, which has a statutory advisory role to the Minister of Social Affairs and Labour Market on immigration.

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<sup>5</sup>*Settling in 2023* – Indicators of Immigrant Integration, OECD and EU.

## 3. Status assessment

The status assessment of this Green Paper is mainly based on information obtained during the consultation process and supporting data, in particular, statistical data from Statistics Iceland. In addition, during the assessment consideration was given to the work of the working groups and steering group concerning refugee children, adult education and people with disabilities.

### 3.1 Development of financial appropriations

The chart below shows the actual expenditures from 2019 to 2022 according to the national accounts, together with the 2023 budget estimate. The Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour has several expenditure items for costs related to immigrants and refugees. Changes were made to these expenditure items with the reorganisation of the ministries at the end of 2021. Services for applicants for international protection were moved to the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour from the Ministry of Justice and reimbursements in connection with Art. 15 of the Children's Act moved to the Ministry of Education and Children. At the same time, adult education,<sup>6</sup> which includes the Icelandic language courses of education funds, was transferred to the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour. Changes were also made in April 2023, when the Multicultural Information Centre was merged with the Directorate of Labour.

Various tasks in connection with refugees, which follow the approval of an application for international protection, are expensed under the item "Immigrants and reception of refugees". These include costs arising from contracts with local authorities for the co-ordinated reception of refugees, costs for activity resources, job search assistance, Icelandic instruction and related work.

Reimbursements of municipalities' fees in connection with Art. 15 of the Act on Social Services of Local Authorities and Art. 15 of the Children's Act are made as provided for in the relevant regulations.

The chart shows the amounts up to and including 2021 in connection with applicants for international protection, when the entire area was the responsibility of the Ministry of Justice. Since 2022, the expenditure in connection with applicants for international protection has been divided into two parts: firstly, the legal processing remains under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of

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<sup>6</sup> Adult education is defined as any type of education, resource or counselling aimed at meeting the needs of people with limited formal education. See further in the Act on Adult Education, No. 27/2010.

Justice and, secondly, services to applicants are the responsibility of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour.

Icelandic courses for immigrants paid for from educational funds were, as previously stated, the responsibility of the [former] Ministry of Education, Science and Culture. Preparation of courses and their administration is paid from the National Treasury while participants pay a course fee.

**Table 1 - Development of actual costs in ISK millions in the period 2019 to 2022 and estimates for 2023**

	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Icelandic language instruction paid for from educational funds	158.9	168.1	300.8	95.9	310
Reimbursement under Art. 15 of the Children's Act.	60.1	49.1	77.9	172.2	62.4
Reimbursement under Art. 15 of the Act on Social Services of Local Authorities, No.	84.9	1,499.1	1,314.4	1,777.6	790.4
Applicants for international protection until the end of 2021	3,299.8	3,407.8	3,248.8		
Services for applicants for international protection				4,743.7	3,190
Processing of applicants for international protection				3,241.4	1,448
Immigrant Council and reception of refugees	629.3	244.9	420.4	1,127.9	1,335.3
Multicultural Information Centre*	55.5	66.3	93.1	201.1	127.7
<b>Total</b>	<b>4,288.5</b>	<b>5,435.3</b>	<b>5,455.4</b>	<b>11,359.8</b>	<b>7,263.8</b>

\*Funding transferred with projects to Directorate of Labour from 1 April 2023.  
All amounts in the table are at current price levels.

## 3.2 Status of immigrants in Iceland

As previously explained, the work presented here in the status report has been carried out by the steering group appointed to draft a policy on matters of immigrants and refugees, together with working groups. The analysis of immigrants' status has been based on five main pillars: society, family and health issues, education, the labour market and refugees. The following chapters discuss the situation of immigrants based on these five main pillars.

### 3.3 Society

As stated in the rationale for strategic planning on immigrant and refugee affairs, major changes have occurred in the absolute and relative numbers of immigrants in Iceland in a relatively short period of time. The great majority of all immigrants live in the southwestern part of the country, as 79% of all immigrants live in the capital area and the Suðurnes peninsula. The proportion of immigrants is highest in Suðurnes, 28% of residents, followed by the West Fjords, where immigrants are 23.3% of residents.<sup>7</sup> In addition to these major concentrations, the proportion of immigrants in the local population can be very high in small and medium-sized municipalities, as is the case in Mýrdalshreppur, Bolungarvík and Grundarfjörður, to name a few examples. Of the larger municipalities, it is the town of Reykjanesbær where the proportion of immigrants in the population is highest. That municipality stands out considerably from other larger municipalities in this respect.

Rapid societal changes are accompanied by various challenges for the group in question as well as for society as a whole. Although the number of immigrants is growing rapidly in Iceland, there are relatively few studies that focus specifically on the inclusion of immigrants in society. Many studies are in the early stages and few large and long-term studies have been conducted. Specific funding for research in the field of immigration is limited and is divided between general projects and research, as is the case with the Development Fund for Immigrant Issues. Dissemination of research has been lacking, limiting the ability of those who work on immigration matters on a daily basis to be able to take advantage of research results; the gap there clearly needs to be bridged. There are neither regular consultations in the field of immigration nor a targeted collection of research results, which could provide a forum for bridging the gap between services for immigrants and research results.

Public attitudes towards immigrants and multicultural society have been rather positive. This is evident, among other things, in a survey by the Social Science Research Institute<sup>8</sup> from 2019 comparing data from the years 2019 and 2017. The attitudes were overwhelmingly positive when people were asked about the economic impact of immigrants and whether immigrants enrich the country's culture. Indications can be seen of a change in attitudes when questions concerned the number of immigrants and whether the number of immigrants should be reduced, kept the same or increased. A higher percentage wanted an unchanged situation in 2019 than in 2017, i.e. the percentage increased from 30% to 37%. Similarly, the percentage of those who wanted to see an increase in

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<sup>7</sup> Statistics Iceland, Percentage of immigrants 2022 by geographical area, online news see: <https://www.hagstofa.is/utgafur/frettasafn/mannfjoldi/mannfjoldi-efrir-bakgrunni-2022/>

<sup>8</sup> Social Science Research Institute, University of Iceland (2019), Survey of Public Attitudes towards Immigrants and Multicultural Society. Research study for the Ministry of Welfare.

immigrants dropped from 38% to 31%. Changing attitudes can have a significant impact on the daily life of immigrants and their opportunities for equal participation in society. The recent television program of the National Broadcasting Service (RÚV), *Mannflóran*,<sup>9</sup> examined the manifestations of such prejudices encountered by young people of foreign origin in Iceland. Both the Directorate of Equality<sup>10</sup> and the emergency helpline 112.is<sup>11</sup> have also recently carried out special awareness-raising on prejudice, including micro-aggression which is one of the manifestations of changing attitudes. The first results available from Margrét Valdimarsdóttir's unpublished study on victims of violence and connections with immigrant background show that youth from immigrant backgrounds are more likely than youth with no immigrant background to be victims of violence rooted in prejudice. The probability increases the more homogeneous is the community in which the youth live. A change in attitudes is reflected in challenges in various areas, including in the labour market (see Section 3.6.6), and with regard to poverty and loneliness among immigrants (see Sections 3.4.1 and 3.4.5). In light of changing attitudes, therefore, it is critical to repeat the previous study by the Social Science Research Institute to get confirmation of whether there has been any further change.

Since 2018, the National Commissioner of Police has kept a special register of offences where there is suspicion of hate speech. Since that time, several such cases have arisen every year based on prejudice with regard to origin, religion or sexual orientation. A total of nine cases were registered in 2018, and eighteen cases a year later. In 2020 there were six, twenty-three in 2021 and eighteen cases had been registered by the third quarter of 2022 according to the report of the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI)<sup>12</sup> on the situation in Iceland.

### 3.3.1 Information on rights and obligations

When they take up residence in Iceland, it is important for immigrants to be able to obtain information about their rights and obligations simply and effectively. Various public bodies offer such information in foreign languages, e.g. [Registers Iceland](#), the [Directorate of Labour](#) (tasks previously under the responsibility of

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<sup>9</sup> The programmes can be accessed on [RÚV's](#) website.

<sup>10</sup> See the campaign by the Directorate of Equality, [Meinlaust \(Harmless\)](#), focusing on women of foreign origin.

<sup>11</sup> See the discussion on the 112.is website, [Við erum öll með fordóma \(We all have prejudices\)](#).

<sup>12</sup> The European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) (2023) ECRI Report on Iceland (sixth monitoring cycle).

the Multicultural Information Centre)<sup>13</sup> and [the Directorate of Immigration](#). [The Directorate of Equality](#) has also published special material intended for immigrants that covers people's rights and the law in Iceland when it comes to close relationships. A special counselling office for immigrants, New in Iceland, was established in 2022. Originally an independent project under the auspices of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour, it was subsequently moved to the Multicultural Information Centre and is now under the auspices of the Directorate of Labour. The Directorate of Labour has also operated a special employment service for immigrants and refugees. The [Landneminn \(The Settler\)](#) website offers community education videos in seven languages about living in Iceland, which are intended for all immigrants and are available free of charge.

Despite these projects, information about rights and obligations does not seem to reach the majority of the target group it is aimed at. Immigrants themselves mention that it is both complicated and time-consuming to obtain the necessary information. Many are therefore too dependent on information either from fellow countrymen or employers, which can in some cases increase the likelihood of misinterpretation of information or that important information is not received. This in turn can affect the person's legal status in Iceland, for example, regarding the economic and social rights related to registration of legal domicile. It is also important to bear in mind that information dissemination in Icelandic society relies heavily on written information and electronic information systems. This makes it very difficult for immigrants who cannot read and write in their own language to obtain information. The same applies to those groups that are not very computer literate.

Proficiency in Icelandic is often the key to being able to obtain information, and therefore Icelandic language skills and access to and possibilities for learning Icelandic are of great importance to immigrants in Iceland. That subject is discussed separately in the section on education.

### 3.3.2 Housing market situation

One of the greatest challenges for Icelandic society in the coming years will be to ensure an increased supply of apartments to promote stability in the housing market. Statistics Iceland's population forecasts play a key role in the planning of the state and municipalities for the development of apartments. A recent report assessing housing needs that Intellecton prepared for the Housing and Construction Authority<sup>14</sup> shows that through the years there have been major

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<sup>13</sup> The Multicultural Information Centre and the Directorate of Labour were merged on 1 April 2023 under the name of the latter institution.

<sup>14</sup>Housing and Construction Authority (2023) Assessment of housing needs. Online version.

fluctuations in population development in Iceland.<sup>15</sup> In very recent years the strong increase in population and large fluctuations in immigration and emigration have made it difficult to predict population trends. The report points out the considerable difference between population forecasts and actual numbers, and that more people have actually migrated to Iceland than forecasts anticipated. Part of this can be attributed to an expanding labour market (see Section 3.6) and the subsequent increase in the number of immigrants (see figures in Section 2.1). Although it is uncertain whether population growth in Iceland will continue in the same manner as in recent years, in the next few years the population can be expected to increase by at least 5,000-6,000 each year. The increase has clearly resulted in pressure on the Icelandic housing market. If the trend continues, the population of Iceland will reach over 400,000 by the end of 2023 or the beginning of 2024<sup>16</sup>.

When assessing future housing needs, both the development of the population and the number of persons per household are essential factors. Based on the increase in population in the past year, more than 4,500 apartments would have had to be built to meet the increased need for housing, assuming that the family size had been in line with the average of previous years. The reality, on the other hand, was that more than 1,600 fewer apartments were built than were needed, which could be called the unmet housing need of that year. The average number of persons per household can also be expected to continue to decrease in Iceland as in other countries,<sup>17</sup> with the probable increased impact on housing needs. The government, therefore, must formulate a clear policy on how to deal with the large increase in the population in Iceland today and for the foreseeable future, while at the same time facing a large-scale shortage of apartments. That work has begun, and a draft housing policy for the next fifteen years, together with a five-year action plan, has already been made public. In order for the government's planning for residential development to achieve its goal of meeting the need and increasing balance on the housing market, a more detailed scenario analysis of housing needs has to be prepared, based on the five- and ten-year development of the population, including the expected increase in the number of immigrants. Housing is a basic need and immigrants are more likely than native-born to be on the rental market. A persistent lack of housing can therefore affect the possibility of immigrants to gain a foothold in this country, as discussed in Section 3.4.1.

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<sup>15</sup>Housing and Construction Authority (2023) Assessment of housing needs. Online version.

<sup>16</sup>Housing and Construction Authority (2023) Assessment of housing needs. Online version.

<sup>17</sup> Housing Financing Fund (2019). Housing needs 2019-2040. Housing Division of the Housing Financing Fund, Reykjavík.

### 3.3.3 Consultation with immigrants

In general, the voice of immigrants in Icelandic society could not be described as strong, although this is not always the case. Most commonly the decisions on specific issues relating to services for immigrants and refugees are made without the involvement of those to whom the service is directed. There are naturally exceptions to this, such as [the Immigrant Council](#), [the Multicultural Council of the City of Reykjavík](#), [the English-Speaking Council of Mýrdalshreppur](#) and the Multicultural Council of Hornarfjörður, to name a few. The activities of the Immigrant Council are provided for by law, as laid down in Art. 4 of the Act on Foreign Nationals, No. [116/2012](#). The council advises the Minister of Social Affairs and the Labour Market on matters of immigrants. At the local government level, consultation with immigrants has not been enshrined in law in the same way as, for example, consultation on issues concerning senior citizens through the Joint Committee on the Affairs of the Elderly, provided for in Act No. [125/1999](#). However, that does not mean that local authorities generally do not have any consultation with immigrants. Many local authorities have regular events to discuss immigrant matters<sup>18</sup> or an occasional event to bring people of different origins together, such as cultural festivals. But the ideology of an inclusive society is about always taking into account the needs of different groups, and therefore the Immigrant Council should be considered as important to the public administration as those for elders and youth.

Various non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have actively participated in the debate on immigrant and refugee issues. These include organisations such as Icelandic Church Aid, the Salvation Army, the Red Cross, Réttur barna á flóttu (the Rights of Children on the Move), the humanitarian aid organisation Solaris and the National Association of Intellectual Disabilities (Þroskahjálþ). Few immigrant organisations have been active in the debate, although mention could be made of organisations such as [Women Of Multicultural Ethnicity Network in Iceland \(WOMEN\)](#), the organisations [Móðurmál \(Mother tongue\)](#) and [Hennar rödd \(Her voice\)](#), all of which are strong advocates for immigrants in this country and support diverse work and discussion. However, there is a certain gender bias in discussion of immigrant issues, as the strong advocates mentioned here deal with the specific issues of children, on the one hand, and immigrant women, on the other hand, while little is discussed about the status of immigrants of other genders. General discussion about the situation of male immigrants has mainly concerned the labour market, and in particular, alleged violations in the labour market, which are discussed in more detail in the section on the labour market.

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<sup>18</sup> Here, for example, it can be mentioned that the City of Reykjavík maintains an extensive dialogue with immigrants in the city. A multicultural forum has been regularly held, the project “Ambassadors of Residents of Foreign Origin” is managed from Breiðholt, and the City of Reykjavík provides a consultation forum for religious and life-stance associations, which includes matters of immigrants.



It could also be mentioned that public debate concerning refugees is much greater than the general discussion on immigrants, even though the latter group is significantly more numerous than the former. Political participation

### 3.3.4 Political participation

The right to vote, and thereby the opportunity to have a direct influence on who directs the society, is a basic right in a democracy. Only those immigrants who have acquired Icelandic citizenship have the right to vote in parliamentary elections,<sup>19</sup> presidential elections and referendums. In municipal elections, Nordic citizens have the right to vote if their domicile is registered in the municipality, and other foreign citizens if they have had a continuous domicile in Iceland for at least three years prior to election day. The same provisions apply to eligibility to stand for election and therefore possible candidature for a seat in the Althingi or local government.<sup>20</sup> Even among those entitled to vote the voter turnout of immigrants is far below the general level, both in elections to the Althingi and to local government. Immigrants are, however, more likely to turn up at the polling station in local elections, and women are generally more likely to participate than men. The University of Akureyri conducted a study on the electoral participation of immigrants in Iceland<sup>21</sup> in the 2017 parliamentary elections and 2018 local government elections. It indicated that voter turnout among immigrants is related both to their assessment of their own Icelandic language skills, as increased language skills increase the likelihood of participation, and to length of residence, as longer residence increases the likelihood of participation.

In the 2021 general election, the voter turnout of immigrants with voting rights was 42% compared to 83% among persons with no foreign background. The participation of second-generation immigrants was slightly higher than that of the first generation, 49.2%. As is generally true for all voter groups, women's voter turnout is higher than men's; the difference between women's and men's participation among immigrants, however, is greater than among other voter groups, at 7.8%. No first- or second-generation immigrant was elected as a Member of Parliament in the 2021 parliamentary elections. Immigrants made up 3.5% of candidates and 0.2% of candidates were second-generation immigrants.

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<sup>19</sup> The exception to this, however, is that Danish citizens who resided in Iceland on 6 March 1946 or sometime during the last 10 years before that time have the right to vote in parliamentary elections according to Act No. 85/1946.

<sup>20</sup> See further the provisions on the right to vote and to stand for election in the Elections Act, No. [112/2021](#).

<sup>21</sup> Grétar Þór Eypórssón (2019) University of Akureyri: [Samfélag án aðgreiningar? \(An inclusive society?\) Kosningabátttaka innflytjenda á Íslandi 2017 og 2018 \(Electoral participation of immigrants in Iceland 2017 and 2018\)](#).

Immigrants comprise 3.2% of alternate MPs and 1.6% of them are second-generation immigrants.<sup>22</sup>

In 2022 local elections, the voter turnout of immigrants was again generally low, as was the case four years earlier. Many more immigrants have the right to vote in local elections than in parliamentary elections.<sup>23</sup> Overall voter turnout in the last local government elections was 62.8%, but among first-generation immigrants it was 18.6% and 32.3% among second-generation immigrants. Participation was higher in the case of people with one foreign parent, 54.8% for those born in Iceland who had one foreign parent, compared to 45.4% among the same group born abroad. By comparison, the voter turnout of those who had no foreign background was 71%. Immigrants were 4.3% of candidates running for local government and they are 1.5% of elected representatives. Second-generation immigrants comprised 0.1% of the candidates, and none of them were elected.<sup>24</sup>

It is therefore evident that immigrants are less likely than other residents to take an active part in elections, and there are many indications that they are generally less likely to participate in the work of political parties than non-immigrants. Electoral participation in Iceland has historically been high compared to participation in neighbouring countries. It is therefore important to look at the correlation between declining voter turnout, the number of immigrants enjoying the right to vote, and the low voter turnout of immigrants.

### 3.3.5 Visibility of immigrants in the media

Changes have occurred in recent years in the visibility of immigrants on the National Broadcasting Service (RÚV). The changes have taken place quite rapidly and are strongly correlated with RÚV's policy in this regard. RÚV is a public-service medium that is owned by the nation which communicates news, knowledge, culture and art on radio, television and on the web. This means that RÚV has obligations<sup>25</sup> towards all social groups, including immigrants. RÚV has a formal, democratic role which, among other things, obliges the organisation to present the complexity of life in Iceland, attitudes and living conditions in the country. In its radio and television programming, RÚV must ensure that all

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<sup>22</sup> Statistics Iceland (2022) [Statistics - Parliamentary elections 25 September 2021](#), online version

<sup>23</sup> Nordic citizens acquire the right to vote and to stand for election when they register their residence in a municipality. Other foreign nationals acquire the right to vote and the right to stand for election after three years of continuous residence in Iceland, if other conditions for the right to vote are met, cf. Art.4 of the Election Act, No [112/2021](#).

<sup>24</sup> Statistics Iceland (2023) Hagtíðindi - Local government elections 14 May 2022, [online publication](#) of 4 October 2023.

<sup>25</sup> See further: Act on the Icelandic National Broadcasting Service, a public-service medium, No. [23/2013](#).

content is in Icelandic or with Icelandic subtitles. Opportunities to share content in other languages have therefore mainly been limited to the web, where news is available in both English and Polish, as well as an English podcast and the Polish podcast Wyspa. News in simple language can be useful to immigrants, especially those who are learning the language, even though the website was not designed specifically with immigrants in mind. All of RÚV's Icelandic content can be viewed with subtitles based on Google's translation engine. It is not clear how common knowledge is among immigrants of these two options. Traffic on RÚV's website shows strong interest in RÚV's foreign pages, but data has not been gathered on how large a proportion of the readers of news in English and Polish are, on the one hand, in Iceland and, on the other, abroad.

As a public-service medium, RÚV has a broader role than other media, but also an opportunity to lead the way. According to RÚV's senior management, immigrants and people with diverse cultural backgrounds have become more visible in the medium's coverage in recent years, both as interviewees and as programme producers. The number of instances in which immigrants discuss issues not related to their status as immigrants is increasing, and the importance of listeners and viewers getting used to Icelandic spoken with a foreign accent should be pointed out.

As previously mentioned, the discussion of refugee issues is more visible in the media than the discussion of immigrant issues in general. However, the number of news items and programmes about immigration has increased, and the topics have reflected current social questions. Recent examples of this from television include the programmes *Mannflóran*, which focused on immigrants in Iceland and people of foreign origin from various perspectives, and *Móðurmál*, which featured children and young people whose mother tongue is not Icelandic and which have received the Young People's Icelandic Award.

The visibility of immigrants in the media can definitely be said to have changed and in a positive direction. However, more time is needed to determine whether this is a permanent change or only temporary. It should be noted that although discussion of the visibility of immigrants in the media in this Green Paper is limited to RÚV, as a public media, this development has also occurred in other media in Iceland, although omitted here due to space limitations. It is important to carry out additional research on the portrayal of immigrants in the media, the attitudes of immigrants towards Icelandic media and their use of them. Most previous studies are decades old.

### 3.4 Family and health

The discussion of family and health deals with support for children and their families and the situation of young immigrants who are neither studying nor active in the labour market. It reviews the situation of the disabled, survivors of violence and the situation of the elderly access to health services is also

examined specifically. To start with, it is important to look at poverty and how it appears among immigrants, since poverty affects all the factors discussed in this section.

### 3.4.1 Poverty among immigrants

Growth in the Icelandic economy has been based significantly on immigrants who move here to work in various jobs. Given the persistent labour shortage, the growth of various industries, especially tourism, would not have been possible without the work of immigrants. The participation rate of immigrants in the labour force in Iceland is generally higher, both than that of native-born and that of immigrants in other Nordic countries.<sup>26</sup> Despite the high employment rate, there are many immigrants living in poverty in this country. The Prime Minister's report, *Poverty and Estimated Social Costs*,<sup>27</sup> states that immigrants, together with single parents, are more likely than other social groups to be below the low-income limit for an extended period (longer than three years). In 2020, there were just over 13,600 immigrants whose income was below the low-income limit; this is around 24% or almost a quarter of all immigrants in the country at that time.<sup>28</sup> This analysis needs to be taken seriously as the situation can have a long-term effect on the situation of immigrants in Iceland. A temporary loss of income is not necessarily a major problem, as people manage to recover over a longer period of time. Chronic poverty is what causes real difficulties. The analysis presented in the aforementioned report, that immigrants live in frequent, deep and often long-lasting poverty is therefore of great concern.

As mentioned in the section on Society, immigrants are in general younger than native-born Icelanders. If young people find themselves trapped in poverty, the likelihood that their children will be poor increases, as the fact is that children of immigrants live in a more vulnerable financial situation than other children. About one-third of the children of immigrants in Iceland live in poverty. Children who grow up in poverty are more likely than other children to end up poor themselves as adults. It is also worth noting that the percentage of low-income persons by region between the years 2000 and 2020 only increases in one region, Suðurnes, where the increase is 1.4%.<sup>29</sup> The possibility of a connection between

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<sup>26</sup> The share of immigrants in the Icelandic labour market is discussed in more detail in the section on the labour market.

<sup>27</sup> Halldór S. Guðmundsson, Herdís Steingrimsdóttir, Kolbeinn H. Stefánsson, Kjartan Ólafsson (2023) *Poverty and Estimated Social Costs* - Prime Minister's report. Prime Minister's Office.

<sup>28</sup> The number of immigrants below the low-income threshold is from the Prime Minister's report on *Poverty and Estimated Social Costs*. The percentage is calculated based on the number of immigrants on 1 January 2021 according to [Statistics Iceland](#).

<sup>29</sup> Halldór S. Guðmundsson, Herdís Steingrimsdóttir, Kolbeinn H. Stefánsson, Kjartan Ólafsson (2023) *Poverty and Estimated Social Costs* - Prime Minister's report. Prime Minister's Office.

the aforementioned frequency of poverty among immigrants in Iceland, and the fact that Suðurnes is the geographical area where immigrants have increased the most and make up the highest percentage of the population (28%) cannot be excluded.<sup>30</sup>

For low-income persons, various types of public support, such as child benefit and housing benefit, are very important. Immigrants in Iceland enjoy the same right to housing benefits as the native-born, and the Housing and Construction Authority (HMS), which handles housing benefit payments, has in recent years witnessed a growing need for information and assistance in languages other than Icelandic. However, it was noted that the increase in granting of international protection in 2022 did not result in an increase in the number of applications by immigrants seeking housing benefit. Immigrants, especially those who have recently arrived in Iceland, are more likely than other groups to be on the rental market. A supply problem in the housing market can lead to an increased number of people living in housing that does not meet the minimum criteria of the Housing Benefit Act, which means that the tenant is not entitled to housing benefit. It has been pointed out that, for example, immigrants who come to the country to work as labourers often live many in one dwelling, pay high rent but are not entitled to housing benefits.

### 3.4.2 Children and their families

Being a parent is a challenge. Raising and supporting children is shaped both by the existing system in the country and no less by traditions and culture, as well as support from relatives, cf. the saying that it takes a whole village to raise a child. Raising children in a new country can therefore involve a double challenge: the work of child-raising, together with the challenge posed by a system, customs and culture different from what the parents themselves are familiar with from their home country. In addition, immigrants usually do not benefit from family support for the care and upbringing of their children.

There are many indications that support for foreign parents raising children in Icelandic society can be improved and their access to information increased. Examples include providing information about children's and youth culture in Iceland, support systems that are available and school and leisure activities. In every society, there are many unwritten rules that govern the upbringing of children. Both the written rules that apply and that appear, e.g. in various laws and regulations, as well as the unwritten ones, which shape relations with children, among children and among children's families, need to be discussed with immigrants to enable them to better understand their children's

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<sup>30</sup> Source: Statistics Iceland, online news of 24. November [2022](#).

environment and what society expects of them as parents. The government and NGOs have improved access to information, and among other things the website [mcc.is](http://mcc.is) has much useful information about children's rights, support systems and the laws and regulations that specifically concern children, including curfews for children or laws on child protection. The school system in Reykjavík has so-called “bridge builders”, whose role is to build bridges between multilingual children and their parents, on the one hand, and employees of the school and leisure services, on the other. Staff working on similar projects as the bridge builders are also found in other municipalities. It should also be noted that the Ministry of Education and Children has entered into an agreement with the NGO *Heimili og skóli* to re-establish parental co-operation for children's well-being, with special focus on parents of foreign origin.<sup>31</sup>

In order to better support children and their families, an act was passed in 2021 on the integration of services for children's well-being,<sup>32</sup> which is intended to ensure that children and their parents have access to appropriate and barrier-free integrated services. As the implementation of this act is currently underway, its impact is not yet clear, but the hope is that it will lead to broader and more efficient support for children and their families, especially for children and families who have little knowledge of the services available to families.

In tandem with education for immigrant parents, cultural literacy and cultural sensitivity among staff who work in services and support for children and families with children needs to be increased. Support for immigrant children must be based on the empowerment of the child and its parents. Parents need to be informed about the various systems, whether in the field of education, welfare or healthcare, to name a few. In some cases, specific support for parenting skills is needed due to different approaches to raising children. It is also inevitable to look at the relationship between economic conditions and the ability of immigrant children to participate in various leisure activities. Due to the fact that a third of immigrant children in Iceland live in poverty, they often lack opportunities to participate in various leisure activities, as participation in such activities is usually costly. Data from local authorities also show that immigrants are less likely to take advantage of leisure and free time grants available for their children than native-born parents. An examination could therefore be made of how parents can be better instructed on how to avail themselves of such grants for their children's participation.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> See [the online news](#) of the Ministry of Education and Children on 11 January 2023.

<sup>32</sup> Act on the Integration of Services in the Interest of Children's Prosperity, No [86/2021](#).

<sup>33</sup> Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour ( [2022](#) ), *Staða og þróun í málefnum innflytjenda – Skýrsla félags- og vinnumarkaðsráðherra* (Status and development of matters of immigrants - Report of the Minister of Social Affairs and the Labour Market).

Participation in sports and leisure activities is important for developing the social skills and self-image of children and adolescents. This applies to both formal and informal activities. In recent decades, organised sports and leisure activities have expanded in Iceland and become a fixture of the environment for a large majority of children in the country. It is important to create opportunities for immigrant children to participate equally with other children in such activities. There are many indications that, for immigrants, participation not only strengthens social skills and self-image, but is an important link in the children's language learning and enhances their Icelandic skills. Many municipalities and sports and youth associations have placed increased emphasis on reaching out to children and families of foreign origin, but much work remains to be done. It is important to continue targeted promotional work, as the participation of immigrants in organised sports and leisure activities is still considerably lower than that of native-born children. The difference is greatest in the case of team sports, and smaller for individual sports and art studies. Even though participation is higher in the latter two categories, the fact is that at least half of immigrant children do not participate in such activities.<sup>34</sup> The causes of this difference and which factors cause poorer participation need to be investigated. It is important that all promotional efforts are suitable for different cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

Social interaction and active participation lay the foundation for an inclusive society. The social interactions of both children and parents need to be the focus right from the beginning. For many immigrants with infants, the maternity leave period can result in considerable isolation, as their network is often weaker than that of persons raised in Iceland. Special consideration needs to be given to parents in this situation, as well as to parents and children who do not benefit from preschool education. Opportunities need to be increased for immigrants who stay at home with their children to use their time to learn Icelandic, and their access to education and information about children's environment in Iceland must be ensured. Research shows that one of the biggest influencing factors in people's life satisfaction and their chances of settling in a new society is the individual's experience of social support and relationships. Lack of such relationships can have negative effects for both parents and their children and increase the risk of anxiety and depression.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour (2022), *Staða og þróun í málefnum innflytjenda – Skýrsla félags- og vinnumarkaðsráðherra* (Status and development of matters of immigrants - Report of the Minister of Social Affairs and the Labour Market). See further in Chapter 3, Specific data extracted from the Survey on Health Behaviour of School-aged Children (HBSC) by the University of Iceland, for the Ministry of Social Affairs and the Labour Market, 2021 on pp. 29-31.

<sup>35</sup> Borsch, A. S., de Montgomery, C. J., Gauffin, K., Eide, K., Heikkilä, E., & Smith Jervelund, S. (2019). Health, education and employment outcomes in young refugees in the Nordic countries: A systematic review. *Scandinavian Journal of Public Health*, 47(7), 735–747.

### 3.4.3 Young immigrants who are neither studying nor working

Young immigrants are more likely than their native-born peers to be neither studying nor active in the labour market. Having a foreign background, i.e. having at least one parent who is an immigrant, also increases the likelihood that a young person will be neither in school nor working. The situation of these young people is closely related to their opportunities for education, which is discussed in more detail in the education section of this report.

When young people find themselves outside of education and work, it can have a long-term impact on their opportunities and job prospects for the future. Being inactive can lead to social isolation, increasing the likelihood that young people will end up both socially and financially impoverished. In addition, social isolation affects well-being and can have a negative impact on young people's mental health. Thus, social connections, family support, language skills in the language of the host community, education and employment are protective factors and enhance the success of young people in the long term.<sup>36</sup>

The labour organisations' research centre Varða has specifically studied young people of foreign origin in this group, referred to as the NEET<sup>37</sup> group. According to the results of that study the NEET group in Iceland included 9.5% of young people aged 16-24 years. Among young people who live in Iceland and have a foreign background<sup>38</sup>, the NEET proportion is considerably higher, 14.4%. One of the conclusions of Varða's research is that a foreign background is a risk factor for being neither in school or employment between the ages of 16-24. Results in Iceland suggest the situation is similar to that elsewhere, as in 2011 it was estimated that young people with an immigrant background in European Union (EU) countries were 70% more likely to end up in a NEET group than their native-born peers.

Figures 6 and 7 show a comparison of the NEET group by origin, firstly, for the younger group, 16-24 years old, and secondly, for the older group, 25-34 years old, during the period 2003-2021. In 2021, 328 young people from the group of immigrants belonged to the younger NEET group, comprising about 13% of the group; at the same time immigrants were 22% of the older group. However, it should be noted that there may be some error in these figures, as people who had already left the country without de-registering are included. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the group and whether there is a difference between

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<sup>36</sup> Cardenas, P., Ásgeirsdóttir, B. B., Sam, D. L., & Doná, G. (2022). Stressful life events, psychological symptoms, and social support of children and young asylum-seekers in Iceland. *Scandinavian Journal of Public Health*, 51(3), 483-489.

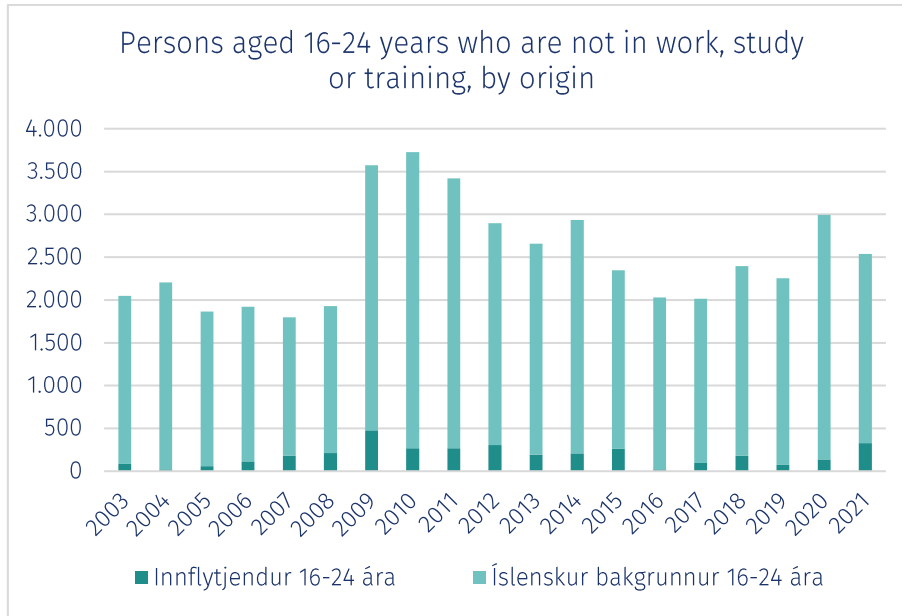
<sup>37</sup> Varða – Labour market research centre (2021) The NEET group: Status and background of young people of foreign origin outside the labour market and school, report author Adda Guðrún Gylfadóttir.

<sup>38</sup> The classification "foreign background" refers to young people who are first- and second-generation immigrants, have at least one parent who was born abroad or were born abroad themselves.



native-born and immigrants, remains to be investigated. The numbers, however, give a clear indication of the overall development of both groups and the specific situation of young immigrants.

**Fig. 5 - Persons aged 16-24 years who are not in work, study or training, by origin**



Source: Statistics Iceland, 2022<sup>39</sup>

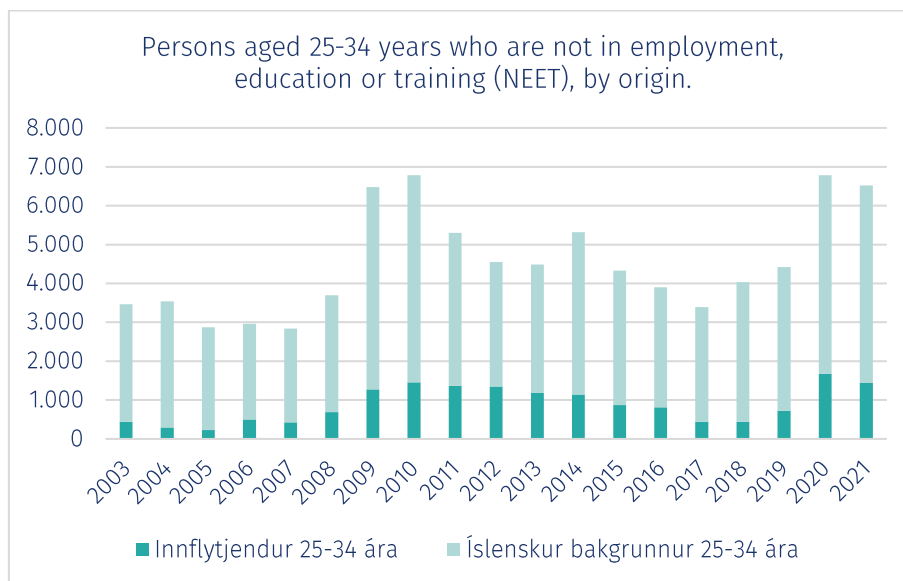
**Legend:**

Innflytjendur 16-24 years – Immigrants 16-24 years

Íslensku bakgrunnur 16-24 years – Icelandic background 16-24 years

<sup>39</sup> Statistics Iceland (2022). Persons not in work, study or training (NEET) by gender and age 2003-2021.

**Fig. 6 - Persons aged 25-34 years who are not in employment, education or training (NEET), by origin.**



Source: Statistics Iceland 2022

**Legend:**

Innflytjendur 25-34 ára – Immigrants 25-34 years

Íslenskur bakgrunnur 25-34 ára – Icelandic background 16-24 years

The Co-ordination Committee of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour for welfare and labour market activity, which commenced work in 2022, is intended to prepare an employment strategy for young people aimed at increasing the participation rate of individuals who belong to the NEET group.

In that work, special consideration will be given to the inclusion and the situation of young immigrants and persons with a foreign background, with the aim of countering the factors that make it difficult for this group to gain a foothold in the labour market.

### 3.4.4 Situation of immigrants with disabilities

There are few studies of the situation of immigrants with disabilities in Iceland. However, it is important to pay close attention to this group and give it special consideration in the provision of basic services to people with disabilities. Immigrants with disabilities face more challenges than the native-born with disabilities, as in addition to the challenges of their disability, there are particular challenges arising from their status as immigrants. It is no secret that attitudes towards disability are often culturally coloured, and here Iceland has done a relatively good job. One aspect of working with immigrants with disabilities and

their families is breaking down barriers of prejudice that often stem from such cultural attitudes.

The special situation of immigrants with disabilities and their families is often due to language challenges, the fact that they have a weak social network, are more likely to be among low-income earners or below the poverty line, and lack access to information on disability issues.

The State Diagnostic and Counselling Centre<sup>40</sup> has seen an increase in referrals of children of foreign origin to the centre. A study by the centre found that a significantly higher percentage of children with a foreign background, especially children of second-generation immigrants, were referred to the Diagnostic and Counselling Centre than native-born children. Since there is neither a long history of this nor many cases, it is difficult to draw conclusions about the connection of immigrants or foreign background with various disorders diagnosed by the centre. One of the challenges with diagnosis has been explaining children's diagnoses to parents and caregivers of foreign origin, who in some cases know little about developmental disorders due to prejudice in their home country towards people with disabilities. Among other things, the connection between referrals for diagnosis and care payments to parents of disabled children needs to be analysed. This development needs to be closely monitored in the long term to enable a suitable response. An examination also needs to be made of how diagnostic data from the country of origin can be better utilised, thereby reducing the burden on both the diagnostic system in Iceland and the waiting period for diagnosis, as well as the need to repeat a diagnostic process which has already been completed in another country. It also remains to be determined how many referrals are the result of symptoms that can be attributed to post-traumatic stress or other stress factors for children moving to a new country.

To improve the information provided to families of disabled children of foreign origin, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour concluded a special agreement with the *National Association of Intellectual Disabilities (Þroskahjálp)*, to increase access to information as provided for in Action 2.3 in the current National Action Plan for Matters of Immigrants.<sup>41</sup> The National Association of Intellectual Disabilities is working on establishing an online counselling centre for immigrant parents. The association has also organised training for

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<sup>40</sup>The State Diagnostic and Counselling Centre is a central service and expertise institution that operates on a multidisciplinary basis for children with disabilities throughout Iceland. The institution provides diagnosis and counselling for children with extensive developmental disabilities, conducts academic research in this field and provides long-term follow-up for children with unusually complex or rare disabilities.

<sup>41</sup> See further the Parliamentary Resolution on a National Action Plan for Matters of Immigrants 2022-2025, No. [29/152](#).

professionals who work with disabled children on the special situation of disabled immigrant and refugee children.

Towards the end of 2022, extensive work began on the preparation of a national plan for the implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. The basic principle of this work is that people with disabilities, their interest organisations, the state, municipalities and the public shall work together as equals to formulate proposals for projects that improve the status of people with disabilities. It is important that immigrants with disabilities also have a voice here, as they often struggle with double marginalisation. Access to information about the rights and services of people with disabilities in Iceland in more languages than Icelandic still needs to be increased. At the same time, a more interdisciplinary approach is needed, where those who generally provide services to people with disabilities and those who generally provide services to immigrants share knowledge and experience with each other. In the proposed action plan that is being prepared under the National Action Plan, specific actions are being formulated concerning immigrants and refugees with disabilities.

### **3.4.5 Elderly immigrants**

Currently the number of older immigrants is not high, although it can be assumed that the group will grow rapidly in the coming years, as immigrants are now a larger percentage of the population and life expectancy in Iceland is relatively high. Just over 1,200 people are considered to be older immigrants, i.e. 67 years old and older. In addition, there are 1,500 immigrants 65 and 66 years old, and around 10,500 aged 50-64 years (see Fig. 3). This means that the number of immigrants of retirement age is likely to double in the next two years. Little has been known about the situation of older immigrants, and therefore an action was added to the National Action Plan for Matters of Immigrants 2022-2025 aimed at increasing knowledge about this group.

The Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour commissioned the Social Science Research Institute of the University of Iceland to conduct a survey on the isolation of older people, where isolation and loneliness were analysed by origin. The survey therefore compares older immigrants and older native-born. The survey specifically looked at factors such as general health, loneliness, social activity, assistance in daily life, housing situation, employment situation, financial situation, setbacks and computer and technology use.

The results of the survey show that the general health of older people, both immigrants and native-born, is good both mentally and physically. Physical health deteriorates with increasing age, while mental health remains good, as 85% of respondents rated their mental health as fairly or very good.

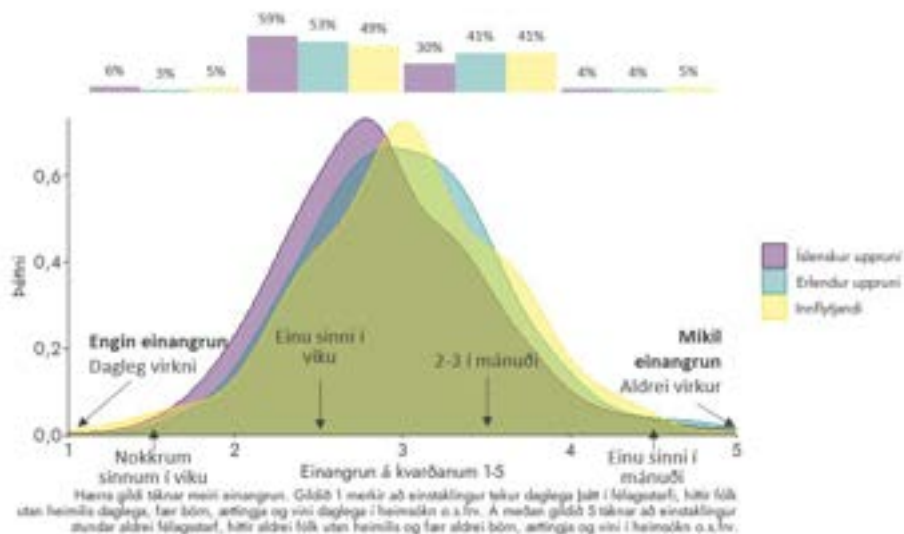
When questioned about experiencing loneliness,<sup>42</sup> some differences appeared between immigrants and native-born: the former group was lonelier, as 31% of immigrants considered themselves to be somewhat or quite lonely, while the corresponding response was 17% for the latter. The same was true of emotional loneliness, as 11% of immigrants considered themselves to be extremely emotionally lonely, while the comparable rate among native-born was 5%. However, emotional loneliness is not only related to origin because it is also gender-related, as women were more likely to consider themselves emotionally lonely, including those who lived alone and those with a lower educational level. With regard to social loneliness, the percentage of immigrants who experience social loneliness is much greater than that of native-born, as 16% of the former experienced extreme social loneliness compared to 6% of the latter.

With regard to social activity and isolation, the majority of older people were not socially isolated: 90% of respondents met someone outside their home at least once a week. The difference in social activity between immigrants and native-born was negligible, although it was slightly lower among immigrants and those who are older.

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<sup>42</sup> It is important to keep in mind that loneliness is divided into three types i.e. social loneliness, characterised by a lack of social connections; emotional loneliness, which is explained by the lack of meaningful relationships; and existential loneliness, that is an aspect of the human condition resulting from the separation of the individual from other persons.

Fig. 7 - Social activity and isolation of older people by origin



Source: Social Science Research Institute, University of Iceland 2023

#### Legend:

- Íslenskur uppruni – Icelandic origin
- Erlendur uppruni – Foreign background
- Innflytjandi – Immigrant
- Dagleg virkni – Daily activity
- Einu sinni í viku – Once a week
- Nokkrum sinnum í viku – Several times a week
- 2-3 í mánuði – 2-3 times a month
- Einu sinni í mánuði – Once a month
- Aldrei virkur – Never active
- Einangrun á kvarðanum 1-5 – Isolation on a scale of 1-5
- Engin einangrun – No isolation
- Mikil einangrun – High isolation
- Þéttni – Density

A higher value represents greater isolation. The value 1 means an individual takes part in social activities daily, meets persons outside the home daily, receives visits from children, relatives and friends daily etc. The value 5 means an individual never takes part in social activities, never meets persons outside the home and never receives visits from children, relatives and friends etc.

In connection with social activity, the survey also investigated how easy or difficult people found accessing information about social programmes and the rights of older people. It revealed clearly that immigrants and people of foreign origin find it more difficult to access information. The responses were analysed with regard to knowledge of Icelandic, which showed clearly that language skills

are key to accessing information. Among those persons least proficient in Icelandic, 27% found it difficult to access information, but only 13% of those with fairly good skills and 15% of those with good skills experienced difficulties.

One of the factors considered of significance to investigate with regard to a person's origin was from whom people obtained assistance in their daily activities. It shows that immigrants and people with a foreign background more often receive help from relatives rather than public services, such as home assistance, home nursing or other purchased services. The length of residence in Iceland is also a determining factor: those who have lived in the country for a shorter period rely more on the care of relatives than those who have stayed longer or are native-born. It can therefore be concluded that the burden of caring for relatives resting on immigrants in Iceland, who are often themselves first- or second-generation immigrants, is heavier than that of native-born in the same situation.

As previously mentioned, the number of elderly immigrants will increase in the coming years. It is therefore critical to use the results of this first survey on the isolation and loneliness of older immigrants in Iceland in order to prevent the difference in well-being currently visible from continuing or growing.

#### **3.4.6 Situation of survivors of violence**

Since 2012, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour has contracted with the Icelandic Human Rights Centre to offer legal advice to immigrants free of charge. Since 2018, the Human Rights Centre, under an agreement with the Ministry, has also provided legal advice at Bjarkarhlíð, which is a centre for survivors of violence in Reykjavík, and Bjarmahlíð, a similar centre for survivors of violence in North Iceland.

There has been a considerable awakening of awareness of the specific needs of immigrants who are survivors of violence and that language skills can in many cases serve to restrict their possibilities of seeking help. A Parliamentary Resolution on actions against violence and its consequences<sup>43</sup> specified measures that address the issues of immigrants in particular, with the aim of educating immigrants about resources for survivors of violence.

The emergency line's website, [112.is](https://112.is), has extensive information for survivors of violence, including where to look for help. The information is in Icelandic, English and Polish. An online chat in these languages is also available. In addition, educational videos were made for the mid-level of compulsory school and upper

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<sup>43</sup> See further: Parliamentary Resolution on an action plan for 2019-2022 on measures against violence and its consequences, No. [35/149](#).

secondary school, which are intended to combat pornography and sexual violence. The videos were subtitled in several languages. In addition, many local authorities have emphasised reaching potential survivors of violence, for example, with information about services in various languages. The City of Reykjavík, for instance, has distributed such information in English and Polish. The website of Bjarkarhlíð is also available in eight foreign languages and the Women's Shelter website includes seven foreign languages. In addition, the Women Of Multicultural Ethnicity Network in Iceland (WOMEN) has addressed these issues through peer education. Around 10% of the survivors of violence assisted at Bjarkarhlíð and Bjarmahlíð have been immigrants or of foreign origin. At the Women's Shelter, immigrants make up 59% of women residing in the facility and 16% of the women interviewed. The high percentage of immigrants among the women in residence indicates that a limited support network has an effect on whether a woman has the opportunity to stay elsewhere than in the Women's Shelter, rather than indicating that foreign women are more abused than native-born women.<sup>44</sup>

In cases where children have been survivors of violence, it is important to instruct immigrants about the remedies available, such as the Children's Home. It appears that immigrant children using the services at the Children's Home are more likely to drop out of treatment than native-born children, which may possibly be attributed to their guardians' social situation or the lack of encouragement to attend treatment. It is important to investigate how to meet the needs of those families better so that a child does not lack the necessary support. Considerable experience and expertise has developed in Iceland in providing support for children who have experienced serious violence. However, there is still no specialised resource like the Children's Home for children who have been survivors of violence other than sexual violence. Expertise in working with children who have experienced serious violence, such as that to which refugee children have been subjected, needs improvement. This includes, for example, cases where refugee children have witnessed threats and violence from the authorities, experienced dangerous situations on the run where fellow travellers lost their lives, experienced war and/or torture and the death of close relatives.

The main objective of the Act on the Integration of Services in the Interest of Children's Prosperity<sup>45</sup> is to give children and parents in need access to appropriate integrated services without barriers. The implementation of the Act is to ensure children's constitutional rights and fulfil international commitments which Iceland has undertaken, in particular, the UN Convention on the Rights of

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<sup>44</sup> Women's Shelter (2023) Annual Report of the Women's Shelter for 2022, Reykjavík.

<sup>45</sup> See further: Act on the Integration of Services in the Interest of Children's Prosperity, No [86/2021](#).



the Child. The Act covers all children who are located in Iceland, regardless of their residence permit status, and is to ensure appropriate guidance and support.

In all services, whether aimed at adult survivors of violence or children, information is always the first step. Immigrants are unlikely to make use of support networks they know nothing about and/or cannot easily obtain information about. In designing future remedies for survivors of violence, consideration must always be given to immigrants who speak little or no Icelandic, since the percentage of immigrants in the population is 18%, and it must be assumed that this group will be subjected to violence in the same proportion as native-born.

### **3.4.7 Immigrants and access to healthcare services**

One of the basic pillars of a successful life in a new country is having access to healthcare. All residents in Iceland are entitled to the necessary healthcare, while how the service is paid for depends on their insurance status. Persons who are resident in Iceland, are legally domiciled here, and have been so for at least six months, are considered to have health insurance. This six-month rule applies equally to Icelandic citizens who move to Iceland after living abroad and to foreign citizens. Health insurance can be purchased from an insurance company for the period that must elapse before the general health insurance takes effect. Those who do not have health insurance have to pay a higher fee for health services. Applicants for international protection are entitled to essential healthcare and medicines free of charge while their case is being processed by the Icelandic authorities. Those whose application for international protection is approved are considered to have health insurance from that point on. In recent years, the website Heilsuvera.is has been developed as a gateway to general healthcare in Iceland. It also provides a variety of educational material regarding general health and mental health. However, the website Heilsuvera is only in Icelandic, which has made it difficult for many immigrants to both use the site and understand the structure of the Icelandic healthcare system. The healthcare systems of countries are often very different; the Icelandic system is based on local care through primary healthcare centres, which can then refer patients to specialists. Dentistry is not integrated into the healthcare referral system, but is in the hands of self-employed dentists. Dental care for children is included in the health insurance system, but not for adults. It is important that immigrants can familiarise themselves clearly with this structure and know their right to different services. Information needs to be accessible, because in reality most people do not look for it until they need healthcare, after having become ill and therefore in a worse position than otherwise to seek information. Although the My pages area of Heilsuvera is accessible in both Icelandic and English through the government portal Island.is, users who do not speak Icelandic need to have information on how to log on to My pages before they can switch to English. In

addition, information on subpages, that can be selected from the English main pages, is all in Icelandic.

Knowledge of the healthcare system and where to turn is not only beneficial for the immigrants themselves, but also for the healthcare system as a whole. It is not uncommon for immigrants to seek more expensive healthcare due to a lack of information about how the healthcare system works. For example, many people go to A&E with an illness that could be treated by primary healthcare on by an on-call doctor.

Art. 5 of the Act on the Rights of Patients, No. [74/1997](#), lays down the right of patients, who do not speak Icelandic or use Icelandic sign language, to interpretation. Healthcare professionals must ensure that patients understand the information provided to them. This can be quite a challenge, especially in services where there are no pre-scheduled appointments. The percentage of foreign patients at the National University Hospital (Landspítali) is about 20%. It is critical to provide support for both patients and healthcare professionals to ensure these rights. More support is needed, both for education about the Icelandic healthcare system for immigrants and to improve the cultural literacy of healthcare professionals, as both language challenges and differences in health literacy strongly affect the success of the services provided and the well-being and satisfaction of patients.

Access to mental health services is particularly important for certain groups, such as refugees. In Iceland it is very expensive to seek out private psychologists. Psychological services at primarily healthcare centres have been increased somewhat, but still do not meet the demand. Refugees and applicants for international protection are at greater risk than others of PTSD, depression and anxiety. Left untreated, these illnesses and other emotional problems reduce the chances of active participation in society and can therefore counteract the assistance provided to people to gain their footing in a new society.<sup>46</sup>

### 3.5 Education

At the core of the working group's discussion on education was the importance of Icelandic instruction for immigrants. It revealed that, regardless of which school level was discussed, Iceland has not progressed as far other Nordic

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<sup>46</sup> Blackmore, R., Gray, K. M., Boyle, J. A., Fazel, M., Ranasinha, S., Fitzgerald, G., Misso, M., & Gibson-Helm, M. (2019). Systematic review and meta-analysis: The prevalence of mental illness in child and adolescent refugees and asylum seekers. *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*, 59 (6), 705–714.

Steel, Z., Chey, T., Silove, D., Marnane, C., Bryant, R. A., & van Ommeren, M. (2009). Association of Torture and Other Potentially Traumatic Events with Mental Health Outcomes Among Populations Exposed to Mass Conflict and Displacement: A Systematic Review and Meta-analysis. *JAMA*, 302(5), 537–549.

countries in teaching the official language<sup>47</sup> of the country as a second language. Few teachers have teaching Icelandic as a second language as their main occupation, while the need for teachers with that specialisation is growing rapidly. Limited teaching materials are available and improvement is needed to the curriculum in Icelandic as a second language, and harmonisation between and within school levels. In teacher education, little emphasis has been placed on the teaching of Icelandic as a second language, and the field has not developed as has teaching of other languages, such as Danish and English. However, more and more is being done in this area and it is clear that there are many opportunities for progress. Teaching Icelandic as a foreign language has more in common with teaching of foreign languages than traditional Icelandic instruction, intended for students whose mother tongue is Icelandic.

Teaching of Icelandic to immigrants must cover a diverse group and is the responsibility of three ministries. The Ministry of Education and Children is responsible for preschools, compulsory schools, upper secondary schools and music schools. The Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Innovation deals with the university level and the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour is responsible for adult education. In addition, the Ministry of Culture and Business Affairs is in charge of the Action Plan for the Icelandic language 2023-2026, which was made available in the government's consultation portal in June 2023, and for Icelandic sign language. Of the 18 measures in the draft Action Plan, 9 deal directly or indirectly with immigrants learning Icelandic.

### 3.5.1 Number of immigrant children of school age

The increase in the number of immigrants in Iceland will inevitably alter the composition of the student body at all school levels. Until recently there were relatively few immigrants in the Icelandic school system, but since the beginning of this century the situation has changed rapidly. Today the school is an environment where more and more students have a diverse linguistic and cultural background.<sup>48</sup>

Statistics Iceland published in June 2023 its new analysis of the composition of preschool children in Iceland.<sup>49</sup> It shows that every fourth preschool child has a

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<sup>47</sup>There are two official languages in Iceland, Icelandic and Icelandic sign language, cf. the Act on the Status of the Icelandic Language and Icelandic Sign Language, No. [61/2011](#).

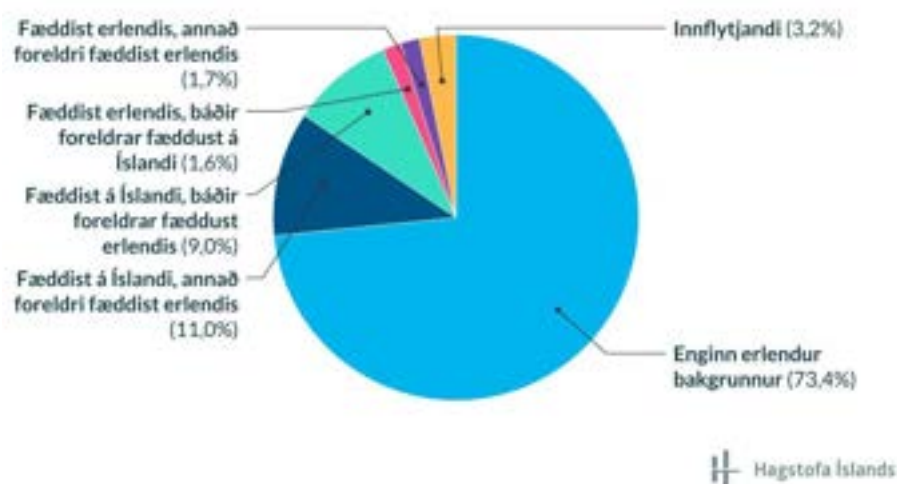
<sup>48</sup>The Ministry of Education and Children uses the concept of "diverse linguistic and cultural background" in referring to students whose mother tongue is not Icelandic or who are multilingual. The concept is broader than the term immigrant, which is the dominant term used in this report. This concept used in relation to education includes children with one parent from abroad, as well as children who move to Iceland from a different linguistic environment but who have native-born parents.

<sup>49</sup>See the online news of Statistics Iceland of 27 June 2023.

foreign background. Of the almost 20,000 children in preschools throughout Iceland, 3,335, or 16.8%, have a mother tongue other than Icelandic.

**Fig. 8 - Background of preschool children 2022**

### Bakgrunnur leikskólabarna 2022



Source: Statistics Iceland

#### Legend:

Bakgrunnur leikskólabarna 2022 - Background of preschool children

Fæddist erlendis, annað foreldri fæddist erlendis (1,7%) – Born abroad, one parent born abroad (1.7%)

Fæddist erlendis, báðir foreldrar fæddust á Íslandi (1,6%) – Born abroad, both parents born in Iceland (1.6%)

Fæddist á Íslandi, báðir foreldrar fæddust erlendis (9,0%) – Born in Iceland, both parents born abroad (9.0%)

Fæddist á Íslandi, annað foreldri fæddist erlendis (11,0%) – Born in Iceland, one parent born abroad (11.0%)

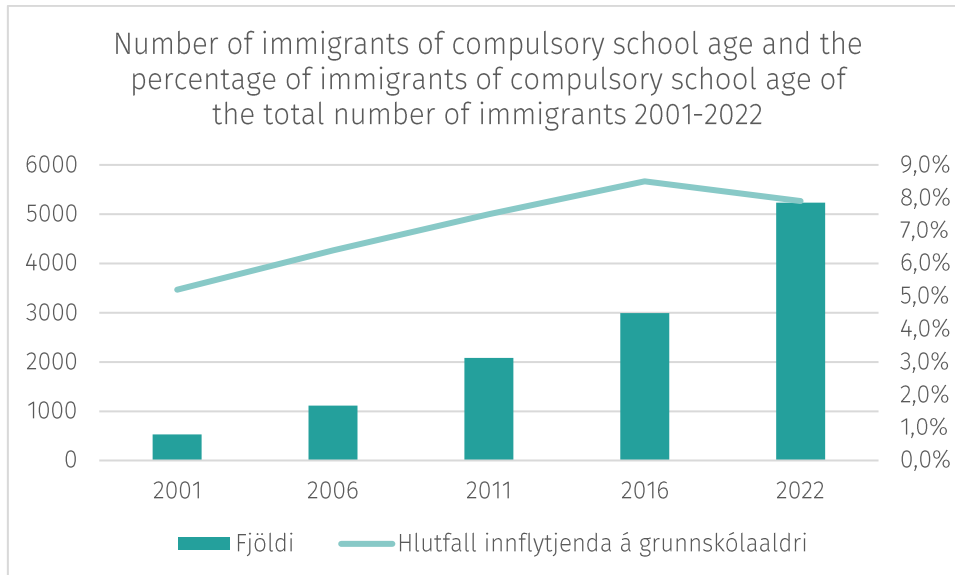
Innflytjandi – Immigrant (3.2%)

Enginn erlendur bakgrunnur – No foreign background (73.4%)

An examination of the number of immigrant children of compulsory school age shows that over a twenty-year period, they have increased considerably, from 530 students in 2001 to 5,235 students in 2022, which is almost a tenfold increase. This can be attributed to two things: a general increase in the number of immigrants over the same period from 10,100 to 66,400, and a concurrent increase in the proportion of compulsory school-age children among immigrants. In 2001, immigrants of compulsory school age were 5.2% of the total number; this percentage increased to a peak of 8.5% in 2016 and then decreased slightly to 7.9% in 2022. This reflects the fact that the majority of immigrants who move to Iceland are young people of child-bearing age, with the natural result that the percentage of children among them is increasing. At the same time, immigrants

are also an increasing percentage of the total number of compulsory school students in the country, increasing from 1.2% in 2001 to 11% in 2022.

**Fig. 9 - Number of immigrants of compulsory school age and the percentage of immigrants of compulsory school age of the total number of immigrants 2001-2022**



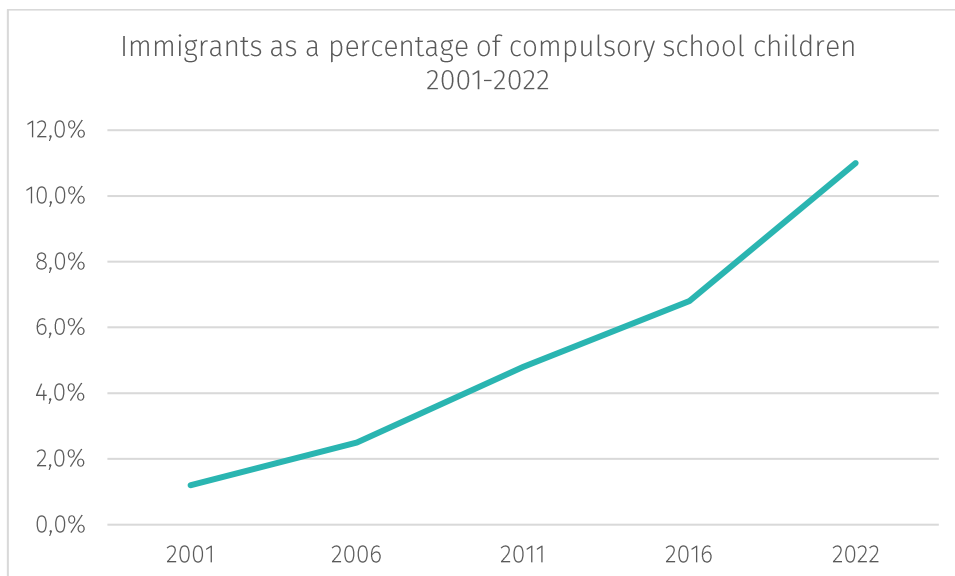
Source: Ministry of Education and Children 2023

**Legend:**

Fjöldi – Number

Hlutfall innflytjenda á grunnskólaaldri – Percentage of immigrants of compulsory school age

**Fig. 10 - Immigrants as a percentage of compulsory school children 2001-2022**



Source: Ministry of Education and Children 2023

Determining the correct number of immigrants in upper secondary schools is more complicated. Among other things, upper secondary schools have foreign students who come to Iceland for a short term as exchange students, and their registration with Statistics Iceland does not make it possible to separate this group of students from other immigrants. Furthermore, upper secondary school education is also of varying length depending on the type of study, there are differences between year-based and course-based studies, academic streams and vocational studies. However, it is clear that the number of immigrants among upper secondary school students, as among compulsory school students, will continue to increase.

### 3.5.2 Education policy and immigration

In March 2021, Althingi approved the Education Policy 2030.<sup>50</sup> The first action plan<sup>51</sup> based on that policy was published in September of the same year, to commence the implementation of the policy. This first plan covers the years 2021-2024. The action plan states, among other things, that the Icelandic school system needs to serve better the academic and social needs of students with diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Curriculum development and support for teachers in teaching Icelandic as a second language has not kept up with the expansion of the student numbers. Despite the lack of study materials, teachers' interest in teaching this group and development in the field of Icelandic as a second language appear to be considerable, which must be considered positive. While there is an urgent need to increase production of study materials, it is clear that the content of teacher education and teachers' professional development need to change to take into account the growing number of pupils with a diverse linguistic and cultural background. The third action in the above-mentioned action plan concerns specifically the needs of pupils with a diverse linguistic and cultural background. It lists six project tasks, including among other things, the production of study materials, equalising the situation of children and young people with this background regardless of where they reside in Iceland, and focusing on their well-being and Icelandic skills at compulsory, upper secondary and tertiary level.

### 3.5.3 Preschool

Preschools are the first level of the education system in Iceland. Children of preschool age learn mainly through play during this important time in their

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<sup>50</sup> See Parliamentary Resolution on education policy for 2021-2030, No. [16/151](#).

<sup>51</sup> See [Education Policy 2030 – First Action Plan 2021-2024](#) published by the then Ministry of Education and Culture.

language acquisition and development process. For children whose mother tongue is not Icelandic, the preschool is often their only Icelandic language environment. Targeted language stimulation is therefore crucial for these children to learn Icelandic. The preschool lays an important foundation for all the children's further learning as they get older. Language stimulation must take into account that the vocabulary that the child needs to acquire is considerably more extensive than that of traditional preschool practice, since they are only in an Icelandic language environment in the preschool. It can therefore prove difficult to ensure these children have a good vocabulary. Targeted language stimulation for children with a diverse linguistic and cultural background is more effective in smaller groups, which is a major challenge at the preschool level in Iceland, as most preschools in the country are full to capacity. It is important to monitor the development of children's vocabulary on a regular basis. At the preschool level, the development of children's vocabulary is monitored and regularly recorded. This important aspect of preschool operation is useful in working with children with a diverse linguistic and cultural background. For example, in the preschool Ösp in the district Fellahverfi in Reykjavík, such checks are made twice a year to monitor the pupils' progress, as a large percentage of children there do not live in an Icelandic language environment. The results are then used to tailor the language stimulation of the children to the needs which can be measured with such tests.

Stimulation of Icelandic as a second language makes high demands of preschool personnel. In recent years there has been greater co-operation between preschools in this regard. There has been an increase in awareness among preschool professionals, who have increasingly sought instruction and advice on the stimulation of Icelandic as a second language. The substantial staff turnover at preschool level, coupled with the low proportion of professionally trained employees throughout the country, adds to the challenges. Two researchers, Sigríður Ólafsdóttir and Ástrós Þóra Valsdóttir, investigated the verbal communication of preschool staff with children who spoke Icelandic as a second language and compared this to communications with children whose mother tongue was Icelandic. The research focused on staff conversations with five- to six-year-old children during free play. There turned out to be a considerable difference in the vocabulary used, to the disadvantage of the children with Icelandic as a second language. In addition, children with Icelandic as their mother tongue received open-ended questions, requiring them to use their vocabulary, while the other group did not receive any open-ended questions. The study shows that it is important to encourage preschool staff in the language stimulation of children with Icelandic as a second language to ensure that the children make regular progress in the language and are thus better prepared for study in compulsory school.

### 3.5.4 Compulsory school

Immigrants and children with a foreign background are not a homogeneous group. On the contrary, this is a very diverse group. Many parents have lived in Iceland for a long time, even decades. However, that does not automatically mean that they are familiar with the Icelandic education system and how it works, as they have no experience of it except through their children's studies. Immigrants themselves say that it can be difficult to understand the structure of the education system and where they can seek advice, help and services. Many people have experienced being directed from one person to another in their search for information about the system. Many parents also report that they have difficulty getting information from the school and that they cannot follow their children's progress and support them as they would like to do. As the student body has become more diverse, extensive work has taken place in connection with the instruction and studies of students with diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Despite many examples of successful practices, there is still much to be done and it is therefore necessary to proceed further along the path taken and work on further improvements.

Students with a mother tongue other than Icelandic have the right to instruction in Icelandic as a second language. This instruction aims at making these students actively bilingual and enabling them to study in compulsory schools and take an active part in Icelandic society. Compulsory schools can recognise students' knowledge of their mother tongue as a substitute for that part of their compulsory schooling which consists of a foreign language study. When consulted, many immigrant parents are concerned about their children's Icelandic studies and request greater support for their bilingual or multilingual children. Some of them report experiencing apathy or even negativity towards multilingualism at the school. These voices strongly suggest that it is important to encourage and improve support for this group of students and their parents. Related to this is the importance of creating an opportunity for parents to learn Icelandic and thus increase their ability to follow their children's studies (this aspect is discussed in more detail in the discussion on Icelandic learning for adults).<sup>52</sup>

The social and economic status of immigrants has a decisive influence on the education and school achievement of their children. It is therefore a matter of concern that many immigrants are below the low-income threshold in Iceland. If this situation persists, it can create a serious gap in equal opportunities for education. Children with diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds fare worse in the Icelandic school system than their native-born peers. The difference tends

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<sup>52</sup> The discussion is based on the findings of a working group on school and leisure services, which was part of the Icelandic government's Response Team on refugee children appointed by the Minister of Education and Children in August 2022 and completed its work in June 2023.



to increase with the increasing age of the students, as learning requires increasingly specific and complex vocabulary as children get older.

### **3.5.5 Special situation of children who are applicants for international protection or refugee children**

The situation of children who are either applicants for international protection or have a refugee background is somewhat special compared to other groups of immigrants in Iceland. A high percentage of these students have intermittent schooling, and many of them struggle with trauma that is a direct result of their flight to Iceland. Many teachers who have handled these students believe that they did not receive enough preparation in their teacher training to deal with the multifaceted needs of a multicultural group of children, many of whom struggle with post-traumatic stress and the consequences of intermittent schooling because of their refugee background. In addition, these children's teachers feel that in order to support the children's studies, simultaneous assistance is needed for their parents, who are also dealing with trauma. Refugee families often have a more limited support network than other immigrants and also live with the fact that they cannot return home, e.g. during holidays. They are also concerned about the fate of friends and relatives who remained in their home country or in refugee camps in unsafe conditions.

One of the main challenges in the case of children from the group of applicants for international protection has been getting the children into the general school system. Too often children have to wait weeks or months before entering school, and therefore their schooling in Iceland is intermittent. Provisions on children's schooling in the Regulation on Foreigners need to be co-ordinated with the Compulsory School Act in this regard, as a child's right to education is one of their fundamental human rights. Therefore, there must be strong reasons for postponing schooling for such a long time. Most children of preschool age from the group of applicants do not have the opportunity to attend preschools, and the availability of education at upper secondary school level has been limited. As a result, young people of that age have often been excluded from the school system during the application process (see further discussion below of the challenges at upper secondary school level). Specific educational options for this group at compulsory school level have been provided in Hafnarfjörður, Reykjavík and Reykjanesbær. However, the remedies offered by different municipalities have not been harmonised. It is urgent to increase the involvement of experts on refugee issues or specific support for the school system in this area, in order to

improve the situation of refugee children in the school system and assist teachers who take care of their education.<sup>53</sup>

### 3.5.6 Upper secondary school

Young people with diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds are more likely to drop out of upper secondary school than their native-born peers. They are also more likely to have a poorer social situation and feel worse at school.<sup>54</sup> This is clearly evident in the examination by Kolbeinn H. Stefánsson and Helgi Eiríkur Eyjólfsson,<sup>55</sup> who investigated the reasons for dropping out of Icelandic upper secondary school. Immigrants are more likely to drop out of school than their peers from other social groups. Their skills in Icelandic, in particular, affect the likelihood of their dropping out of school. In that context, it is important to consider that the skills are not an influencing factor on an individual basis but a demographic one, related to the group's social situation. It is also clear that the length of time from arrival in the country to the start of upper secondary school education is a key factor. A comparison of different groups of young people with diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds shows that the children who belong to the group of immigrants, i.e. where both parents were born abroad, are more likely than children who are considered to have a foreign background but have only one parent who was born abroad, to drop out of upper secondary school education. It also shows that immigrants are more likely to choose academic streams than other options at upper secondary school level, suggesting that the study choices of young immigrants depend more on what is available rather than their field of interest. Despite the quality of the available research, more extensive research is urgently needed on the young immigrants' opportunities and needs for assistance in connection with upper secondary school education. Far too little is known about the group's participation and its obstacles in education.

An examination of the availability of education for young people who speak little or no Icelandic shows that the supply is very limited, despite the fact that the Upper Secondary Schools Act stipulates that students with a mother tongue other

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<sup>53</sup> The discussion is based on the findings of a working group on school and leisure services, which was part of the Icelandic government's Response Team on refugee children appointed by the Minister of Education and Children in August 2022 and completed its work in June 2023.

<sup>54</sup> The discussion is based on the findings of a working group on school and leisure services, which was part of the Icelandic government's Response Team on refugee children appointed by the Minister of Education and Children in August 2022 and completed its work in June 2023.

<sup>55</sup> Kolbeinn Hólmar Stefánsson and Helgi Eiríkur Eyjólfsson (2022) Félagsleg og efnagasleg staða og brottþvarf úr íslenskum framhaldsskólum (Socioeconomic status and dropouts from Icelandic upper secondary schools). Welfare Watch.

than Icelandic should be offered instruction in Icelandic as a second language.<sup>56</sup> In recent years, several upper secondary schools have devoted major efforts at developing suitable programmes for this group, mainly based on extensive instruction in Icelandic as a second language for one or even two years. The objective of the schools is to ensure that the students have the necessary skills to complete university entrance studies through the schools' regular study options. The problem, however, is that not all upper secondary schools in the country offer such a programme, and therefore not everyone has access to suitable study. This has resulted in the schools that do offer such studies having classes which are too numerous in their efforts to respond to the demand. Due to the nature of the instruction, however, it would be preferable for the learning to be organised in smaller groups in order to ensure active vocabulary and make it easier for the students to use the language. There are indications that young people from immigrant groups, especially those who have not attended primary school in Iceland, do not attend upper secondary school due to a lack of study places and that they drop out of school because of a lack of support. It is urgent that all upper secondary schools provide for the enrolment of students who speak little or no Icelandic and offer them suitable study options and support. This is a growing group and the entire upper secondary school community needs to reflect this. Young people with a foreign background are much more likely than their peers in other groups not to be in work or in school, and the percentage increases with age. Young people who are neither studying nor working during their formative years not only miss out on opportunities in the labour market and in education, but are also more likely to experience poor health and exhibit risky behaviour. This shows the importance of early intervention for 16- and 17-year-olds as a preventive measure, and upper secondary schools have a major role to play here.

Co-ordination of instruction<sup>57</sup> for students with Icelandic as a second language is an urgent matter to be resolved and, as at other school levels, the preparation of learning materials must be a priority. Teachers who teach in special programmes for this group of students report a high workload, as the young people need help with so many things concerning their first steps in a new country. The students are under a lot of pressure, i.e. the stress of moving and learning a new language in addition to the stress that generally follows starting upper secondary school. They also need to be guaranteed more varied study options and assistance with varied types of studies suited to their areas of

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<sup>56</sup> See further: Art. 35 of the Upper Secondary School Act. [92/2008](#).

<sup>57</sup>The lack of standardisation refers to the fact that the courses of different secondary schools for students who speak no or little Icelandic at the beginning of upper secondary school education are not structured in the same way and have different names, as they have been developed within each school and not for the upper secondary school system as a whole.

interest, i.e. so that both academic and vocational study options with language support are available.

There are no specific remedies for young people of upper secondary school age with intermittent schooling. Students who are not literate have no appropriate options and are likely to be inactive. It also occurs regularly that students entering programmes for young people who speak little or no Icelandic have undiagnosed disabilities. It often takes a long time for teachers to realise that poor educational performance is not due to a language barrier, but rather that the student needs additional support. In such cases there are no educational options for youth with disabilities of upper secondary school age who speak little or no Icelandic.

In the study by Hólmar Stefánsson and Helgi Eiríkur Eyjólfsson<sup>58</sup> previously referred to, one of the measures mentioned to counter the high dropout rate of immigrants from upper secondary schools is to expand teaching of Icelandic as a second language at compulsory school level. This is in line with the emphases of upper secondary school teachers themselves, who point out that too often young people with diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds leave compulsory school poorly prepared in terms of Icelandic language skills. This causes them learning difficulties at upper secondary school level and reduces the chances that they will receive appropriate support at the beginning of the new school level. In order to be able to study at secondary school level, certain basic skills in Icelandic are necessary so that the student can gain a command of the material that individual subjects are based on.

Upper secondary schools in Iceland must give priority to younger students, due to statutory provisions on ensuring education for young people who are still under the age of legal majority. The fact that study places for students who speak little or no Icelandic are so few has meant that young people between the ages of 18-22 who have recently come to Iceland do not have the chance to study at an upper secondary school in Iceland. This is clearly evident in the changes that have taken place in the student body of the Reykjavík Technical College, as the students on specialised Icelandic streams are now much younger than they were a few years ago. The reason is the limited number of study places that are available, and not that the number of older persons seeking admission has dropped. As a result, there is a group of young people in Iceland who completely lack educational opportunities and thus the opportunity to shape their own future.

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<sup>58</sup> Kolbeinn Hólmar Stefánsson and Helgi Eiríkur Eyjólfsson (2022) Socioeconomic Status and Dropouts from Icelandic Upper Secondary Schools. Welfare Watch.

### 3.5.7 Icelandic language instruction for adults

Icelandic language instruction for adult immigrants is aimed at a very diverse group with different needs and expectations. The programme can therefore never be homogeneous any more than the student group itself, and there must be a variety of pathways to learning Icelandic. Instruction in Icelandic as a second language for adults is offered at lifelong learning centres, at language schools and education companies, in upper secondary schools and at the University of Iceland. In addition, more and more workplaces offer their employees specific instruction during working hours, which is often focused on practical vocabulary linked to the company's activities. As previously mentioned, instruction in Icelandic as a second language for adults has been hampered by the fact that such instruction is, in most cases, not a permanent or full-time job, the curriculum is neither co-ordinated nor accessible, and study often takes place in the evenings after participants have put in a full-day's work. The availability of such instruction also seems to depend on where you live, as access to study in non-urban areas is considerably poorer than in the capital region and Suðurnes. The teaching system, or rather the support provided for learning Icelandic, is shaped by the deep-rooted assumption that has prevailed in Iceland, that immigrants come here primarily to work, and therefore financial support for learning Icelandic is mainly made available through trade union membership. However, Icelandic language instruction is offered to refugees who live here as part of the government's reception assistance for refugees at the beginning of their residence in Iceland. The Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour annually provides grants for Icelandic instruction for persons legally domiciled in Iceland. The grants are awarded to approved adult education providers and cover studies that are not part of traditional compulsory and upper secondary education. Enterprises can also apply for grants for Icelandic instruction, but in such case they must co-operate with an approved education provider if they do not hold such accreditation themselves. In 2022, 18 institutions received funding to hold 457 Icelandic courses that reached 5,302 students. Of these, one-quarter lived in non-urban areas, while three quarters were in the capital area and Suðurnes.<sup>59</sup>

Immigrants have pointed out that different ways are needed to learn Icelandic, depending on each person's purpose in learning and their previous educational background. There is also a lack of information about the Icelandic instruction that is available. They also point out that the students' needs in learning Icelandic often vary depending on the person's native language, e.g. whether that uses Latin script, or whether it is a tonal language. Icelandic is also a language of limited use, so immigrants need to see a clear benefit from their studies. Unfortunately, many people feel it is difficult to continue their progress in the

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<sup>59</sup> Rannís (2022) Íslenskukennsla fyrir útlendinga (Icelandic instruction for foreigners) – Annual report 2022, online version.

Icelandic language after beginners' courses conclude; it is costly and they feel that it is not practical enough. Immigrants also repeatedly point out that Icelanders themselves often make little effort to use Icelandic with immigrants and are quick to switch to English, regardless of whether the immigrant spoken to has knowledge or skills in that language. They are also unused to hearing Icelandic spoken with an accent. We cannot ignore the fact that many immigrants work long hours and therefore often have limited energy left to study after their working day. They request both more diverse pathways to learning the language, increased availability of local courses as well as distance learning, and electronic access, for example, apps to practice the spoken language. That the study is entertaining, useful and preferably free or for a small fee. That specific opportunities are created to use the language and that Icelandic-speaking residents assist immigrants in learning Icelandic through active communication in Icelandic. The importance of active consultation with users and tailoring instruction to meet the actual needs of persons who intend to learn is reflected in the immigrants' own priorities. The United Nations High Commission for Refugees has also pointed out, in its conversations<sup>60</sup> with the Icelandic authorities, that refugees with whom the organisation has spoken in Iceland complain that Icelandic is often taught in another language, i.e. that teaching in Icelandic takes place in English, for example. This makes it difficult for many people to take advantage of Icelandic lessons as they do not have a command of English. It is important that Icelandic instruction is not based on a specific reference language, that specialisation is encouraged in such instruction and the study materials support such teaching methods.

### 3.5.8 Icelandic sign language as a second language

The deaf community in Iceland<sup>61</sup> is fairly small and until recently immigrants did not make up a large proportion of this community. After Russia's invasion of Ukraine at the end of February 2022, the composition of the deaf community in Iceland changed very quickly, as over fifty deaf refugees from Ukraine applied for protection in Iceland over a period of several months. Responding to the specific needs of this group has put a considerable strain on all service providers. In the beginning, it was difficult to obtain interpreters to interpret between Ukrainian sign language and Icelandic sign language. This resulted in considerable difficulties, both for all parties who normally provide services to refugees, for the deaf community in Iceland and not least for the refugees themselves.

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<sup>60</sup> Visit of the UNHCR Regional Office to the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour on 26 October 2023.

<sup>61</sup> The word "deaf" is used for hearing-impaired persons who used sign language. Such persons belong to the deaf community and consider sign language their first language. See further the website [of the Icelandic Association of the Deaf](#).

The Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour concluded a special service agreement with the Icelandic Association of the Deaf for various support services for deaf refugees in Iceland. According to the premises of that agreement, Ukrainian refugees now make up about 17% of the deaf community in this country. Since there are other immigrants in this group, it is clear that it will be important to maintain both instruction and training in the use of Icelandic sign language. The agreement between the Ministry and the Association of the Deaf is still in force, and the association and the Ministry are currently working on a reassessment of the necessary support for a large group of language users who do not have Icelandic sign language as their mother tongue.

### 3.5.9 Assessment of previous study

Studying is an investment, both on the part of the student and the state that pays for the education system enabling such study. It is important to make the best use of this investment, for the benefit of society as well as the individual. The fact is, however, that many immigrants have difficulty getting their degrees, education and work experience properly evaluated in Iceland. A lengthy period may be required for evaluation and in some cases hampers the possibility of hiring immigrants for work suitable to their education and experience. There is no single uniform system or gateway to get education assessed, and the methods are therefore somewhat different between disciplines<sup>62</sup> and depending on whether university education, secondary school education or vocational education is concerned. This has meant, among other things, that immigrants are to a greater extent overeducated for the jobs they perform, i.e. they are more likely to perform jobs that either require less education than they possess or work as labourers in certified trades, despite having a qualification in the relevant trade. In Iceland, 42% of immigrants work in jobs that do not require a specific qualification<sup>63</sup> despite the fact that the percentage of immigrants who live here and have not completed a specific educational qualification is 17%.

The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, OECD, has been following the development of immigrants' affairs in Iceland for a long time. According to the Organization's analyses, the level of education of immigrants and native-born in Iceland is very similar. Nor is there any significant difference in the level of education of immigrants depending on whether they come from

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<sup>62</sup> For example, Rafmennt is in charge of the assessment and recognition of qualifications in the electrical trades; the Iðan Centre for Continuing Vocational Education is responsible for the assessment and recognition in other trades. ENIC/NARIC in Iceland is in charge of the assessment and recognition of university studies, and the Directorate of Health handles the assessment and recognition of education in health professions.

<sup>63</sup> These are jobs that the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, OECD, classifies as low-skilled jobs.

countries within or outside the EU. In addition, the percentage of immigrants in Iceland with no or very little formal education is one of the lowest among the OECD countries. Despite the demographic similarities in education, many immigrants with higher education have a difficult time in the Icelandic labour market and are more often unemployed or in jobs where their experience and knowledge are of less use. Well-educated foreign women appear to be worse off than men in this respect. Immigrants in Iceland with higher education are more likely to be unemployed than less educated immigrants. The situation of immigrants in the labour market is discussed in more detail in the following section.

## 3.6 Labour market

As the number of immigrants in Iceland has grown, their participation in the labour market has increased. In Iceland, as in other EEA countries, the principle applies that all citizens within the area have unrestricted access to the labour market. Certain rules apply to the rights of people outside the EEA, just like in other countries, which are explained in Section 3.6.1. The labour market plays an important role when it comes to the inclusion of people in society. Scholars have suggested that the large increase in the number of immigrants in the labour market, firstly in the years 2006-2008 and then again from 2015 to the present day (with the exception of the pandemic), was a key factor in the economic upswing of those years, much of which can be attributed to the increasing number of employees in tourism.<sup>64</sup>

### 3.6.1 The right to work in Iceland

The Act on Foreign Nationals, No. 80/2016,<sup>65</sup> provides for the right of foreign nationals to reside in Iceland. Their employment rights are laid down in the Act on Foreign Nationals' Right to Work, No. 97/2002. The general principle is that all foreigners need a work and residence permit to work in Iceland, unless they are specifically exempted from the requirement for a work permit. Those persons who are exempt from the requirement for a temporary work permit are, for instance, citizens of EEA member states as well as foreign spouses and cohabiting partners of Icelandic citizens who have been granted a residence permit on the basis of marriage or cohabitation. Foreign nationals granted a residence permit on the basis of international protection, humanitarian considerations or special ties to the country are exempt from the work permit requirement, as are those who have received an indefinite residence permit in Iceland.

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<sup>64</sup> Katrín Ólafsdóttir (2023) Framlag útlendinga til hagvaxtar á þessari öld (Contribution of foreigners to economic growth in this century); *Vísbending* 22 September 2023, no. 321, Vol. 41.

<sup>65</sup> According to the Act, a foreign national is a person who does not have Icelandic citizenship.



Changes were recently made<sup>66</sup> with regard to the granting of temporary work permits to individuals who transfer within a commercial enterprise with an establishment in Iceland. After these changes were adopted, such persons may be granted residence and work permits on the grounds that the jobs require expertise, whereas previously such permits were granted on the grounds that employees were lacking. Changes were also made<sup>67</sup> to the right of young people to stay and work in Iceland on the basis of Iceland's reciprocal agreements with foreign countries. The age criteria of such agreements were extended from 18-26 years of age to 18-31 years of age, and such residence and work permits can now be extended by up to two years, if the agreements with other countries allow this.

Another amendment was recently adopted<sup>68</sup> to exempt those persons granted a residence permit in Iceland on humanitarian grounds or due to special ties to the country under the Act on Foreign Nationals from the requirement of the Act on Foreign Nationals' Right to Work, No. 97/2002, for a temporary work permit in Iceland.

In April 2023, the Minister was authorised by law to publish in a Regulation a list of positions requiring specialised expertise, of which there is a temporary shortage in Iceland. The Directorate of Labour may grant a temporary work permit for positions that have been listed in the above-mentioned Regulation if certain conditions are met.<sup>69</sup>

In November 2022, the Prime Minister appointed a working group on the employment rights of foreigners<sup>70</sup> which submitted its proposals to the minister in February 2023. The working group's main recommendations were to expand the rules on the residence and right to work of foreigners, ensure predictability by forecasting manpower needs, simplify administration by combining residence and work permits, and simplify and improve the application process for residence permits by digitisation. Following this, various amendments were made<sup>71</sup> to the Act on Foreign Nationals' Right to Work, among other things, in response to the proposals of the working group on the employment rights of foreigners. After the amendment, the period for which a temporary work permit may be granted initially for work that requires specialised expertise was extended from two years to four. Furthermore, the spouses and cohabiting partners of foreigners who have been issued a work permit due to specialised expertise, together with dependent

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<sup>66</sup> For details see Act No. [53/2022](#), amending the Act on Foreign Nationals' Right to Work.

<sup>67</sup> For details see Act No. [58/2023](#), amending the Act on Foreign Nationals and Act on Foreign Nationals' Right to Work.

<sup>68</sup> For details see Act No. [14/2023](#) amending the Act on Foreign Nationals.

<sup>69</sup> For details see Act No. [17/2023](#) amending the Act on Foreign Nationals' Right to Work.

<sup>70</sup> Prime Minister's Office (2023) Atvinnuréttindi útlendinga – tillögur starfshóps (Employment rights of foreigners - recommendations of a working group).

<sup>71</sup> See further Act No. [56/2023](#) amending the Act on Foreign Nationals.

children in their custody up to the age of 18 years, were exempted from the requirement for a work permit. The period for which a temporary work permit may be extended due to a lack of qualified employees was extended from one year to two, and the condition removed that a foreigner who has held such a work permit may not be granted a new permit until the end of a continuous stay abroad of two years after the end of the validity period of the permit. Furthermore, the period for which a temporary work permit may be granted for athletes was extended from one year to two. The maximum percentage of a full-time position which a foreigner studying in Iceland may work was increased from 40% to 60%.

The Directorate of Labour issues work permits to persons who need such a permit. In 2022, 4,454 work permits were granted, of which 872 (20%) were granted to Ukrainian citizens who, as of March 2023, did not have to apply for such a permit. Most of the work permits granted by the Directorate of Labour in 2022 were granted on the basis of special reasons, on the basis of specialised expertise, on the basis of labour shortages and to foreign students.<sup>72</sup>

The Directorate of Labour also supervises temporary employment agencies and matters concerning seconded workers who come to Iceland. Temporary employment agencies are service companies, domestic and foreign, which rent out employees under a contract for a fee, to perform work at the workplace of an Icelandic user company under the supervision of the latter. Seconded workers are workers who come to Iceland on behalf of a foreign company and work under its direction in connection with the provision of services in this country. In 2022, 1,375 workers were employed by temporary employment agencies in Iceland, and there were 980 seconded workers.<sup>73</sup>

### 3.6.2 Immigrants in the labour market in general

In August 2023, the number of working immigrants in the Icelandic labour market was around 52,420, which is around 23% of the total number of working people in Iceland. The number of employed immigrants has increased somewhat more in recent years than the number of native-born who are employed: there were about 17,300 more working immigrants in Iceland in August 2023 than in the same month of 2017, while the increase among native-born who were employed amounted to about 3,200 during the same period. This accords with the OECD's analysis used in relation to the policy work, which revealed that the increase in immigrants as a percentage of the employed in Iceland was among the highest in OECD countries between 2011 and 2021. During this period the percentage rose from 10.7% to 20.1% in 2021 and is currently, as mentioned earlier, 23% as of July [sic] 2023. In an economic upturn, the number of employed men exceeds that of

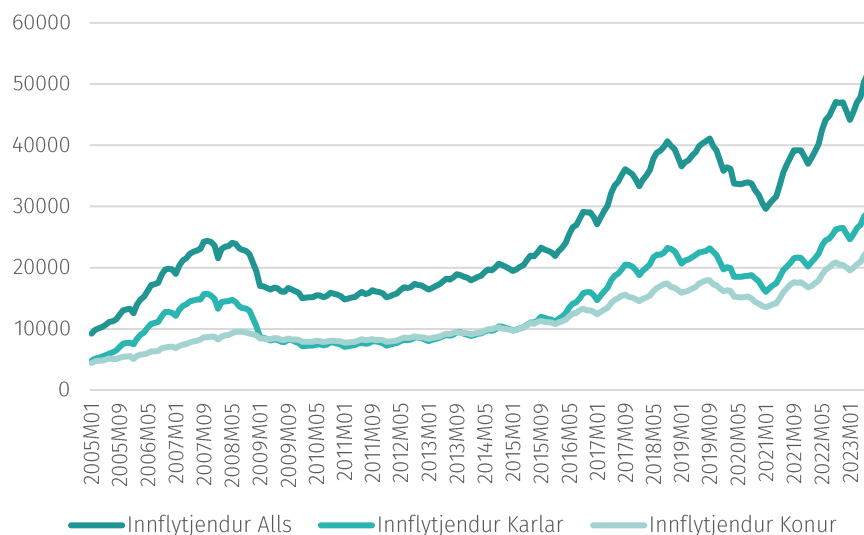
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<sup>72</sup> Annual Report of the Directorate of Labour [2022](#).

<sup>73</sup> Annual Report of the Directorate of Labour [2022](#).

women, as can be seen in the figure showing changes in the number of employed immigrants over the period 2005-2023.

**Figure 11 - Number of employed immigrants 2005-2023**



Source: Statistics Iceland 2023

**Legend:**

Innflytjendur Alls - Total immigrants

Innflytjendur Karlar – Male immigrants

Innflytjendur Konur – female immigrants

The general employment participation rate in Iceland is 82%, which is considered high by international comparison. However, according to preliminary statistics from Statistics Iceland, the employment participation rate of immigrants is even higher, or almost 87%. The employment participation rate of immigrants in Iceland is also much higher than that of immigrants in other Nordic countries, which must be considered one of the strengths of the Icelandic society and labour market with regard to inclusion of immigrants in society.

The table below shows the number of employed immigrants in August 2023 according to Statistics Iceland data, broken down by industrial sector. It should be pointed out that information on nearly 3,000<sup>74</sup> of the 52,000 immigrants working in the Icelandic labour market is missing from this table.

<sup>74</sup> There are two reasons for this discrepancy: on the one hand, these are persons who work here but have legal domicile abroad, and on the other hand, they are youths in the labour market, whereas the data in the table includes only persons who are 18 years of age and older.

**Table 2 - Number of employed immigrants in August 2023, broken down by industrial sector and background**

Sector	Within the EEA	Outside the EEA
Agriculture, forestry and fishing	617	187
Manufacturing, mining, utility operations and waste management	5,743	2,712
Building and construction	5,184	941
Wholesale and retail trade, transport and storage areas, hospitality and accommodation	11,461	5,369
IT & telecommunications	271	376
Finance and insurance	57	86
Real estate	287	65
Various specialised services	4,492	1,611
Public administration, educational activities, health and social services	2,915	5,077
Other operations	1,064	893
<b>Total</b>	<b>32,091</b>	<b>17,317</b>

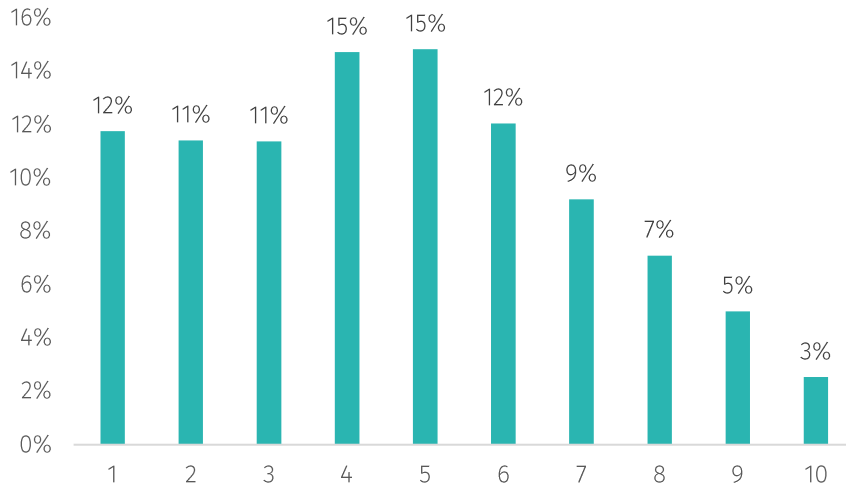
Source: Statistics Iceland 2023

As the table shows, the majority of persons who come to Iceland work in sectors related to tourism and trade. An examination of the groups coming from EEA countries and those who come from outside the EEA shows that a slightly larger share of persons coming from non-EEA states work in the public sector. It is likely that a major portion of this group works in healthcare services.

An examination of immigrants' income reveals that around half of the immigrants have income in deciles 4-7, with slightly more in the lower deciles than in the highest. The percentage of immigrants with the lowest incomes is the same as it was in 2020, cf. the report on poverty published in 2023<sup>75</sup> which is discussed in Section 3.4.1. The following figure shows the distribution of income among immigrants as of 1 September 2023.

<sup>75</sup> Halldór S. Guðmundsson, Herdís Steingrimsdóttir, Kolbeinn H. Stefánsson, Kjartan Ólafsson (2023) Fátækt og áætlaður samfélagslegur kostnaður – skýrsla forsætisráðherra (Poverty and the estimated social costs - Prime Minister's report). Prime Minister's Office.

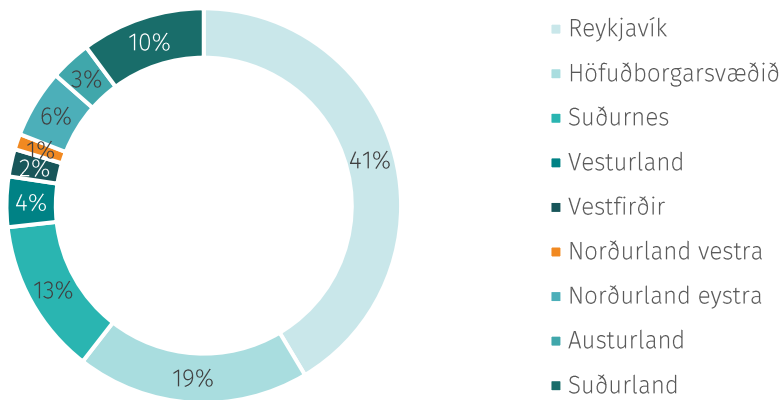
**Fig 12 - Percentage of immigrants by income decile on 1 September 2023**



Source: Statistics Iceland 2023

With regard to geographical distribution, 61% of immigrants in the Icelandic labour market are considered to be in the capital area, and 41% in the City of Reykjavík. As 13% of immigrants are located in Suðurnes, this means that almost three of every four are located in the capital region or Suðurnes.

**Fig 13 - Geographical distribution of immigrants in the labour market**



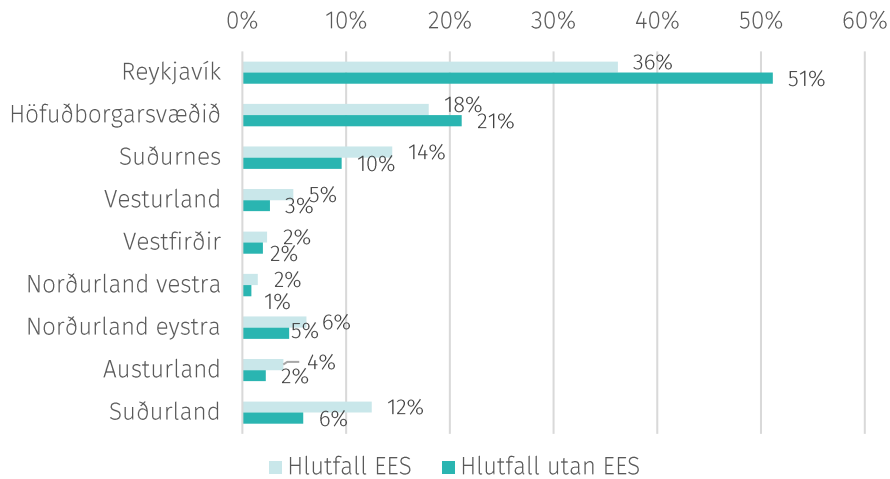
Source: Statistics Iceland 2023

**Legend:**

- Reykjavík – Reykjavík
- Höfuðborgarsvæðið – Capital region
- Suðurnes – Suðurnes
- Vesturland – West Iceland
- Vestfirðir – West Fjords
- Norðurland vestra – Northwest Iceland
- Norðurland eystra – Northeast Iceland
- Austurland – East Iceland
- Suðurland – South Iceland

With regard to residence, around 82% of employed immigrants from outside the EEA live in the capital region and Suðurnes. About 68% of working immigrants coming from within the EEA live in the capital region and Suðurnes.

**Fig 14 - Working immigrants by geographic area**



Source: Statistics Iceland 2023

**Legend:**

Reykjavík – Reykjavík

Höfuðborgarsvæðið – Capital region

Suðurnes – Suðurnes

Vesturland – West Iceland

Vestfirðir – West Fjords

Norðurland vestra – Northwest Iceland

Norðurland eystra – Northeast Iceland

Austurland – East Iceland

Suðurland – South Iceland

Hlutfall EES – percentage from EEA

Hlutfall utan EES – percentage from outside EEA

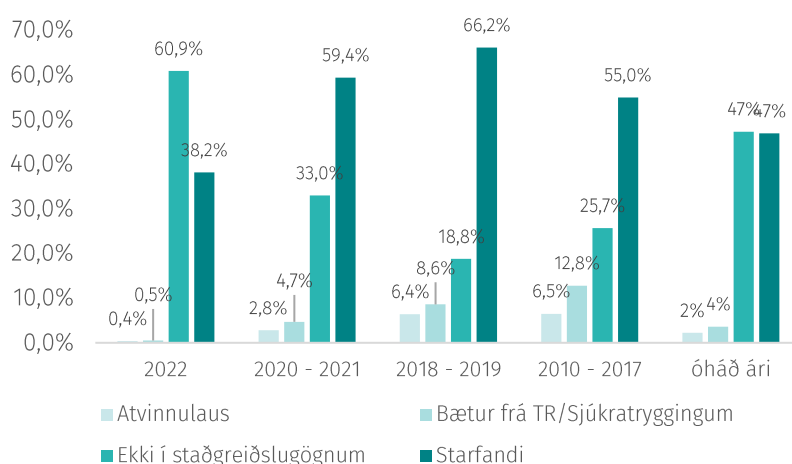
### 3.6.3 Employment situation of refugees

In connection with the policy work, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour had Statistics Iceland carry out an analysis of the employment participation of persons granted international protection since 2010. The cut-off point was 30 December 2022, and the employment status of people who had received protection during four periods was analysed based on withholding tax data. The periods were the years 2010-2017, 2018-2019, 2020-2021 and 2022.

When the employment status of all refugees who had received international protection was examined by the period when protection was granted, it was evident that the longer the period which had elapsed since protection was granted, the more likely people were to be employed. This accords well with the

nature of the residence permits and the fact that refugees who have experienced trauma and have been forced to leave their homes need time to process these shocks and rebuild their lives in a new location. It is therefore only normal that their employment rate should be low in the beginning and increase as time progresses. Fig. 16 shows how the percentage of refugees in work increases with the length of time that has elapsed from the granting of protection.<sup>76</sup> However, the employment rate of those who received protection in the years 2018-2019 is higher than that of those who received protection earlier. The explanation for this difference lies in the exceptionally high employment rate of Venezuelan citizens. If their employment is excluded, the difference between these periods is 1%, i.e. 56% employment for those granted protection in the years 2018-2019 and 55% for those who received protection earlier<sup>77</sup> (see further the discussion on labour participation of Venezuelan citizens).

**Fig 15 - Employment status of refugees in Iceland as of 30 December 2022 by year protection was granted**



Source: Statistics Iceland 2023<sup>78</sup>

**Legend:**

Atvinnulaus - Unemployed

Ekki í staðgreiðslugögnum – Not included in withholding tax data

Bætur frá TR/Sjúkratryggingum – Benefits from Social Insurance Administration / Icelandic Health Insurance

Starfandi – Employed

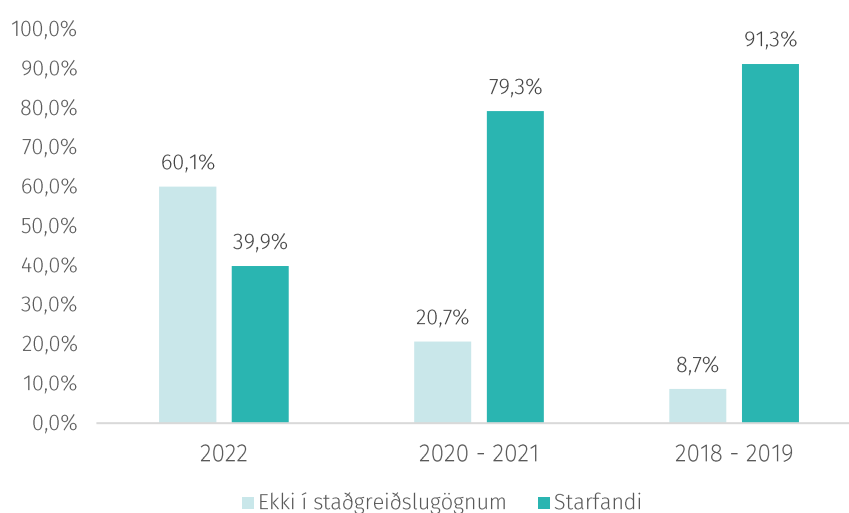
<sup>76</sup> Employment status is classified in four categories. Persons who are classified as unemployed are those who have previously earned entitlement to unemployment benefits, i.e. were in the labour market but have lost their job. Those who are entitled to benefits, for example, due to age or disability, are in one category, those who are employed are in another, and there are some people not included in the withholding tax data. The last category includes persons who are supported by their spouse, are studying or receive support from local authorities.

<sup>77</sup> That difference is not considered significant due to the small size of the population.

<sup>78</sup> Statistics Iceland (2023), Specific data extracted for the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour.

In view of the fact that a major portion of the persons receiving international protection in Iceland in past years have come from Ukraine and Venezuela, it was decided to analyse their employment participation specifically. As things developed, it turned out to be only possible to examine the employment participation of persons from Venezuela for three periods of protection granted and people from Ukraine for 2022.

**Fig. 16 - Employment status of refugees from Venezuela in Iceland 30 December 2022 by year protection was granted**



Source: Statistics Iceland 2023<sup>79</sup>

**Legend:**

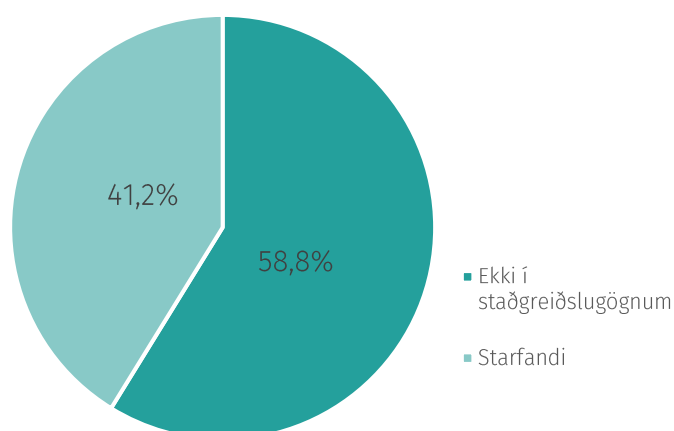
Ekki í staðgreiðslugögnum – Not included in withholding tax data

Starfandi – Employed

<sup>79</sup> Statistics Iceland (2023), specific data extracted for the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour.



**Fig. 17 - Employment status of refugees from Ukraine, who received protection in 2022, on 30 Dec. 2022**



Source: Statistics Iceland 2023.<sup>80</sup>

**Legend:**

Ekki í staðgreiðslugögnum – Not included in withholding tax data

Starfandi – Employed

The analysis shows that the employment status of both groups is very good, and for people from Venezuela who received international protection in 2018-2019, the employment rate was 91.3% on 30 December 2022. The percentage of people from Ukraine who received protection in 2022 and were employed as of 30 December 2022 was 41.2%, which must be considered quite high so soon after fleeing war. For comparison, the average employment rate of immigrants is 82%, as stated in the discussion in Section 3.6.2.

### 3.6.4 Immigrant unemployment

Since the beginning of 2016, the percentage of foreign nationals in the population has gone from 10.8% to 18% as of the second quarter of 2023. However, the percentage of foreign nationals in the labour market is higher than their percentage of the population: employed foreign nationals were 13% of the total number of employed at the beginning of 2016, and 23% in July 2023.

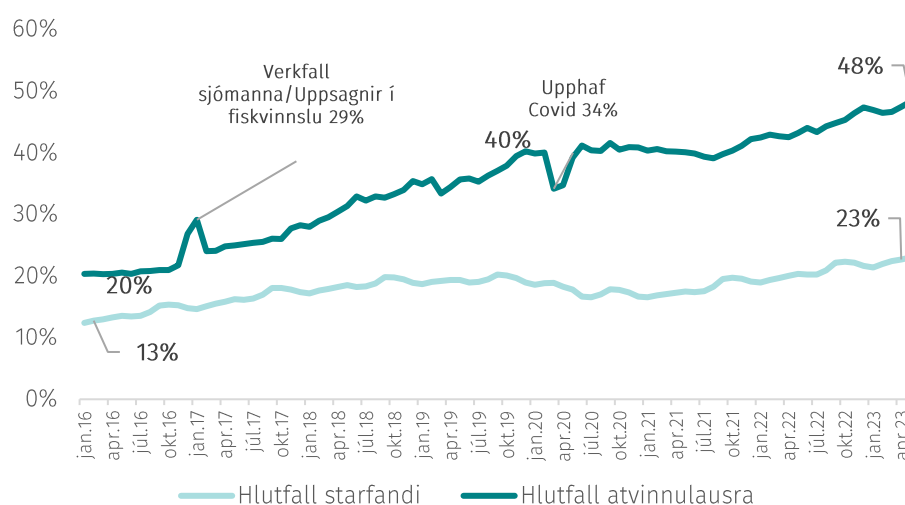
An examination of the percentage of unemployed by nationality, based on the data of the Directorate of Labour, shows that the percentage of foreign nationals of the total unemployed has increased considerably more than the percentage of those employed. At the beginning of 2016, foreign nationals made up 13% of

<sup>80</sup> Statistics Iceland (2023), specific data extracted for the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour.

the employed and 20% of those on the unemployment register. In July 2023, they were 23% of the total employed, but about 48% of the total of unemployed.

A possible explanation for the rising percentage of foreign nationals of those on the unemployment register could be that their situation is not equal to that of employed native-born. The unemployment rate among foreign nationals is somewhat higher, 6.3% at the end of the period shown, whereas the general unemployment rate was then 3%.

**Fig. 17 - Percentage of unemployed immigrants 2016-2023 according to the records of the Directorate of Labour and employed according to the register of Statistics Iceland**



Source: Statistics Iceland 2023 and Directorate of Labour 2023

#### Legend:

Verkfall sjómanna/Uppsagnir í fiskvinnslu (29%) – Fishermen's strike/Layoffs in fish processing

Upphaf Covid – Beginning of COVID-19 pandemic

Hlutfall starfandi – Percentage of employed

Hlutfall atvinnulausra – Percentage of unemployed

At the end of September 2023, there were a total of 3,056 foreign nationals without employment according to the Directorate of Labour. This is around 51% of all job seekers. Of that number, long-term unemployed<sup>81</sup> were about 20%, or 610 persons. The percentage of long-term unemployed among native-born is about 18% of the total number of unemployed, or 549 persons.

A breakdown of unemployment by gender shows that the percentage of men is higher in the group of foreign nationals than among Icelandic nationals, 57% and

<sup>81</sup> Long-term unemployment is defined as unemployment that has lasted longer than 12 consecutive months.

51% respectively. Among women, the percentage is higher for Icelandic nationals, 48%, compared to 43% for foreign nationals.

Polish nationals are the most numerous (about 44%) among unemployed foreign nationals, as by far the largest share of immigrants in Iceland is from Poland. This is followed by citizens from Lithuania (11%), Romania (6%) and Latvia (5%).

An examination of unemployment by age group shows that unemployed foreign nationals are generally younger than Icelandic nationals, which may possibly reflect the different demographics of native-born and immigrants (see Fig. 3). At the end of September 2023, for example, around 57% of all unemployed foreign nationals were aged 18-39, while the overall percentage, as previously mentioned, is 51%.<sup>82</sup>

A breakdown of unemployment by industrial sector reveals a considerable difference between Icelandic and foreign nationals, which reflect to a certain extent the difference between the jobs held by the two groups in Iceland. Most of the unemployed foreign nationals used to work in trade and goods transport (about 15% of foreign job seekers) which corresponds roughly to the percentage of people in the industry as a whole. This is followed by persons who previously worked in the construction industry (12%), restauration (12%) and various service activities (10%).

### 3.6.5 Labour market services for immigrants

Trade unions in Iceland provide extensive services to immigrants regarding their rights and obligations in the labour market. Demand for these services has increased with the increasing number of immigrants in the labour market, and the trade unions have made major efforts to assist this group of members. Many have ensured good access to all their information in languages other than Icelandic. The unions VR, Efling and Sameyki, for instance, all have detailed information in both English and Polish, while others, like Verkalýðsfélag Vestfirðinga, use translation machines to reach their members. On the websites of the Icelandic Confederation of Labour (ASÍ) and the Confederation of State and Municipal Employees (BSRB) there is extensive information about employee rights in the labour market in both English and Polish.

The Directorate of Labour provides job-seeking services to immigrants, regardless of whether they are entitled to unemployment benefits or not, as well as providing special services to job-seeking refugees. Services for those who are not entitled to unemployment benefits are more limited than for the other two groups and mainly consist of the possibility to apply for the jobs that are

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<sup>82</sup> Directorate of Labour, dashboard (2023).

available on the website of the Directorate of Labour and general advice. The same applies to native-born seekers who are not entitled to unemployment benefits. The Directorate of Labour offers job seekers assistance in a total of twelve languages and, for example, many services are provided in Polish, as around 48% of job-seeking immigrants were Polish speakers in 2022. The organisation also regularly offers courses for job seekers in languages other than Icelandic.<sup>83</sup> For refugees the services consist primarily of an individualised approach to job counselling, where a person is allocated their personal counsellor as soon as possible. Refugees who consider themselves ready for the labour market most often receive service from the Directorate of Labour following a request for such from the social services. They are invited to attend Icelandic courses, community education and other work-related courses when appropriate. They receive help in getting their educational qualifications evaluated and help in job hunting, which can, for example, include a counsellor accompanying a person to an interview and providing follow-up as appropriate.

Immigrants generally have the same right to unemployment benefits as native-born in the labour market, which means that entitlement is earned after at least three months of work in the Icelandic labour market. In general, the same rules apply to people from within and outside the EEA, although the type of work permit can affect the legal status of the person concerned. The general condition for the payment of unemployment benefits is that the person is considered insured according to the law and is authorised to work in Iceland without restrictions. This means that individuals who work in Iceland on the basis of temporary work permits do not meet the insurance requirements. Under the Act on Foreign Nationals, residence permits granted in connection with employment may be revoked if the employment relationship is terminated.

Immigrants who cannot do their job or participate in the labour market for reasons of poor health, but who aim to work, can seek services from the VIRK vocational rehabilitation fund if they are able to participate in targeted vocational rehabilitation and commit to following a vocational rehabilitation plan. Nationals of the EEA/EFTA area, nationals from outside the EEA/EFTA area who have an indefinite work permit in Iceland, and persons from outside the EEA/EFTA area who have a residence permit based on humanitarian considerations (regardless of whether they have an active work permit) are entitled to VIRK's services. However, persons from outside the EEA/EFTA area who have a temporary residence permit do not have the right to work-related vocational rehabilitation.<sup>84</sup> The percentage of foreign nationals among users of VIRK's services was around 8% in 2022 and 6.6% in 2020. Of these, 35% were men

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<sup>83</sup> Annual Report of the Directorate of Labour [2022](#).

<sup>84</sup> See further Act No. [60/2012](#), on Vocational Rehabilitation and the Operation of Vocational Rehabilitation Funds.

and 65% were women, which is a similar gender distribution to that of VIRK's native-born service recipients. However, the reasons for using the services differ, as physical health problems are more common among immigrants who seek services from VIRK, while mental health problems are more common among native-born service recipients.

### 3.6.6 Challenges in the labour market

Despite the high employment participation rate of immigrants in the Icelandic labour market, there are indications that the challenges they face are greater and their position in the labour market is weaker than that of native-born. Among the challenges are, for instance, a lack of knowledge of Icelandic and the assessment of previous studies.<sup>85</sup> Section 3.5.9 discussed immigrants' situation regarding assessment of education and that immigrants are more often than native-born doing work where their education is not utilised. This discrepancy indicates that the education, experience and skills that immigrants bring to Iceland is underutilised or even not at all utilised as it could be. The results of the OECD analysis show that this applies more to women of foreign origin and that the difference compared to native-born women lessens as their stay in Iceland lengthens.<sup>86</sup> It is important, both socially and economically, to improve this situation, among other things, to reduce poverty among immigrants and to make use of the investment that has been made in their education. According to the OECD analysis, highly educated immigrants are much more likely to be unemployed than immigrants with little or very little education.<sup>87</sup> The unemployment of highly educated immigrants in Iceland is also believed to last longer than that of native-born in the same situation, and that due to problems in getting their education assessed, this group has difficulty establishing a foothold in the Icelandic labour market.<sup>88</sup>

National studies support the OECD's conclusion, although a study by Ljiridona Osmani (2023) on the experience of educated immigrants in the Icelandic labour market reports that immigrants feel their situation is poor in comparison to well-educated native-born. It states that language difficulties, the lack of a network

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<sup>85</sup> OECD (2023), OECD Economic Surveys: Iceland 2023, OECD Publishing, Paris, og Réttur Aðalsteinsson & Partners (2019) Jafnrétti innflytjenda á atvinnumarkaði: jafnir möguleikar innflytjenda til atvinnu hjá hinu opinbera (Equality for immigrants in the labour market: equal opportunities for immigrants to work in the public sector).

<sup>86</sup> *Settling in 2023* – Indicators of Immigrants' Integration, OECD and EU.

<sup>87</sup> The International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) classifies education into three levels: i) low, not higher than compulsory school level; ii) middle, upper secondary level; iii) high, university level. Very little education means that the person has not completed compulsory school. Source: *Settling in 2023* – Indicators of Immigrants Integration, OECD and EU.

<sup>88</sup> *Settling in 2023* – Indicators of Immigrant Integration, OECD and EU.

and the fact that immigrants' education is not valued properly are the main reasons why immigrants do not stand on an equal footing with other well-educated people in the Icelandic labour market.<sup>89</sup> This is consistent with a large number of surveys that have been carried out on immigrants' experience of participation in the Icelandic labour market and were summarised in a study carried out for the Ministry of Social Affairs in 2019, entitled Women of foreign origin: What are the challenges?<sup>90</sup>

Although there has been a great improvement in information about labour market rights in foreign languages, immigrants can be expected to be more exposed than other groups to various types of unlawful activities in the labour market, and there are many inter-related reasons for this.<sup>91</sup> According to an ASÍ report, the unions submit wage claims amounting to hundreds of millions of ISK every year, more than half of them on behalf of foreign workers, despite the fact that foreign workers made up only about one-fifth of their workers at the time.<sup>92</sup> These cases deal with alleged violations of rights under collective bargaining contracts. Undeclared economic activity, for instance, can lead to a serious situation and lack of rights for immigrants. The social partners have responded to this situation in various ways.<sup>93</sup> Varða's 2023 survey among employees of ASÍ and BSRB member associations, and a special analysis made for ASÍ,<sup>94</sup> report on immigrants' experience of the labour market, as individuals' experiences can be explained by different factors in their environment. According to the survey, 56.4% of immigrants felt that their labour market rights had been violated in the last 12 months, compared to about 29% of native-born. The results also show that a much higher percentage of persons with a skin colour other than white believe they have suffered a violation of their rights in the labour market, 60% compared to 36% of those with a white skin colour. Labour trafficking, the most serious crime in the labour market, also exists in Iceland just like in other countries. During the period 2019–2022, the police investigated 71 cases related to human

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<sup>89</sup> Ljiridona Osmani (2023), „Ekkert tengslanet engin vinna“ – Upplifun menntaðra innflytjenda á íslenskum vinnumarkaði (No network, no work" - The experience of well-educated immigrants in the Icelandic labour market).

<sup>90</sup> Unnur Dís Skaptadóttir and Kristín Loftsdóttir (2019) Konur af erlendum uppruna – hvar kreppir að? (Women of foreign origin: What are the challenges?). Report prepared for the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour. University of Iceland, Reykjavík.

<sup>91</sup> ASÍ (2023) Íslenskur vinnumarkaður 2023 – erlent launafólk og brotastarfsemi á vinnumarkaði (The Icelandic labour market 2023 – foreign workers and illegal labour market activities). Online version.

<sup>92</sup> ASÍ (2023) Íslenskur vinnumarkaður 2023 – erlent launafólk og brotastarfsemi á vinnumarkaði (The Icelandic labour market 2023 – foreign workers and illegal labour market activities). Online version.

<sup>93</sup> IWW Iceland - Industrial Workers of the World (2021) and Varða - Labour market research centre (2023) Staða launafólks á Íslandi (The situation of workers in Iceland). Results of a survey among members of ASÍ and BSRB member associations.

<sup>94</sup> ASÍ (2023) Íslenskur vinnumarkaður 2023 – erlent launafólk og brotastarfsemi á vinnumarkaði (The Icelandic labour market 2023 – foreign workers and illegal labour market activities). Online version.

trafficking in Iceland, involving 73 alleged victims. Charges were laid in one of these cases and it ended in acquittal after an appeal.<sup>95</sup> While no human trafficking cases have resulted in convictions, Bjarkarhlíð, which is a centre for survivors of violence in Reykjavík, provided assistance to 25 alleged victims of human trafficking from July 2020 to September 2022. All were foreign nationals and the majority of them were said to be victims of labour trafficking.<sup>96</sup>

The report of the Council of Europe's Group of Experts on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings (GRETA)<sup>97</sup> of October 2023, on human trafficking in Iceland, states that the government needs to do more to investigate human trafficking and ensure the well-being of possible victims. Knowledge about human trafficking in Iceland has generally been limited. As a result, the response has been too slow and it is necessary to rectify this situation. This same report urges the Icelandic government to ensure safe housing for all alleged victims of human trafficking and suggests that a formal response process be established for front-line staff who may come into contact with victims of human trafficking. The investigation and prosecution of human trafficking cases is complex and the nature of human trafficking is completely different from other crimes that come before the courts in Iceland. Victims are sometimes in a situation where they do not realise they are victims of human trafficking, and therefore it is important that information on rights in the Icelandic labour market is always provided by all possible means.

Indications from ASÍ's workplace inspection unit in 2022 give reason to be concerned about the situation of people from countries outside the European Economic Area (EEA), who often work in Iceland on temporary work permits. The most serious cases of abuse referred to ASÍ's workplace inspection by unions more often than not concerned individuals with such permits. The experience of ASÍ's workplace inspection shows that persons who are at risk of losing their work permit, and thus their residence permit, if they lose their job are more likely than other immigrants to accept poor working conditions.<sup>98</sup> To counter this, amendments are planned to the Act on Foreign Nationals' Right to Work so that temporary work permits are issued to work in an industry rather than for an employer, as is currently the case.

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<sup>95</sup> GRETA (2023) Evaluation Report Iceland, Third evaluation round, Access to Justice and Effective Remedies for Victims of Trafficking in Human Beings. Council of Europe: Online version.

<sup>96</sup> GRETA (2023) Evaluation Report Iceland, Third evaluation round, Access to Justice and Effective Remedies for Victims of Trafficking in Human Beings. Council of Europe: Online version.

<sup>97</sup> GRETA (2023) Evaluation Report Iceland, Third evaluation round, Access to Justice and Effective Remedies for Victims of Trafficking in Human Beings. Council of Europe: Online version.

<sup>98</sup> ASÍ (2023) Íslenskur vinnumarkaður 2023 – erlent launafólk og brotastarfsemi á vinnumarkaði (Icelandic labour market 2023 – foreign workers and illegal labour market activities). Online version.

In preparing the assessment of the situation in the Green Paper, it was repeatedly pointed out that immigrants often lacked information about the systems of the institutions that are intended to assist them in connection with labour market rights, and people had little trust in institutional services. The National Action Plan for Matters of Immigrants 2022-2025 emphasises accessible information about the rights and obligations of workers and employers. It is also important not to assume that immigrants know their rights<sup>99</sup> and that regulatory bodies and society as a whole assume their responsibility and ensure a proper labour market framework for all groups.

### 3.7 Refugee issues

Never before have more people in the world been displaced by war and persecution. The UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates that, at the end of 2022, over 108 million people were displaced, most of them within their own borders (62.5 million), and that over 32 million people are considered refugees and 5.4 million are considered applicants for international protection. About 58% of displaced people come from three countries, i.e. Syria, Ukraine and Afghanistan.<sup>100</sup> The impact of the changed global situation of refugees can be clearly seen in Iceland. For a long time, most of the refugees who came here were from the group of resettlement refugees, who have received an invitation from the Icelandic government through UNHCR to settle in Iceland. This type of reception has a long history, but a regular arrangement for the reception of refugees by the government was not established until around 2015. Groups have been received every year since then, with the exception of those years when the corona virus pandemic prevented the normal continuation of the project. No decision was made to invite a group in 2023 and a decision for 2024 is not yet available. The proportion of people whose application for international protection in Iceland is accepted has been increasing and now the majority of refugees in Iceland come from this group. The number of applicants for international protection has ranged from 700 to 1,100 annually since 2016, but jumped in 2022 after the Russian invasion of Ukraine and due to the increase in applications from Venezuelan citizens. Most applicants for international protection in Iceland in 2022 and so far in 2023 come from two countries, i.e. Ukraine and Venezuela. According to UNHCR, 5.7 million people have fled

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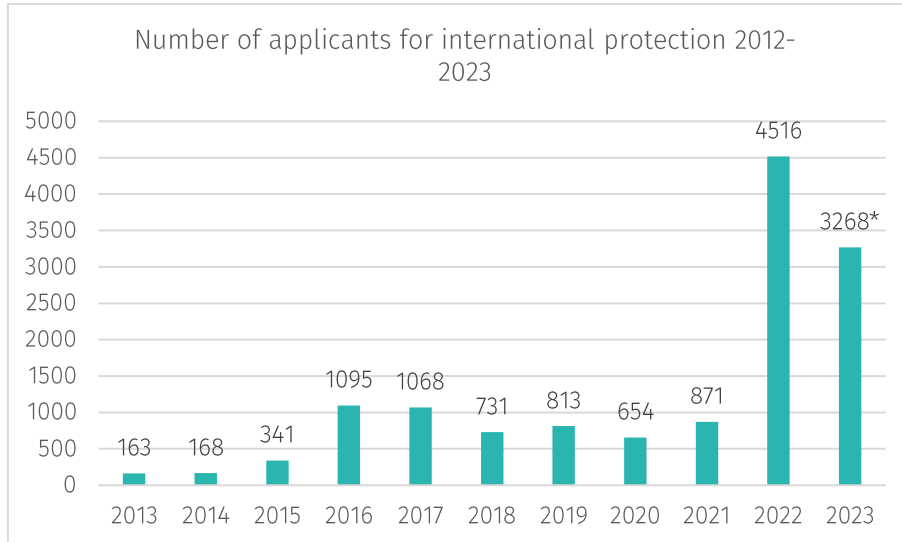
<sup>99</sup> Hildur Kristjánsdóttir's final project (2013) for an MA degree in applied macroeconomics, focused on the "lost community" in Kárahnjúkar in 2013, where the people who worked on this largest construction project in Iceland's history were given a voice. Among other things, it showed that there was a huge class division on the site, that human and social factors were not prioritised, and that media coverage often gave a misleading view of the community that lived there. This is an example that demonstrates the importance of both workplace monitoring and provision of information to workers.

<sup>100</sup> UNHCR (12/9/2023), Refugee Data Finder on the website: <https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/>



Ukraine<sup>101</sup> and about 7.3 million Venezuela.<sup>102</sup> The number of persons applying in Iceland is expected to continue to be high, as between 4,000 and 5,000 applications for protection are expected in 2023. As of 1 October 2023, 3,285 applications had been received.

**Fig. 18 - Number of applicants for international protection 2012-2023**



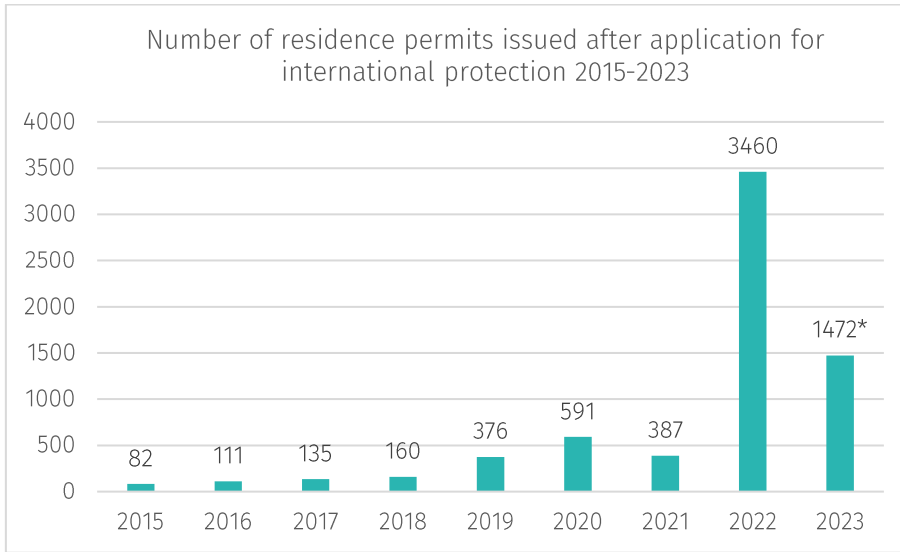
Source: Directorate of Immigration

\*based on applications received as of 30/9/2023

<sup>101</sup> UNHCR (12/9/2023), Refugee Data Finder on the website: <https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/>

<sup>102</sup> UNHCR (12.9.2023), Venezuela Humanitarian Crisis on the website: [https://www.unrefugees.org/emergencies/venezuela/#:~:text=More%20than%207.3%20million%20Venezuelans,\(as%20of%20February%202023\)](https://www.unrefugees.org/emergencies/venezuela/#:~:text=More%20than%207.3%20million%20Venezuelans,(as%20of%20February%202023))

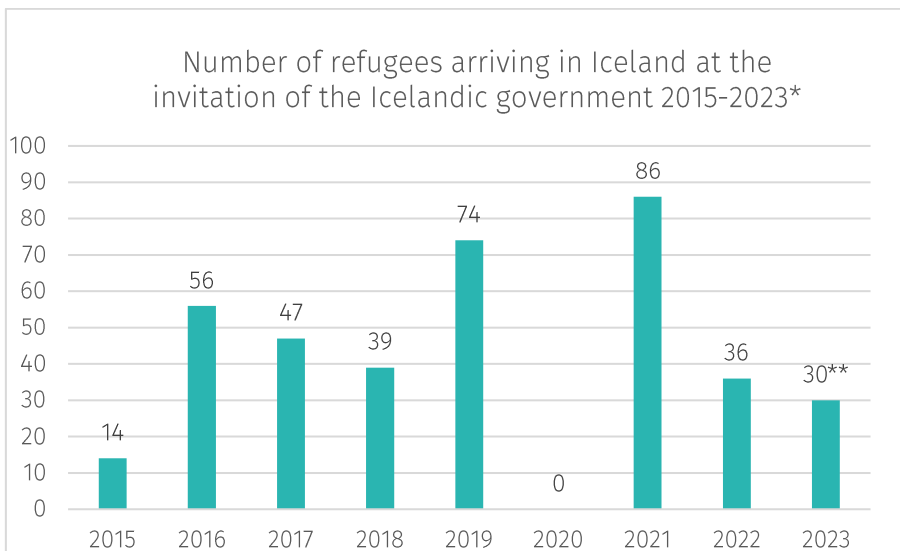
**Fig. 19 - Number of residence permits issued after application for international protection 2015-2023**



Source: Directorate of Immigration and the Immigration Appeals Board

\*based on protection granted as of 30/9/2023

**Fig. 20 - Number of refugees arriving in Iceland at the invitation of the Icelandic government 2015-2023**



Source: Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour

\*\*based on the situation as of 30/9/2023

The Agreement on the Platform for the Coalition Government of the Independence Party, the Left-Green Movement and the Progressive Party states the reception of resettlement refugees will continue to increase, with a focus on individuals and families in a vulnerable situation. Co-ordinated reception of refugees by the state and local authorities, regardless of the grounds on which

people come to the country, will be reinforced. Systems and institutions that assess individual circumstances and interests should be efficient, laws and regulations clear and humane, and implementation satisfactory. Furthermore, the process needs to be reviewed and the procedural time in the current system needs to be shortened, to ensure prompt and efficient handling of cases in accordance with the UN Refugee Convention to avoid prolonged uncertainty for individuals and families.<sup>103</sup> This section discusses the situation based on the challenges faced and the policy already formulated by the government.

### 3.7.1 Stress test of the system

As indicated by the rather abrupt and multi-fold growth in the number of applicants for international protection and the granting of such protection, the reception system in Iceland has been subjected to a major stress test. The system as a whole was designed for far fewer people than it has had to handle since the beginning of 2022. Since that time, various shortcomings of the system have become more apparent and, at the same time, many opportunities for improvement have been created in various aspects of services to applicants for international protection due to economies of scale in the reception system. At the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, a co-ordinated response was established for everyone involved in the reception system in Iceland. It was adapted to the new reality in a very efficient manner and issues were resolved across institutions. However, there has not yet been time to re-evaluate the system as a whole, even though many improvements have been made. The Prime Minister's Office established a co-ordination team for refugee issues, which is intended to operate for three years, and engaged a co-ordination manager with the aim of improving co-ordination and oversight.<sup>104</sup> The main challenges are discussed in more detail in below, either with regard to services for applicants for international protection or refugees.

### 3.7.2 Services for applicants for international protection

The Presidential Decree of 2022, on the division of government functions among ministries,<sup>105</sup> made extensive changes which resulted in altering the responsibility for services to applicants for international protection. Previously, the responsibility for this group lay with the Ministry of Justice, which entrusted the

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<sup>103</sup> Agreement on the Platform for the Coalition Government of the Independence Party, the Left-Green Movement and the Progressive Party (2021). Online version: <https://www.stjornarradid.is/library/05-Rikisstjorn/Stjornarsattmali2021.pdf>

<sup>104</sup> See further the [news item](#) on the website of the Ministry for Social Affairs and Labour.

<sup>105</sup> See further the Presidential Decree on Allocation of Ministerial Responsibilities, No. 6/2022, <https://www.althingi.is/lagas/nuna/2022006.html>

Directorate of Immigration with the implementation of the task. The new division of government functions placed the responsibility under the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour, which has entrusted the Directorate of Labour with the implementation of the task. Issues concerning foreign nationals, with the exception of work permits and services for applicants for international protection, remain the responsibility of the Ministry of Justice, which has delegated this responsibility to the Directorate of Immigration and the Immigration Appeals Board. The Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour is thus responsible for Articles 27 and 33 of the Act on Foreign Nationals, No. 80/2016, which concern services to applicants for international protection and the issuing of regulations to implement those provisions.

The adoption of the Act on Foreign Nationals, No. 80/2016, was aimed at having services for applicants for international protection be provided by the social services of local authorities, based on an agreement with the central government. In this way, the government has emphasised that most applicants receive residence and services in a municipality, therefore at the local government level, on the understanding that social services in each individual's local community play a key role in their welfare, including the school system, social services and health services. When the number of applications increased in 2016, however, a two-part system developed, and since March 2022 the overwhelming majority of applicants have been managed by the Directorate of Immigration and subsequently by the Directorate of Labour. Despite good co-operation with key local authorities regarding services, currently only a small fraction of applicants, about 27%, receive services from local authorities under an agreement, while 73% receive services from the Directorate of Labour. In tandem with the increased number of applicants, a persistent shortage of housing in the general market has affected these services as well as society as a whole. The housing market situation has meant that much of the time of staff who provide services to applicants is used to secure housing, with the result that development in other areas of the service has suffered. However, the Directorate of Labour has made various changes to services for applicants, most of which are aimed at bringing the service closer to people and providing support for applicants. For instance, the agency has recruited nurses and social workers, opened an activity centre and provided activities and study resources for children.

Services for applicants include healthcare, which includes a first medical examination upon arrival, primary healthcare and emergency services.<sup>106</sup> The services are both extensive and complex, and an agreement has only been concluded between the service providers and Primary Healthcare in the Capital Region, even though the applicants are spread much more widely in the country.

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<sup>106</sup> Regarding the right to healthcare, see subparagraph c of the first paragraph of Art. 33 of the Act on Foreign Nationals, No. 80/2016, and Art. 26 of the Regulation on Foreigners, No. [540/2017](#).

For instance, no agreement has been reached on such services with the Healthcare Centre of Suðurnes, despite the fact that applicants have been staying in the town Reykjanesbær since 2004. The current arrangement for applicants' healthcare is therefore in part inefficient and labour-intensive. Simple measures, such as the recruitment of nurses by the Directorate of Labour, have given good results and have improved the service for the applicants themselves as well as reducing the burden on healthcare institutions. Service providers and others who work with applicants point out that because of their status, people from this group often have untreated symptoms and have even been without healthcare for years, which further adds to the burden. Applicants need to be educated about what services are available and how the Icelandic health system works. Healthcare professionals could also be assisted with increased education about cultural sensitivity and the specific status of applicants. Although the Act on Patients' Rights, No. [74/1997](#), should ensure that patients who do not speak Icelandic can avail themselves of interpretation, this is often problematic, especially when services are provided by an on-call doctor outside normal opening hours or in emergency services. As a result, applicants' visits to a doctor are often poorly utilised due to language difficulties. This puts pressure on both patients and healthcare professionals.

While applications are being processed, it is important to maintain the activity of the applicants to prevent negative social and physical effects of inactivity. There are indications that this aspect needs to be ensured more clearly and formalised.<sup>107</sup> In addition, that it would be desirable to begin formal education on the society during the application process. Educational material intended for those who receive a residence permit is already available, and part of the material that is useful to everyone staying in Iceland can be taught, regardless of whether the stay is for a longer or shorter period. General education and activity also contribute to making individuals better equipped to deal with the application process, as well as empowering them to return home should the person receive a final rejection of their application in Iceland. The more dispersed residence of applicants has also revealed the importance of bringing activity resources closer to people, creating opportunities for initiating activity and educating people about their rights and obligations. Experts working with people after protection is granted believe that too often people know little about Icelandic society, even after a lengthy procedure time. Activity must be ensured for both children and adults.

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<sup>107</sup> The Directorate of Labour has concluded a fixed-term agreement with the Icelandic Red Cross for activity resources, as well as temporary agreements with continuing education centres, sports clubs and other non-governmental organisations as deemed necessary. The agency has also tendered a special contract for activity resources. In addition, the Directorate of Labour has opened an activity centre in Reykjanesbær, Klúbburinn (The Club), due to the large number of applicants for international protection residing there.

Children who are applicants for international protection must be guaranteed education. As a general rule they are to have been placed in an educational resource four weeks after the date of application and enrolled in a normal compulsory school no later than twelve weeks after the date of application.<sup>108</sup> Until the year 2022, children were generally successfully placed in school within these time limits. After March 2022, however, cracks began to appear in the system, and since then it has not been possible to ensure all children with schooling within these time limits. Both the education system as well as the Directorate of Labour want to resolve these issues in the best way possible. Important work has also been done to ensure suitable educational and behavioural resources for unaccompanied children. Many applicants who are children have been displaced for a long time or have lived in a very precarious situation for a long time. They have often had intermittent schooling and therefore need specific support when it comes to education. The importance of creating a suitable environment for the successful education of these children has been pointed out. At the same time, it is necessary to increase the knowledge and expertise of teachers in teaching refugee children specifically. The issue of children with intermittent schooling is discussed in more detail in the section on education.

In general, applicants for international protection are meant to take care of their daily needs in terms of food and basic necessities within the framework provided by food and subsistence allowances.<sup>109</sup> It has been pointed out that the food allowance and subsistence allowance are not sufficient to cover the most basic needs, as the amounts have not changed since 2017. Demand for both clothing and food distributions (especially in the form of direct food donations) has increased greatly, and aid organisations report that the number of applicants among those persons seeking aid is constantly increasing. The obstacles preventing applicants from applying for a job to provide for themselves are generally considerable. This fact, combined with the group's difficulties in providing themselves with a livelihood, has led to increased evidence of them engaging in illegal work. This needs to be examined better, however. With reference to the government's intention to prevent a lengthy application procedure, there should be no great need for a work permit during the procedure, and the time should be used for various types of education and activities. In most EU member states, the general rule is that if the process drags on for more than nine months, the person concerned has the possibility of obtaining a work permit while the process is underway. This is not the case in Iceland; instead, it is possible to apply for a temporary work permit due to special circumstances (see

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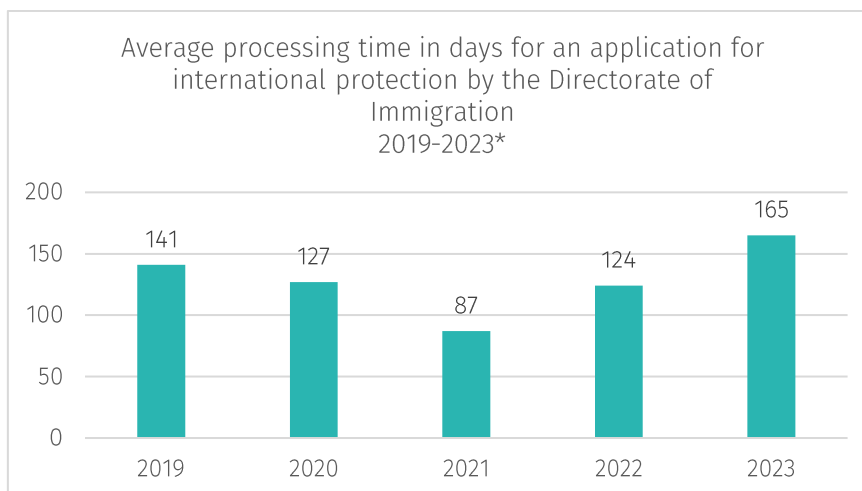
<sup>108</sup> The right to education is governed by the provisions on compulsory schooling that appear in the Compulsory School Act, No. [91/2008](#), and Art. 27 of the Regulation on Foreigners, No. [540/2017](#).

<sup>109</sup> The provisions of Art. 25 of the Regulation on Foreigners, No. [540/2017](#), apply concerning food and accommodation, and provisions of Art. 29 of the same Regulation on subsistence allowance.

the discussion in Section 3.6.1 for more details). It is important to distinguish between temporary and permanent work permits. In both Iceland and in EU countries, applicants for protection receive temporary work permits while their cases are processed; such a permit does not grant an independent right of residence in the country concerned.

For quite a long time, the government's goal has been to have the average processing time no longer than three months at each administrative level, while ensuring that efficacy of processing does not compromise its quality. The accompanying figure shows the average processing time for applications for protection by the Directorate of Immigration, measured from the date of application to the agency's decision. A decrease in applications during the corona virus pandemic enabled the agency to process pending cases and reduce the average processing time to less than three months in 2021. On the other hand, the mass exodus following the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine and the increase in applications from Venezuelan citizens after the lifting of travel restrictions have lengthened the average processing time once more, to five and a half months currently. It should be noted that, due to the investigation by the Directorate of Immigration into the situation in Venezuela, the processing time of those cases became considerably longer and the large number of applications from Venezuelan citizens has lengthened the average processing time. It should also be noted that the processing time for applications due to mass exodus is not included in the average, as those applications did not require the normal procedure and citizens of Ukraine were granted residence permits for humanitarian reasons immediately upon application. The number of those applications is so high that the figures would not have given a correct picture of the actual state of processing if they were included.

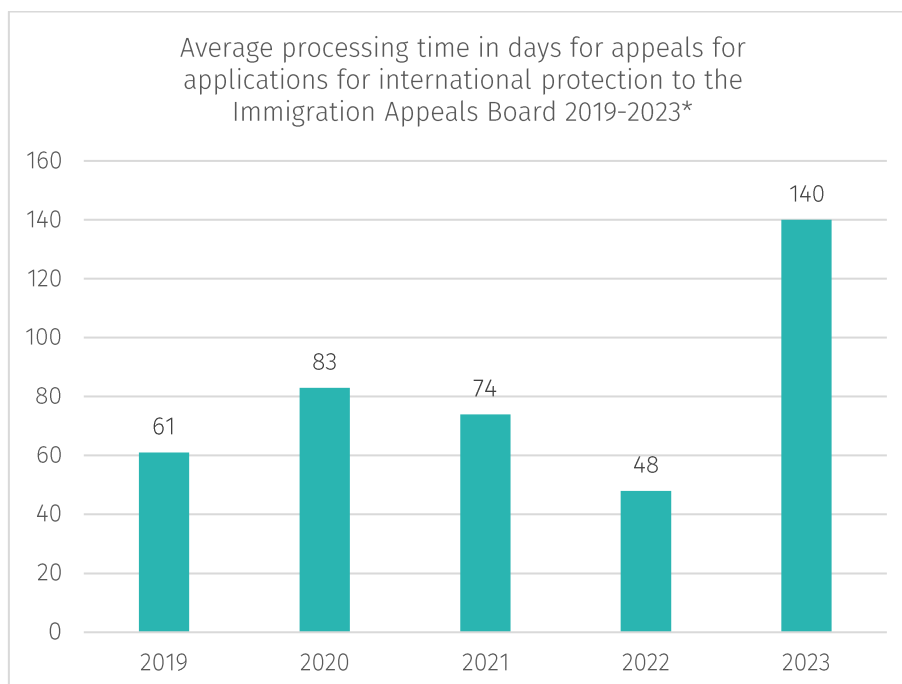
**Fig. 21 – Average processing time in days for an application for international protection by the Directorate of Immigration 2019-2023**



\*The reference date for 2023 is 20/09/2023.

Source: Directorate of Immigration

**Fig. 22 - Average processing time in days for appeals for applications for international protection to the Immigration Appeals Board 2019-2023**



\*The reference date for 2023 is 25/09/2023.

Source: Immigration Appeals Board

### 3.7.3 Co-ordinated reception of refugees

The support provided to refugees who receive a residence permit here, regardless of how they arrived in the country, has taken some time to develop and can actually be traced back to 2017. When creating the reception system, emphasis was placed on examining the situation of refugees and their well-being, and basing services on an assessment of needs following analyses that were partly carried out in a study by the International Institute of the University of Iceland.<sup>110</sup> A pilot project was launched in collaboration with five local authorities with whom agreements were signed. The project was based on the receiving municipalities guaranteeing continuous and flexible individualised services for each refugee, in addition to the local authority's statutory role. The project established that because of their situation refugees, more than other immigrants, need specific support to take their first steps in a new society. The pilot project laid the foundation for the framework agreement currently in force on services

<sup>110</sup> See further discussion of those results on p. 61 in the report of the Minister of Social Affairs and the Labour Market on [Stöðu og þróun í málefnum innflytjenda \(Status and development of matters of immigrants\)](#), which was submitted to Althingi in June 2022.



for refugees.<sup>111</sup> The service is based on the co-operation of three parties: the local authority, which provides additional social services; the Directorate of Labour, which is in charge of inviting people to participate, directs them to the municipalities and offers Icelandic instruction, community education and job counselling; and the Red Cross, which provides social connection through friendship projects, social programmes and psychosocial support.

Thirteen local authorities have signed an agreement for services for refugees through co-ordinated reception. These thirteen agreements provide for services for up to 3,309 persons, and in September 2023 there were a total of 2,512 persons receiving services. The thirteen municipalities include 83% of the residents of Iceland. The table below lists the municipalities, the number of applicants to be received by each and that number relative to the number of residents in the municipality. In most of the municipalities, some spaces for refugees are still available under the agreements to the end of 2023, except for Reykjanesbær, which has already received more people than the local authority's agreement stipulates. Service recipients in Reykjanesbær have as a result become 1.8% of the population, which is 0.2% more than the percentage provided for in the agreement.

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<sup>111</sup>The agreement on co-ordinated reception, specification of requirements and cost model can be found on the website of [the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour](#).

**Table 3 - Municipalities with an agreement on co-ordinated reception and numbers concerned**

Local authority	No. of applicants to be received	Service recipients as a % of population
Akranes	80	1.0%
Akureyri	350	1.8%
Árborg	100	0.9%
Garðabær	180	1.0%
Hafnarfjörður	450	1.5%
Höfn	8	0.3%
Ísafjörður	40	1.0%
Kópavogur	101	0.3%
Mosfellsbær	80	0.6%
Múlaþing	40	0.8%
Reykjanesbær	350	1.6%
Reykjavík	1,500	1.1%
Westman Islands	30	0.7%
<b>Total</b>	<b>3,309</b>	<b>1.0%</b>

*Source: Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour 2023*

As the table shows, local authorities' participation in relation to the size of their population varies considerably. Of the seven local authorities in the capital area, six participate in the co-ordinated reception project. The overall percentage of service recipients under these municipalities' contracts compared to the population of the region as a whole is 0.9%. If the ratio for all was equal to that of the City of Reykjavík, there would be 400 additional places; if it were the same as in the agreement with Hafnarfjörður there would be 1,400 additional places. This shows that both the number of participating municipalities and the numbers provided for in their agreements in relation to the population are very important. Those local authorities that have been involved in refugee reception projects for the longest time have pointed out the importance of ensuring the joint responsibility of all local authorities in welcoming refugees into the community. There has been discussion of ways to accomplish this and whether to follow a similar route to that of Denmark and Sweden, where reception and support for the inclusion of refugees is mandatory and the number of places is determined according to the population, the percentage of immigrants in the community and other factors, such as job opportunities. No formal discussion of such quotas has yet taken place between the state and local authorities.

Co-ordinated reception, like general services for applicants, was designed in an environment where persons receiving a residence permit after applying for

international protection, together with other refugees, were a much smaller group. An examination of the number of applicants granted protection and the increase in the number of residence permits between the years 2021 and 2022 shows an almost ninefold increase and almost a sixfold increase compared to 2020, the year with the highest number prior to 2022 (see Fig. 21). Various challenges have arisen during the implementation and follow-up of the agreements for everyone involved. The pressure on the system due to the large numbers has made it impossible to invite everyone to participate<sup>112</sup> in co-ordinated reception or to ensure that the reception is co-ordinated so that the requirements specified in the agreements are fulfilled. Implementation of the agreement is also relatively complex, which has resulted in the state and local authorities having to spend a lot of time reviewing and calculating the payments to be made based on the cost model of the agreement. It is also necessary to specify better the role of each party involved in implementing the agreement, in order to avoid overlap in services and thereby utilise optimally the time to be spent on users of the service. Co-ordinated reception, however, has numerous strengths on which future reception systems can be based. These include short channels of communication, specific expertise building and sharing between regions; the persons involved in the system (regardless of whom they work for) are very positive, think in terms of solutions and show plenty of imagination. In addition, the Directorate of Labour (including the former Multicultural Information Centre) has been the backbone of the development of the system and, in the opinion of the partners, has performed very well both in terms of support in the implementation of the project as well as knowledge sharing. However, it is also evident that better access must be ensured to Icelandic instruction, education about the community and activity resources.<sup>113</sup> In addition, the resources which are to be available under the agreements on the co-ordinated reception of refugees need to be further developed.<sup>114</sup> It is also urgent to even out the services in different parts of the country and ensure as much as possible that the service is as similar as possible, although always individualised and taking into account the local situation. Setting a clearer framework and objectives for the services will make it easier to evaluate results. As things stand today, indicators of success are not built into the project. It is also pointed out that more user consultation is needed in the development of the reception

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<sup>112</sup> The period when the co-ordinated reception of refugees was subject to prioritisation lasted from October to December 2022. With the increase in the number of local authorities and the expansion of agreements, it was again possible to invite all refugees to participate in the project.

<sup>113</sup> Regarding activity, it must be kept in mind that this can be social, as preparation for studies and preparation for participation in the labour market. For refugees, Icelandic instruction and community education are important both as preparation for the future and no less as social activity. Activity counteracts the negative effects of trauma experienced by refugees; at the same time, activity resources need to be both practical and empowering for participants.

<sup>114</sup> See [the agreement](#) on the website of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour.

system, in order to ensure the needs that users feel they have are being met and to provide the support that the users feel they need most. It is imperative that refugees themselves are involved in developing the services.

A workday meeting on opportunities for the future in the co-ordinated reception of refugees pointed out the necessity of greatly enhancing opportunities for Icelandic instruction, and no less for community education. Opportunities for education and activity need to be strengthened within co-ordinated reception and have Icelandic instruction prepare people for studies in Iceland or participation in the labour market. Here assessment of previous education and experience is a key aspect of inclusion in society (those aspects are further discussed in the section on the labour market). Many refugees also find it difficult to obtain information about their rights and obligations and the services of various public bodies, both at the state and local authority level. The overall conclusion of discussions on the situation of co-ordinated reception of refugees was that this offers important support for refugees, but that the service needs to be adapted to the changed reality, equality ensured, clearer objectives set and user consultation increased.

#### **3.7.4 Resettlement refugees**

As mentioned previously, only a small portion of refugees in Iceland are so-called resettlement refugees. Proposals on the number of refugees and which groups of refugees are accepted at any given time are drafted by the Refugee Committee.<sup>115</sup> The majority of refugees have currently found first refuge in low- and middle-income countries, but are in need of relocation to permanent residence. By inviting people who have fled their home country but are still living in unsafe conditions, the aim is to prevent people from embarking on dangerous journeys, such as across the Mediterranean, to seek protection in a safe country. In its reception of specific groups, the Icelandic government has focused on the most vulnerable, such as single mothers and LGBTQI+ refugees. Most come through the government's co-operation with UNHCR.

Many persons who come at the invitation of the government have lived in precarious conditions for a long time, often in refugee camps. Co-ordinated reception assumes that those who come at the invitation of the government will need more help at the beginning of their stay, since other refugees have had the opportunity to become acquainted with the situation in Iceland during the application process. The arrival of resettlement refugees has often attracted a

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<sup>115</sup> The Refugee Committee operates on the basis of Art. 9 of the Act on Foreign Nationals, No. 80/2016. The provision stipulates that the role of the Refugee Committee is, among other things, to organise the reception of refugee groups referred to in Art. 43 of the Act. It also provides for the committee to work in co-operation and consultation with UNHCR.

great deal of attention which can impinge on the limits of the refugees' own privacy. A new approach in co-ordinated reception has altered the reception of resettlement refugees so that in general it will not be possible to distinguish them from other refugees, to allow the people themselves to control whether they share their stories and past circumstances or not. The reception of resettlement refugee groups has generally gone well and been successful and there are no indications otherwise than that reception of refugees regularly at the invitation of the government will continue in a similar manner.

### **3.7.5 Humanitarian considerations in the reception of refugees**

In general, humanitarian aspects must be considered when granting international protection, and the Icelandic government is obliged to take humanitarian considerations into account in all proceedings. At the same time, specific humanitarian considerations must be taken into account when deciding whether to grant permission to reside in Iceland to people not considered refugees according to the definition of that term.<sup>116</sup> An efficient process is part of the humanitarian considerations in the reception of refugees. It must be ensured that the process takes as little time as possible, while making certain that speed does not compromise its quality. The average processing time for applications for international protection by the Directorate of Immigration had reached a satisfactory point of just under three months. However, following the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine and the increased number of applications in Iceland, the average processing time has increased to around five and a half months. As the reception of resettlement refugees is based primarily on humanitarian considerations, Iceland has focused on providing shelter to especially vulnerable groups. Iceland has also undertaken a number of international human rights commitments concerning the rights of individual groups, which are regularly followed up on with assessments of the state of affairs in the country.

From a humanitarian point of view, it is clear that care is always necessary to ensure that refugees enjoy their rights. Due to their situation, refugees are considered to be particularly vulnerable, making it important to bear in mind that because of this it can be more difficult for refugees to claim their rights than for other citizens. The situation of those living with various disabilities needs special attention. In Iceland, there is a lack of access to specialists in various fields related to the specific needs of refugees, such as in dealing with post-traumatic stress, supporting victims of torture and assisting women who are victims of genital mutilation, to name a few. It must also be borne in mind that people enjoy less extensive rights during the processing period, for example to healthcare, than those who have a permanent residence permit here. The government is

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<sup>116</sup> See further Chapters III and IX of the Act on Foreign Nationals, No. [80/2016](#).

therefore in a key position when it comes to ensuring access to services, especially for applicants for international protection. A transparent system must be ensured where refugees have easy access to information about their rights and obligations in a language they understand.

### 3.8 Status assessment of equality and equal rights issues

In 2012, the percentage of female immigrants was higher than that of men, or 52% women compared to 48% men. The percentage of men has grown since then and, in 2022, 55% of immigrants were men, while 45% were women. This is different from the situation in OECD countries, in most of which women make up the majority of immigrants. By comparison, men made up 51% and women 49% of the Icelandic population as a whole in 2022.

In the period under review, gender was recorded as either male or female. Obviously, the group includes LGBTQI+ individuals who define themselves outside of such traditional binaries, but the data does not contain information about that group.

There is a lack of comprehensive and gender-disaggregated data on immigrants, and certain measures and objectives in the National Action Plan for Matters of Immigrants 2022-2025 are difficult to measure due to the lack of recorded data.

**Table 4 - Status and strategic options towards greater equality and equal rights**

	Situation	Opportunities for improvement
Employment	Immigrant women are more often than immigrant men overeducated for the jobs they perform.	<p>Arrangements for recognition of foreign studies must be examined in light of the situation and development.</p> <p>Jobs that require a university education often also often require a perfect command of Icelandic, which greatly reduces the opportunities for immigrants.</p>
Interpreting services	<p>In some places the provision of an interpreter is considered optional, when in fact persons actually have the right to an interpreter.</p> <p>According to Art. 5 of the Act on Patients' Rights <a href="#">74/1997</a>, a patient who does not speak Icelandic or uses sign language must be</p>	It is important to ensure access to interpretation services - also for Icelanders (e.g. in the healthcare system if employees do not speak Icelandic). This is about ensuring access to important information and enabling people to participate in society.

	guaranteed interpretation of information. Healthcare employees should ensure that a patient who does not speak Icelandic or uses sign language understands the information provided.	
<b>Healthcare services</b>	<p>Immigrants find it more difficult to understand and make use of information about health, healthcare institutions and the healthcare system, among other things due to language difficulties and cultural differences.</p> <p>Foreign women in maternity care: both Icelandic and foreign studies indicate that foreign women have worse outcomes and require more interventions during childbirth.</p>	<p>Improve access to information about healthcare services in the main languages of immigrants in Iceland.</p> <p>It is important to ensure access to interpretation services.</p> <p>Cultural literacy among experts can be improved.</p>
<b>Violence Support for survivors of violence</b>	<p>People of foreign origin seek support resources such as Bjarkarhlíð to a lesser extent than native-born. They make up 10% of the service recipients (which is well below the percentage of immigrants in Iceland).</p>	<p>Reach everyone with education on violence in close relationships.</p> <p>Information in more languages is needed.</p> <p>Ensure access to interpretation services.</p> <p>Cultural literacy among experts can be improved.</p>
<b>Icelandic instruction for adults Availability nationwide</b>	<p>Availability of Icelandic instruction in non-urban areas is limited, and people need to travel long distances to attend courses.</p>	<p>Co-operation of lifelong learning centres – a specialised network that offers Icelandic instruction nationwide.</p>
<b>Status of young immigrants not in work, education or training (NEET)</b>	<p>Young people of foreign origin are more likely to be outside the labour market and education system.</p> <p>Dropout is considered a manifestation of unequal opportunities.</p>	<p>Intervention early in the education process is important. Increased co-operation between schools and social services for children in order to identify the factors that inhibit learning achievement and in the formulation and implementation of measures to respond to them, just as the Prosperity Act requires. Part of the solution is to assist children at compulsory school level better.</p>
<b>Housing</b>	<p>A higher percentage of immigrants are in the rental market than native-born. They are also more likely to be unaware of their right to housing benefits and more likely to live in housing which is not designed for residential use, and therefore does not confer</p>	<p>Inform immigrants better about the housing benefit system and increase information on how residential housing is defined in Iceland, e.g. what is considered legal housing and what is not.</p>

	entitlement to housing benefits.	
<b>Situation of elderly immigrants</b>	Older immigrants are more lonely than older native-born. Immigrants and people of foreign origin find it more difficult to access information about social programmes and the rights of seniors.	Special consideration needs to be given to the needs of older immigrants when it comes to developing services and communicating information to seniors.
<b>Situation of children with disabilities and their families</b>	<p>Considerable increase in referrals of immigrant children to the State Diagnostic and Counselling Centre. Children with a foreign background, especially children who are second-generation immigrants, are referred to the State Diagnostic and Counselling Centre in a significantly higher proportion compared to native-born children.</p> <p>Their disabilities are revealed later than usual due to language difficulties.</p> <p>Cultural differences in attitudes towards persons with disabilities.</p>	<p>Increase education of immigrants about services for children with disabilities in Iceland and the authorities' policy for equal participation of people with disabilities in society.</p> <p>Cultural literacy of experts can be improved as well as awareness about the manifestations of disability when children and employees do not speak the same language.</p>
<b>People of foreign origin with disabilities</b>	<p>Services and support for immigrants rarely take into account the needs of people with disabilities – the assumption is that people with disabilities are covered by the general support measures available to immigrants.</p> <p>Access to information and support in connection with disability is insufficient for immigrants with disabilities.</p> <p>A bridge needs to be built between parties who provide services for people of foreign origin and those who provide services for people with disabilities.</p>	<p>Increase the access of immigrants with disabilities to information about their rights and the services that are available.</p> <p>Ensure that people with disabilities are taken into account when planning and implementing specific services for immigrants.</p> <p>Work specifically on increasing consultation and co-operation between the immigration and disability service systems to ensure suitable services for immigrants with disabilities.</p>
<b>Political participation</b>	Immigrants are less likely than other residents to actively participate in elections. As is generally true for all voter groups, women's voter turnout is higher than men's; the difference between women's and men's participation among immigrants is, however, higher than among other voter groups, at 7.8%.	Inform immigrants in a targeted way of their right to participate in elections, first in general, and then in tandem with immigrants acquiring the right to vote in Iceland.
<b>Voices of immigrants</b>	There is a certain gender bias in discussion of	Support immigrants and their own advocacy work on



	immigrant issues, as issues of concern to male immigrants are less discussed than those concerning women and children. The latter groups have strong advocates.	immigrant issues specifically.
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### 3.9 Assessment of the success of current policies

The report of the Minister of Social Affairs and the Labour Market on the status and development of matters of immigrants<sup>117</sup> which was published in 2022, discusses the National Action Plan for Matters of Immigrants that was in effect for the years 2016-2019. The current plan was approved by Althingi in June 2022 and is valid for the years 2022-2025. It includes 34 actions, the status of which is shown in the table below.

**Table 5 - National Action Plan for Matters of Immigrants 2022-2025 - status of actions**

Action	Not yet begun	Started	Well advanced	Complete
<u>1.1.</u> Formulation of policy on matters of immigration, refugees and multiculturalism				
<u>1.2.</u> Information centre for immigrants				
<u>1.3.</u> Data gathering and knowledge sharing				
<u>1.4.</u> Education for employees of state and local authorities				
<u>1.5.</u> Multicultural policies and reception programmes of municipalities				
<u>1.6.</u> Education and information about Icelandic society to be available in the main languages of immigrants				
<u>1.7.</u> Community interpretation				
<u>2.1.</u> Participation of children and young people in sports and youth activities				
<u>2.2.</u> Young people of foreign origin who are not in				

<sup>117</sup> Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour (2022), *Staða og þróun í málefnum innflytjenda – Skýrsla félags- og vinnumarkaðsráðherra* (Status and development of matters of immigrants - Report of the Minister of Social Affairs and the Labour Market), pp. 8-13.

employment, education or training (NEET)		Orange		
2.3. Children of foreign origin with disabilities and support for their families			Yellow	
2.4. Immigrants in the housing market	Red			
2.5. Elderly of foreign origin			Yellow	
2.6. Violence		Orange		
3.1. Assessment of previous knowledge		Orange		
3.2. Assessment of education		Orange		
3.3. Native language support and active multilingualism				Green
3.4. Icelandic instruction for adult immigrants and applicants for international protection		Orange		
3.5. Increasing the number of teachers and professionals of foreign origin in the education system		Orange		
3.6. Validation of competence for immigrants		Orange		
3.7. Electronic competency-based assessment in Icelandic and supporting materials		Orange		
3.8. Continuity in the instruction of applicants for international protection and refugees		Orange		
4.1. Wage equality in the labour market		Orange		
4.2. Percentage of immigrants in the public sector and positions of influence	Red			
4.3. Immigrant unemployment			Yellow	
4.4. Occupational safety and labour market rights		Orange		
4.5. Review of the Act on Foreign Nationals' Right to Work.				Green
5.1. Coordinated services for people granted protection in Iceland				Green
5.2. Manual for the reception of and services for refugees			Yellow	
5.3. Well-being and participation of refugees and		Orange		

applicants for international protection				
5.4. Education for refugees, applicants for international protection and professionals involved in refugee services				
5.5. Unaccompanied children applying for international protection				
5.6. Support for unaccompanied children and young people who have been granted protection				
5.7. Refugees in the labour market				
5.8. Reception and services for refugees in a particularly vulnerable situation				

As the table shows, of the 34 actions four have been completed, 6 are well advanced, 20 have started and 4 have not yet begun. The Action Plan is valid until 2025, when a new action plan is expected to be prepared together with a new policy.

### 3.10 Developments in neighbouring countries

While the Nordic countries are similar in many ways, there are some differences between Iceland and the other countries when it comes to matters of immigrants and refugee. Although among Nordic countries the proportion of immigrants is now highest in Iceland, this development has been rapid and has occurred almost exclusively in the 21st century, as pointed out in Section 1.2. The percentage of immigrants in the other Nordic countries who have lived in those countries for 15 years or more is much higher. It is highest in Sweden and Denmark, where over 40% of immigrants have lived in those countries for 15 years or more; in Norway and Finland almost one-third have long-term residence, while in Iceland the percentage is only just over 15%.<sup>118</sup>

As discussed in section 1.2, the legal framework for immigration issues in this country is neither detailed nor old. The situation is different in the other Nordic countries, all of which have fairly detailed legislation<sup>119</sup> on the subject of

<sup>118</sup>The Nordic Council of Ministers (2022) Immigrants in the Nordic countries, online news.

<sup>119</sup> Currently applicable legislation in Norway is from 2021 and is available [here](#); in Finland new legislation was introduced in 2022 and is available [here](#). That legislation supplements older legislation from 2010. The Danish legislation is available [here](#) and the Swedish legislation [here](#). In Sweden, [an Act](#) is in effect that

immigration, which covers both immigrants and their inclusion in society as well as refugees and the support given to refugees in gaining a foothold in a new country. This does not mean that the legislation of the Nordic countries is homogeneous, but that immigration matters have developed over a longer period of time than in Iceland. Its legislation, together with the policies of each country in this area, thus lays the foundation for receiving and supporting immigrants.

As has been repeatedly mentioned in various contexts in this Green Paper, language is the key to participation in the community. While the same is true for other Nordic countries, there are some differences between Iceland on the one hand and the other Nordic countries on the other regarding the role of language for inclusion. All the Nordic countries, apart from Iceland, have adopted a clear legal framework for immigrants' rights and obligations when it comes to learning the country's official language. Language instruction is actually the right of immigrants in the other Nordic countries, and all of them guarantee immigrants access to such instruction free of charge. This applies equally to immigrants from within and outside the EEA, as well as refugees. How extensive is the instruction provided without charge to each group, and whether this is subject to any time limits, varies depending upon the group and the country. There is an exception, however, to instruction without charge in Norway, as free instruction is not available to EEA citizens. The requirements regarding language skills differ between countries, for example, to be able to study or work. However, all the countries except Sweden require some language ability for acquiring citizenship.<sup>120</sup>

Many issues in the field of immigrants' and refugee affairs are similar in the Nordic countries, and the countries co-operate at the level of the Nordic Council of Ministers in sharing knowledge and experience in this field. The current focus of the collaboration is access to education and inclusion in the labour market. Nordic co-operation offers many opportunities for Iceland to learn from the experience of the other Nordic countries. At the same time, it is evident that the most urgent tasks in Iceland are to reinforce legislation on matters of immigrants, increase access to Icelandic instruction and formulate a clear government policy in this field.

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obliges municipalities to receive refugees. This is not an exhaustive list of all the statutory provisions in the Nordic countries concerning immigrants, but is provided here to enable comparison with the Icelandic legislation that can be found [here](#).

<sup>120</sup> Rambøll (2021) Karlegging av tilbud om språkopplæring og språktrening for voksne innvandrere i Norge og øvrige Nordiske land. Oslo.

### 3.11 Key policy issues for the coming years

Based on the assessment of the situation in this Green Paper, the following key policy issues regarding immigrants and refugees for the coming years are highlighted:

1. Ensure good and effective information services for immigrants and refugees about their rights and obligations in Iceland.
2. Expand teaching of Icelandic as a second language, ensure access to a variety of instruction for different age groups and equal access throughout the country.
3. Manpower needs in the Icelandic labour market should be defined and predictable, to attract qualified workers from both within and outside the EEA.
4. Simplify and improve assessment of previous education and work experience of persons educated abroad, to enable them to obtain suitable jobs and the society to benefit from the education and experience of those who move here.
5. Aim for an inclusive society, where immigrants are always expected to participate in all areas of society.
6. Ensure the involvement of immigrants in decision-making on their own issues.
7. Reduce poverty among immigrants.
8. Promote democratic participation, protect human rights and equality for immigrants.
9. Strengthen research in the field of matters of immigrants and refugees and improve registration and gathering of data to facilitate long-term improvements in the quality of services founded on a knowledge base and measurable goals.
10. Ensure support for refugees so that they can establish themselves here and rebuild their lives. Emphasis should be placed on support for the most vulnerable groups.

The numbering of these key issues does not reflect priorities.

## 4. Strategic options, vision and priorities for discussion

The objective in mapping the situation of matters of immigrants and refugees is to highlight the main factors and challenges in this area, with the goal of formulating a policy and actions for the coming years. The Green Paper is therefore intended to provide a baseline for evaluating the success of the policy and the actions that will follow. The policy is intended to promote a society based on respect for diversity and equal opportunities for participation for all, regardless of origin.

### 4.1 Strategic options - approaches

The approaches considered for selection must be suitable for the purpose, likely to be successful, feasible, result in positive socio-economic effects and have a positive long-term impact.

It is evident that public bodies can be involved in the project in various ways, and the public sector needs to lead by example and purposefully create an environment that supports respect for diversity and ensures equal opportunities. The principal instruments are:

- information and education that form the basis for decisions made by public authorities, enterprises and individuals alike;
- legislation, in particular comprehensive legislation on matters of immigrants and their inclusion in society;
- direct intervention of the public sector, i.e. that agencies work directly on certain projects, as is done in the National Action Plan for Matters of Immigrants;
- support for research, data gathering and targeted measurement of results that can improve projects and decisions for the future.

In the selection of approaches to follow, the path ahead needs to be kept in sight, a future vision and emphases determined, and an assessment made of which approaches are feasible to support the objectives set. The following pages present a draft future vision and emphases for further discussion and implementation with the public and stakeholders.

### 4.2 Draft future vision

In formulating a future vision for matters of immigrants and refugees in Iceland, the focus is on the next 15 years. The future vision for immigration is for Iceland to be an inclusive society that welcomes diversity and offers equal opportunities for participation in all areas of society regardless of origin. A society which is

supportive of immigrants and where rights and obligations are based on trust and transparency.

### 4.3 Key Subjects – Emphases

The following section explains in more detail the key aspects emphasised, based on the status assessment in the Green Paper. It is important to point out that the numbering or ranking of emphases does not reflect priorities.

1. **Ensure good and effective information services for immigrants and refugees about their rights and obligations in Iceland.**
  - Counselling services for immigrants, as the first port of call for people looking for information and advice, will be strengthened and access guaranteed throughout Iceland.
  - Electronic dissemination of information to immigrants about rights and obligations in Icelandic society will be strengthened and made available through a single portal.
  - Public institutions ensure access to information and services, both in simple language and in languages other than Icelandic.
  - Key points of contact with many immigrants will be specifically used to disseminate information.
2. **Improve teaching of Icelandic as a second language, ensure access to a variety of instruction for different age groups and equal access throughout the country.**
  - Immigrants' needs and their suggestions regarding Icelandic learning will be used to guide the preparation of future plans for adult education.
  - Guarantee immigrants' right to instruction in Icelandic, as is done in the Nordic countries.
  - Improve instruction in Icelandic as a second language for children and young people.
  - Improve the education of and support for teachers of Icelandic as a second language at different school levels.
  - Increase the production of learning materials in Icelandic as a second language.
  - Ensure the full introduction of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), both in the teaching of Icelandic as a second language, as well as in the assessment of skills in Icelandic.
  - Support especially the education of young immigrants to combat upper secondary school dropout and create learning opportunities for young people with intermittent schooling.

3. **Manpower needs in the Icelandic labour market should be defined and predictable, to attract qualified workers from both within and outside the EEA.**
  - The granting of employment and residence permits should be characterised by transparency, fairness, trust and efficiency based on digital solutions.
  - Short- and long-term forecasts should be available of manpower needs in the labour market, in part so that people moving to Iceland have clearer information about their future employment outlook.
  - Targeted work should be directed at analysing and assessing the education and experience of immigrants who are already in the Icelandic labour market. Their knowledge and experience should be utilised in the best possible way and opportunities created for them for further education and professional development.
  - There should be a link between the granting of work permits and the assessment of professional qualifications in the case of certified occupations or those requiring professional qualifications.
4. **Simplify and improve assessment of the previous education and work experience of persons educated abroad, to enable them to obtain suitable jobs and the society to benefit from the education and experience of those who move here.**
  - Establish a single portal for people to apply for and receive assistance with the assessment of studies from foreign schools.
  - Ensure a short and efficient assessment period for foreign studies and professional qualifications.
  - Improve validation of competence.
  - Analyse the economic benefits of improving the assessment of previous education and work experience.
5. **Aim for an inclusive society, where immigrants are always expected to participate in all areas of society.**
  - That provision of public services allow people who speak no or little Icelandic to access services on an equal basis with others.
  - Increase education that promotes tolerance of diversity in society.
  - Improve education for immigrants about Icelandic society better and make it more accessible; clarify areas of responsibility for maintaining and communicating such information.
  - Comprehensive legislation on matters of immigrants and refugees, emphasising rights and obligations in an inclusive society.



- Equalise children's opportunities for education and participation in social and leisure activities.
- 6. Ensure the involvement of immigrants in decision-making on matters of immigrants.**
- Provide targeted support for immigrants' NGOs.
  - Formalise consultation with immigrants, as has been done with the issues of older people (Council on the Affairs of the Elderly) and children and young people (Youth Council).
- 7. Reduce poverty among immigrants.**
- Simplify and improve the assessment of previous studies and work experience.
  - Reduce barriers to employment to ensure that immigrants enjoy equal opportunities in the public sector.
  - Ensure better that immigrants are aware of their rights regarding support that needs to be applied for, especially for housing benefits or grants for extracurricular and leisure activities.
  - Ensure the availability of and support for the education of young immigrants.
- 8. Promote democratic participation, protect human rights and equality for immigrants.**
- Increase and encourage the democratic participation of immigrants, both with regard to voting rights, political participation and opportunities for influence in society.
  - Work systematically against prejudice based on origin, religion and race, including all forms of hate speech.
  - Work against honour-based violence and negative social control<sup>121</sup> as well as strengthening support for survivors of violence and for preventive measures against violence.
  - Promote greater understanding and tolerance between different groups.
  - Increase support for immigrants with disabilities and ensure that they stand on an equal footing with other people with disabilities in Iceland.
  - Equalise the position of immigrant women, especially in the labour market.
- 9. Strengthen research in the field of matters of immigrants and refugees and improve registration, harmonisation and gathering of**

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<sup>121</sup>Negative social control refers to subjecting individuals to pressure, supervision, threats and coercion to control their activities, in particular to limit the freedom of the individual to make decisions about their own life. The perpetrators are two or more, often the immediate family of the victim.

**data to facilitate long-term improvements in the quality of services founded on a knowledge base and measurable goals.**

- Co-ordinate and increase the registration of data on immigrants between public institutions.
- Establish a forum for research and dissemination of research in the field of matters of immigrants and refugees.
- Promote the utilisation of research results.

**10. Ensure support for refugees so that they can establish themselves here and rebuild their lives. Emphasis should be placed on support for the most vulnerable groups.**

- Continue to develop support for the co-ordinated reception of refugees with a special focus on the most vulnerable groups.
- Emphasise a trauma-informed approach in services to refugees and access to mental health services for those who need it.
- Continue the reception of particularly vulnerable groups at the invitation of the Icelandic government.
- Increase peer support among refugees in Iceland.  
Further strengthen knowledge networks in services for refugees.

## 5. What is your opinion?

The objective of the Green Paper on Matters of Immigrants and Refugees is to encourage discussion of the situation, issues and priorities for the future of these matters in Iceland.

It is important that the contents of the Green Book reflect this as well as possible, as it lays the foundation for policy development in the issue in the coming years.

In light of this, we would like your opinion on and discussion of the following points:

### **Status assessment**

Does the status assessment correspond to the actual situation? If not, what is missing or over-emphasised?

### **Key topics**

Do the key topics reflect the main challenges in the field for the future? If not, what needs to be changed or added?

### **Future vision**

Does the future vision serve as a guide to dealing with the key topics and challenges in this field in the future? If not, what needs to be changed or added?

### **Approaches and priorities**

Discussion of different approaches and their priority is encouraged. What approaches are most likely to prove successful in the future?

The Green Paper on Matters of Immigrants and Refugees will be available for comment in the government's consultation portal on [Island.is](https://island.is) between 10 November and 8 December 2023.

## 6. Appendices

### 6.1 Appendix 1 – List of participants

Permanent additions to the working groups included representatives from the social services of the municipalities of Árborg and Akureyri, representatives from the Directorate of Labour, the Ministry of Health and Icelandic Church Aid.

Guests attending individual meetings came from preschools, compulsory and upper secondary schools, ENIC/NARIC, the Housing and Construction Authority (HMS), the Ministry of Infrastructure, the gynaecological ward of the National University Hospital, the human trafficking team of the Suðurnes Commissioner of Police, Mímir Continuing Education Centre, the Nordic Welfare Centre, OECD, the National Broadcasting Service (RÚV), privately employed experts in the field of psychology and children's issues, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, as well as experts from the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour in the field of adult education, matters of people with disabilities and labour market resources.

Participating in discussions in on-site visits were representatives from the following ministries: the Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Finance and Economic Affairs, Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour, the Prime Minister's Office and the Ministry of Education and Children. Representatives of public institutions and councils participating in discussions came from Statistics Iceland, the Immigrant Council, the Directorate of Equality, Directorate of Education, Directorate of Labour and Directorate of Immigration. Representatives from universities and the research sector participating in discussions came from the University of Akureyri, ENIC/NARIC and the labour market research centre Varða. At the local government level, representatives participating in discussions came from the city of Reykjavík, the towns of Akureyri, Reykjanesbær, and Suðurnesjabær, and the primary school Fellaskóli. Other parties to discussions were representatives of the Icelandic Confederation of Labour (ASÍ), the Confederation of State and Municipal Employees (BSRB), the Icelandic Teachers' Union (KÍ), Suðurnes Continuing Education Centre (MSS), the enterprise Norðlenska, the Icelandic Red Cross, the Confederation of Icelandic Employers and WOMEN in Iceland (Women Of Multicultural Ethnicity Network in Iceland). The reception centre for refugees on Egilsgata in Reykjavík was visited.

A workday meeting on co-ordinated reception was attended by representatives of the municipalities that had, at that time, in May 2023, concluded an agreement with the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour on co-ordinated reception of refugees. Representatives from the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour, the Directorate of Labour and the Icelandic Red Cross.

Representatives of the Ambassadors of Residents of Foreign Origin in Breiðholt in Reykjavík and the English-speaking Council of Mýrdalshreppur took part in focus group discussions.

## 6.2 Appendix 2 – Mandate of the steering group

Excerpt from the mandate of the steering group appointed to draft a policy on the matters of immigrants and refugees, and representatives appointed to the group:

*The main task of the steering group is to make a proposal for a comprehensive policy on matters of immigrants, aimed at ensuring that persons who settle in Iceland will have the opportunity to integrate (inclusion) and actively participate in society in general and the labour market. In its work, the steering group will take into account the National Action Plan for Matters of Immigrants 2022-2025 and the latest reports in the field, and will base its work on multicultural perspectives, where the emphasis will be on equality for all the country's inhabitants. Consideration will also be given to the experience of the Nordic countries and leading OECD countries in multicultural issues.*

*The steering group is expected to assign to subgroups the examination of specific issues, such as matters concerning the society, families, education and the labour market, as well as issues concerning refugees, reflecting the division of immigration issues in the National Action Plan for Matters of Immigrants. These subgroups are expected to include representatives from the steering group and, as the case may be, from ministries and institutions dealing with immigrants and foreign nationals, as well as representatives from interest groups for people with disabilities, LGBTQI+ people, immigrants and gender equality.*

*In its work the steering group shall consider the following aspects, among others:*

- *research and development, including statistics regarding community participation and the inclusion of immigrants in Icelandic society;*
- *social values regarding humanity, equality, justice and respect for diversity and recognition of the contribution of immigrants to the culture of our society;*
- *the participation of immigrants in politics and social debate;*
- *access to Icelandic instruction and community education that caters to the diverse backgrounds of individuals and paves their way into Icelandic society;*
- *interpreting services, among other things, in connection with access to education, healthcare and social rights, as well as diverse social activities that reduce isolation;*
- *support for children of foreign origin and their families to actively participate in society, including through school and leisure activities;*
- *the needs of society with regard to education, skills and experience and how can we attract people with specialised expertise in the form of education and experience that is particularly lacking in Iceland at any given time;*
- *humanitarian considerations when welcoming people in search of international protection and the number and composition of refugees that the government offers to stay in this country, with particular attention to vulnerable groups;*

- *whether the government should stipulate the priorities and considerations that should be taken into account when receiving resettlement refugees, including social as well as economic circumstances;*
- *how to strengthen the reception of refugees, considering diverse ways to encourage the active participation of individuals in society, both through the welfare system and the education system as well as in business and industry;*
- *proposals and results of work in the consultation and response team of the Icelandic government for refugee children;*
- *actions to combat hate speech and the work of the Prime Minister's Office's task force against hate speech;*
- *actions regarding the situation of immigrants and refugees in the labour market, including opportunities for employment, access to jobs, facilities, job security, possible discrimination due to ethnic origin, knowledge of workers' rights and remedies if rights are violated;*
- *streamlining the issuance of residence and work permits, with a view to facilitating persons from outside the EEA to come to come to Iceland to work.*

*The steering group is composed as follows:*

*Members:*

*Áshildur Linnet, chairperson, without nomination*

*Tryggvi Haraldsson, without nomination*

*Guðrún Margrét Guðmundsdóttir, nominated by the Icelandic Confederation of Labour*

*Þóra Kristín Þórsdóttir, nominated by the union BHM (Confederation of University Graduates)*

*Dagný Ósk Aradóttir Pind, nominated by the union BSRB (the Confederation of State and Municipal Employees)*

*Gunnlaugur Geirsson, nominated by the Ministry of Justice*

*Marta Guðrún Skúladóttir, nominated by the Ministry of Finance*

*Íris Björg Kristjánsdóttir, nominated by the Prime Minister's Office*

*Gísli Hvanndal Ólafsson, nominated by the School of Humanities of the University of Iceland*

*Paola Cardenas, nominated by the Immigrant Council*

*Magnús Þór Jónsson, nominated by the Teachers' Association of Iceland*

*Óttarr Ólafur Proppé, nominated by the Ministry of Education and Children*

*Nína Helgadóttir, nominated by the Icelandic Red Cross*

*Heiða Björg Hilmisdóttir, nominated by the National Association of Local Authorities*

*Ægir Örn Sigurgeirsson, nominated by the National Association of Local Authorities*

*Ólafur Garðar Halldórsson, nominated by the Confederation of Icelandic Employers*

*Jasmina Vajzovic Crnac, nominated by Women Of Multicultural Ethnicity Network in Iceland (WOMEN)*

*Alternates:*

*Ásta Margrét Sigurðardóttir, without nomination*

*Aleksandra Leonardsdóttir, nominated by the Icelandic Confederation of Labour*

*Andri Valur Ívarsson, nominated by the union BHM (the Association of Academics)*

*Valgerður María Sigurðardóttir, nominated by the Ministry of Justice*

*Kristinn Bjarnason, nominated by the Ministry of Finance*

*Gunnar Narfi Gunnarsson, nominated by the Prime Minister's Office*

*Ólöf Garðarsdóttir, nominated by the School of Humanities of the University of Iceland*

*Joanna Marcinkowska, nominated by the Immigrant Council*

*Jónína Hauksdóttir, nominated by the Teachers' Association of Iceland*

*Donata Honkowicz Bukowska, nominated by the Ministry of Education and Children*

*Atli Viðar Thorstensen, nominated by the Icelandic Red Cross*

*Maj-Britt Hjördís Briem, nominated by the Confederation of Icelandic Employers*

*Hilma Hólmfríður Sigurðardóttir, nominated by the National Association of Local Authorities*

*María Ingibjörg Kristjánsdóttir, nominated by the National Association of Local Authorities*

## 6.3 Appendix 3 – Research on immigrants

The following is an overview of recent research and ongoing research on matters of immigrants. It should be borne in mind that this is not an exhaustive list.

Examples of research projects that have received funding from the Development Fund for Immigrant Issues or from the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour are:

- Langtímarannsókn á starfsaðstæðum innflytjenda á íslenskum vinnumarkaði (Long-term study of the working conditions of immigrants in the Icelandic labour market). Varða - labour market research centre (2023).
- The inclusion of Muslim immigrant women in the Icelandic labour market: tailwinds and hindrances – Fayrouz Nouh (2023).
- Assessing the talent pool of foreign experts living in Iceland – Kathryn Elizabeth Gunnarsdóttir (2023).
- Huldufólk (Hidden people): Frásagnir erlends verkafólks á Íslandi (Stories of foreign workers in Iceland) - IWW Iceland (2021).<sup>122</sup>
- Konur af erlendum uppruna – Hvar kreppir að? (Women of foreign origin: What are the challenges?) – Unnur Dís Skaptadóttir and Kristín Loftsdóttir (2019).<sup>123</sup>
- Jafnrétti innflytjenda á atvinnumarkaði – Jafnir möguleikar innflytjenda til atvinnu hjá hinu opinbera (Equality for immigrants in the labour market - Equal opportunities for immigrants to work in the public sector) – Réttur Aðalsteinsson & Partners (2019).<sup>124</sup>
- Erlendu börnin í kvennaathvarfinu – hvað segir mamma? (The foreign children in the women's shelter - what does mom say?) – the Women's Shelter (2019).
- Umfang og eðli launaþjófnaðar hjá erlendu vinnuafli (The extent and nature of wage theft from foreign workers) - Icelandic Confederation of Labour (2019).
- Máltaka 3ja ára barna með íslensku sem annað mál og áhrif söngiðkunar á framvindu og færni (Speech development of 3-year-old children with Icelandic as a second language and the effect of singing on progress and skills) - Helga Rut Guðmundsdóttir (2019).
- Áhrif tvítýngis málhafa á þróun íslenska táknmálsins (The influence of bilingual speakers on the development of Icelandic sign language) - Communication Centre for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (2019).

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<sup>122</sup> IWW Iceland (2021).

<sup>123</sup> Unnur Dís Skaptadóttir and Kristín Loftsdóttir (2019).

<sup>124</sup> Réttur Aðalsteinsson & Partners (2019).



- Viðhorf íbúa til innflytjenda og fjölmenningsarsamfélagsins og tækifæri til félagslegrar þátttöku í Reykjanesbæ (Residents' attitudes towards immigrants and multicultural society and opportunities for social participation in Reykjanesbær) - Reykjanesbær (2019).
- Verkalýðsfélög og erlent starfsfólk í ferðaþjónustu (Trade unions and foreign workers in tourism) - Íris H. Halldórsdóttir and Magnfríður Júlíusdóttir (2019).
- Fjölgun tilvísana á Greiningar- og ráðgjafarstöð ríkisins vegna barna af erlendum uppruna – í hverju felst hún og hvað veldur henni? (The increase in referrals to the State Diagnostic and Counselling Centre in connection with children of foreign origin - what does it consist of and what causes it?) – State Diagnostic and Counselling Centre (2019).

The labour market research centre Varða, established by the Icelandic Confederation of Labour and the Confederation of State and Municipal Employees (BSRB), has published several reports that give a picture of the position of specifically defined groups in the labour market, including immigrants:

- Staða og lífsskilyrði fólks sem starfar við ræstingar (Situation and living conditions of people working in cleaning) (September 2023)<sup>125</sup>.
- Staða launafólks á Íslandi – Niðurstöður spurningakönnunar meðal félaga í aðildarfélögum ASÍ og BSRB (The situation of workers in Iceland - Results of a questionnaire among members of ASÍ and BSRB member associations) (May 2023),<sup>126</sup> (January 2022)<sup>127</sup> and (February 2021).<sup>128</sup>
- NEET-hópurinn: Staða og bakgrunnur ungmenna af erlendum uppruna utan vinnumarkaðar og skóla (The NEET group: the situation and background of young people of foreign origin not in education, employment or training) (September 2021).<sup>129</sup>
- „Við munum ekki styðja þig með neinum hætti, þú þarft bara að gera þetta sjálf“ – Upplifanir og reynsla ungra NEET-kvenna af erlendum uppruna (“We won't support you in any way, you just have to do it by yourself” - Experiences and experiences of young NEET women of foreign origin) (September 2021).<sup>130</sup>

<sup>125</sup> [https://www.rannvinn.is/\\_files/ugd/61b738\\_badfe435edd74cd0a4b5f605b73e0b11.pdf](https://www.rannvinn.is/_files/ugd/61b738_badfe435edd74cd0a4b5f605b73e0b11.pdf)

<sup>126</sup> [https://www.rannvinn.is/\\_files/ugd/61b738\\_42efc9dcc153415fa4726d21f521985e.pdf](https://www.rannvinn.is/_files/ugd/61b738_42efc9dcc153415fa4726d21f521985e.pdf)

<sup>127</sup> [https://www.rannvinn.is/\\_files/ugd/61b738\\_a832231abeed492cb01753df50838ab0.pdf](https://www.rannvinn.is/_files/ugd/61b738_a832231abeed492cb01753df50838ab0.pdf)

<sup>128</sup> [https://www.rannvinn.is/\\_files/ugd/61b738\\_ba2d63de6ecf43469c4b4e50f02cd99b.pdf](https://www.rannvinn.is/_files/ugd/61b738_ba2d63de6ecf43469c4b4e50f02cd99b.pdf)

<sup>129</sup> [https://www.rannvinn.is/\\_files/ugd/61b738\\_2707f7b72f794d19a7e60045fe3bc18a.pdf](https://www.rannvinn.is/_files/ugd/61b738_2707f7b72f794d19a7e60045fe3bc18a.pdf)

<sup>130</sup> [https://www.rannvinn.is/\\_files/ugd/61b738\\_884390cf43c54fe184bc36b59b67b72a.pdf](https://www.rannvinn.is/_files/ugd/61b738_884390cf43c54fe184bc36b59b67b72a.pdf)

In October 2022, the Institute of Social Science Research Institute of the University of Iceland presented the study *Einkenni starfa, vinnuumhverfi og ástæður brotthvarfs af íslenskum vinnumarkaði* (Characteristics of jobs, work environment and reasons for leaving the Icelandic labour market),<sup>131</sup> which was prepared at the request of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour. The Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour also commissioned the Social Science Research Institute of the University of Iceland to conduct a survey on the isolation of older people, where isolation and loneliness were analysed by origin. The results were announced in October 2023.<sup>132</sup>

A major research project is currently underway at the School of Education of the University of Iceland, entitled: *Immigrant women's experiences of employment-based violence (EBV) and intimate partner violence (IPV) in Iceland: A baseline exploration.*<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> [https://www.stjornarradid.is/library/02-Rit--skyrslur-og-skrar/Skyrsla\\_Felagsvisindastofnunar\\_einkenni\\_islensks\\_vinumarkadar.pdf](https://www.stjornarradid.is/library/02-Rit--skyrslur-og-skrar/Skyrsla_Felagsvisindastofnunar_einkenni_islensks_vinumarkadar.pdf)

<sup>132</sup> <https://www.stjornarradid.is/library/02-Rit--skyrslur-og-skrar/Ni%c3%b0urst%c3%b6%c3%b0ur%20k%c3%b6nnunar%20F%c3%a9lagsv%c3%adsindastofnunar.html>

<sup>133</sup> <https://iwev.hi.is/>

