

# Nordic Council of Ministers

## Working for all in Norden



**The Nordic countries have worked closely together on political issues for 50 years. Inter-parliamentary co-operation has been channelled through the Nordic Council, the forum for members of the Nordic parliaments, since 1952. Inter-governmental co-operation has been the remit of the Nordic Council of Ministers since 1971.**

Nordic co-operation is popular. Initial successes in the 1950s included the passport union, the common labour market and social policy conventions. Co-operation is so well established that most people take it for granted. The challenge now is to make sure progress continues and benefits all Nordic citizens. Nordic values are based on democratic concepts of participation in decision-making, human rights, social solidarity, gender equality and respect for minorities.

The people of the Nordic countries are joined together by language, culture and history. New impulses, from within the Nordic countries and from elsewhere, influence Nordic identity. The new century and the rapid pace of European co-operation and globalisation have thrown up a large number of new challenges.

A sustainable Norden needs to include the whole of society – equilibrium between competing demands and interests is the key to long-term sustainability. In other words, economic growth and competitiveness, which are essential to finance the Nordic welfare model, must be integrated with, and balanced against, the effects on the environment and on social policy.

Globalisation reduces the importance of political and economic borders. A globalised world brings new opportunities, but it also highlights inequalities and distortions. Other consequences of globalisation include increased international mobility and the growth of multicultural societies, which present new political and social challenges.

### **Nordic role in the new Europe**

Nordic co-operation increasingly reaches out to include the Adjacent Areas – Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, North-West Russia and the Arctic region. A fifth of the Nordic Council of Ministers' budget is earmarked for activities in these areas. Specifically, Nordic programmes support the development of democracy, the market economy, the sustainable use of resources and improvement of relations between the Adjacent Areas and the EU.

The Nordic countries also do their best to improve relations between the Nordic region and the EU. Topical EU issues are a standard agenda item at every meeting of the Council of Ministers. The three Nordic EU members – Denmark, Finland and Sweden – and the two Nordic countries that remain outside the EU but participate in the European Economic Area (EEA) – Iceland and Norway – agree that Nordic co-operation needs to be linked to European co-operation.

The so-called "Wise Men" published a report in late 2000 entitled "Norden 2000 – Open to the Winds of the World".

[www.norden.org/vis/vismansrapp.pdf](http://www.norden.org/vis/vismansrapp.pdf)

Its vision of Nordic co-operation is now being translated into practical policies. In "New Nordic Agenda – following up on the Wise Men's Report" published in 2001, the Nordic governments laid out their strategy for co-operation in the coming years.

[www.norden.org/web/3-1-raad/sk/nnd.pdf](http://www.norden.org/web/3-1-raad/sk/nnd.pdf)

Nordic co-operation develops all the time. One major challenge is to position the Nordic countries in the new Europe currently emerging from the EU expansion progress, which includes some of the countries in the Adjacent Areas around the Baltic Sea. Another challenge is to make sure that Nordic co-operation is capable of involving the Baltic region as well as the West-Nordic areas in the North Atlantic.

### **Five countries – and three autonomous territories**

The Nordic Council of Ministers brings together ministers from Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden, as well as the autonomous territories of Greenland, the Faroe Islands and Åland.

The presidency, which lasts for a year at a time, is held in turn by each of the five Nordic countries. In 2002 it is the turn of Norway, in 2003 Sweden.

Overall responsibility for the Nordic Council of Ministers lies with the prime ministers. In practice, however, responsibility is delegated to the ministers for Nordic co-operation and the Nordic Co-operation Committee. In addition to prime ministers and co-operation minis-

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ters, the Nordic Council of Ministers consists of the following specialist ministerial councils:

- *the labour market*
- *construction and housing*
- *energy*
- *trade and industry*
- *finance and economics*
- *consumer affairs*
- *food – including fisheries, agriculture and forestry*
- *information technology*
- *justice*
- *culture*
- *equality*
- *the environment*
- *drug abuse*
- *regional affairs*
- *health and social services*
- *transport*
- *education and research*

The Nordic prime ministers meet regularly, including before EU summits of heads of state and government. The foreign affairs and defence ministers also meet regularly, but outside the auspices of the Nordic Council of Ministers.

Decisions taken by the Nordic Council of Ministers must be unanimous.

## Co-operation between the Nordic governments

The main purpose of the Nordic Council of Ministers is to manage official co-operation between the governments of the Nordic countries. It has a budget of approximately DKK 800 million. Further details of the budget are available at: [www.norden.org/web/3-3-budget/sk/index.asp](http://www.norden.org/web/3-3-budget/sk/index.asp)

The individual countries contribute a percentage of gross national product to the budget. Spread over the more than 24 million Nordic citizens, the cost per capita is approximately DKK 30 per annum. The Secretariat of the Nordic Council of Ministers is located in Copenhagen. It has around 100 staff from

throughout the Nordic region and is headed by a secretary-general.

The Secretariat convenes and runs ministerial meetings, meetings of senior officials, conferences and seminars in collaboration with the country holding the presidency. The Council of Ministers is responsible for the implementation of ministerial decisions and for following up on recommendations made by the Nordic Council.

Close focus on political objectives and priorities ensures that the resources of the Council of Ministers are put to the best possible use, while collaboration with the Nordic Council and other national, Nordic and international organisations maximises synergy effects.

Through its information activities, the Nordic Council of Ministers disseminates information more widely, raising awareness of Nordic co-operation within and beyond the Nordic countries. The purpose of these information activities is to demonstrate the results and consequences of Nordic co-operation, above all to Nordic citizens. One method of achieving this is to highlight ways in which Nordic experiences might contribute to social developments in the rest of the world.

## Notable achievements

Nordic co-operation, spearheaded by the Nordic Council of Ministers, has achieved notable results that are felt in the everyday life of Nordic citizens.

Best known is the Nordic passport union from the 1950s, which allows Nordic citizens to travel freely throughout the Nordic region. Another well-known result is the Swan Label (the green environment swan), which now appears on over one thousand products, guaranteeing consumers that the products are eco-friendly.

Other results have helped lay the foundations for industrial success: e.g., the NMT network (Nordic mobile telephony) and the high-speed Nordunet, which gave the Nordic countries early access to high-speed Internet connections.

Other political results include the agreement on access to higher education in the Nordic countries, the agreement on access to upper secondary schools, conventions on the common labour market, on municipal voting rights and candidate eligibility, social policy conventions and a Nordic language convention.

Recent years have brought the “Strategy for a Sustainable Nordic Region” and “Hello Norden”, a helpline for ordinary Nordic citizens caught up in red tape, e.g. when moving from one Nordic country to another.

[www.norden.org/hallonorden/sk/index.asp](http://www.norden.org/hallonorden/sk/index.asp)

In addition to the formal co-operation under the auspices of the Nordic Council of Ministers, a great deal of informal co-operation takes place between the Nordic governments. The Nordic embassy complex in Berlin is a prominent example of practical co-operation outside the Nordic region.

## Institutions, foundations and funding bodies

More than 30 joint Nordic institutions are financed either partially or wholly by the Nordic Council of Ministers. The remit of these institutions is to deal with specific issues in specific areas. They have their own boards of management and budgets and vary in size from relatively small bodies with budgets of DKK 1 million or so, up to the Nordic Industrial Fund which is more than 50 times larger.

The Nordic Investment Bank, which is run by the five Nordic countries





from its headquarters in Helsinki, is the largest joint Nordic institution.

The Nordic Council of Ministers is responsible for approximately 1,200 ongoing projects.

For a complete list of joint Nordic institutions, see the home page [www.norden.org](http://www.norden.org) or the Nordic Council of Ministers' fact sheets for individual sectors.

In the culture sector, the Nordic Council of Ministers has established a Nordic House in both Reykjavik and Tórshavn and Nordic institutions on the Åland Islands and Greenland.

Information offices operate in the Baltic states and St. Petersburg, and cultural and information centres called "Norden in Focus" have been established in Oslo, Stockholm and Copenhagen.

Well-known foundations and funding bodies financed by the Nordic

Council of Ministers include the Nordic Cultural Fund, Nordic Film and TV Fund, Nordplus and Nordplus Mini (exchange programmes for children and young people), the Nordic Academy for Advanced Study and Nordic scholarship programmes for the Baltic States and North-West Russia.

#### **Foundations for the future...**

The Nordic Council of Ministers has registered increased awareness of, and interest in, the Nordic model of regional co-operation. The active interaction between members of parliament on the Nordic Council and the governments on the Nordic Council of Ministers is unique and has become a model for international co-operation elsewhere in the world.

It is a particular strength of Nordic co-operation that it permeates the Nordic societies at all levels and enjoys strong popular backing. No fewer than 91% of all Nordic citizens are aware of the Nordic Coun-

cil and Nordic Council of Ministers, and 74% favour closer Nordic co-operation.

Individually, the Nordic countries are as small now as they were 50 years ago. The international challenges have grown large and complex, however, so pooling resources in areas of common interests is still a major advantage.

The Nordic Council of Ministers aims to realise the major potential inherent in continued Nordic co-operation. Its ambition is to match the efficiency of the national governments and be flexible enough to solve the most important problems facing the Nordic countries and the Adjacent Areas.



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