

5. Iceland: COVID-19 handling strategy in Iceland: centralised and expert-led

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INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, material from a case study based on interviews in northern Iceland's Akureyri municipality is used to shed light on how and which governmental-level decisions or recommendations on crisis reactions were made and how actors at different levels reacted to and implemented these. The mayor of Akureyri, who had a very good oversight of how things developed, was interviewed, along with the chairman of the municipal council. This interview data is used here to investigate how decisions, including either recommendations or restrictions from the state level, were perceived at the local level. The findings will be considered in relation to how Iceland succeeded in fighting the pandemic.

PANDEMIC GOVERNANCE IN ICELAND

Iceland managed the COVID-19 pandemic comparatively well¹ in the Nordic context.

To give insight into the governance processes at the state level, we begin with three individuals at two state institutions who were the leading figures in reacting to COVID-19, offering recommendations and advice to the Minister of Health:² the Director of Health (*Landlæknir*), the Chief Epidemiologist (*Sóttvarnarlæknir*), and an officer from the Department of Civil Protection and Emergency Management. These three figures quickly became known as 'Þrieykið' ('the triad'). They worked closely together and held public meetings every working day for at least the first few months of the pandemic. The Minister of Health and Cabinet of Iceland also played important roles.

¹ <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/>.

² Chapter 3 in this book.

The COVID-19 pandemic was formally recognised in Iceland at the end of February 2020. As in other countries, this led to reactions on the national, regional and local scales. By the end of January 2020, people in relevant institutions saw the pandemic coming, and preparations had already begun at the highest levels. At a Cabinet meeting on 28 January, the Minister of Health presented a note titled ‘Upplýsingar um viðbrögð vegna kórónaveiru (2019-nCoV)’.³ She had received a memorandum from the Director of Health and the Chief Epidemiologist concerning reactions to the virus (Hrafnsson, 2020, p. 20).

The description above indicates that COVID-19 decision-making in Iceland was concentrated at the state level and the role of the local level was rather passive. This case study strives to showcase these governance structures as well as how people at the local level perceived the relationship with the state government.

Governance of the COVID-19 pandemic consisted of a specialist team suggesting courses of action to the Minister of Health that the Minister then brought to Cabinet meetings.

THE CASE: AKUREYRI MUNICIPALITY⁴

This case study considers the municipality of Akureyri in northern Iceland. The information collected derives almost entirely from an interview with the mayor of Akureyri and a follow-up interview with the chairman of the Town Council at the time of the pandemic.

Akureyri is the largest urban area outside the capital area of Reykjavík and the fifth biggest municipality in the country, with a population just below 20,000. Akureyri is the main centre of trade and services for northern Iceland.

The interview with the mayor of Akureyri⁵ was conducted on 14 February 2022. From the onset of the pandemic, she used a notebook to list any related information. This detailed record helped her to provide detailed and reliable information. We conducted a follow-up interview to fill gaps and understand the standpoint of a politician; this was completed in October 2022 with the chairman of Akureyri Town Council (2018–2022).⁶

³ In English: ‘Information on reactions to the Coronavirus’.

⁴ Most of the information on Akureyri is taken from their website (www.akureyri.is/en).

⁵ The mayor of Akureyri is (b. 1974) from West Iceland. She has been the mayor of Akureyri since 2018. She is not an elected member of municipal council.

⁶ The chairman of Akureyri Town Council 2018–2022 is from Akureyri born in 1967. Aside from being in local politics, she has been an air traffic controller at Akureyri Airport since 2010.

The frame for the analysis and interviews is the phase model, which is often used in crisis studies (see Chapter 1).

AKUREYRI AND COVID-19

Phase 1. Before the Pandemic and Start Phase

No crisis reaction plans had been prepared within the administration of Akureyri municipality before the pandemic.⁷ The only similar resource was a training on how to react to avalanches in the skiing facility located 400–500 meters above the town on Hlíðarfjall mountain. These exercises were recorded in a document on crisis reactions, but this was not published until February 2021 – a year after the pandemic broke out (*Viðbragðsáætlun vegna Hlíðarfjalls*, 2021). The only kind of plans at the local level that the mayor recalled was a document on crisis management and procedures prepared by the Federation of Municipalities. Hence, virtually no crisis reactions had been prepared within the Akureyri administration before the pandemic.⁸

No special skills, training, or knowledge related to crisis management or reactions were found within the town administration nor in its technical departments. The only skills and knowledge were concentrated within the local voluntary search and rescue organisation *Súlur*, which is part of the country-wide rescue NGO⁹ organisation *Icelandic Association for Search and Rescue (Landsbjörg)*. The police, the fire brigade, and the local power company (Norðurorka) also possess some skills and knowledge.

When asked about the beginning phase of the pandemic, the mayor said: ‘We in the highest administration and the decision-making organs first heard that something might be coming up on 24 January 2020, and the pandemic was first mentioned on 6 February at a meeting in the Civil Defence Committee (Almannavarnanefnd) – a week after the WHO’s declaration of an international emergency situation’. However, the first meeting on a reaction plan was not held until 27 February; this took place at the town police station. A status meeting was held in the same committee on 5 March. After this, a new organ

⁷ The chairman confirmed this in the interview.

⁸ Crisis reaction plans for several things exist in Akureyri but are not or are only partly the responsibility of the municipality. There are reaction plans connected to Akureyri Airport under the responsibility of state-owned ISAVIA. A crisis reaction plan for earthquakes in the Eyjafjörður region also exists. https://www.hsn.is/static/files/Vidbragdsaaetlanir/sept_2020/vidbragdsaaetlun-jardskjalfti-eyjafjo-utgafa-1.0.pdf. The power company Norðurorka, owned by the municipalities in the region has its own reaction plan related to water protection areas.

⁹ Non-governmental organization.

was constructed within the municipal administration: the ‘*Akureyri Crisis Group*’, which consisted of the mayor, the 11 elected councillors in the local council, and six directors of the six main divisions in the administration. This group had its first meeting on 16 March and met after that about three to four times a week. More people were soon added into this group, such as the Chief of the Fire Department and various managers in the primary school sector and the kindergarten sector. The foremost issue at this point was managing the pandemic and preparing a system that could be used.

At this point around mid-March, all administrative meetings had become digital, and many people were working from home. The mayor stated, ‘It is a fact that at this point, people were really scared of being infected in the city hall.’ Meetings in the town council became digital on 18 March when the Ministry of Local Government officially permitted all local governments in the country to have digital council meetings.

Phase 2. Acceptance of the Situation and Preparing to Face the Crisis

All information on the pandemic came from the Directorate of Health (state institution in Reykjavík), to which the Director of Health and the Chief Epidemiologist belonged. They worked closely with the officer from the Department of Civil Protection and Emergency Management. These actors recommended restrictions to the Minister of Health for meetings, schools, and other events. The last step in this decision-making process was that the Minister of Health suggested these recommendations to the Cabinet to make the final decision. All decisions on restrictions and recommendations for local governments came from above and were expert-driven.

The pandemic was declared internationally at the end of February, but the mayor noted that in Akureyri the crisis and its scope became very real in mid-March when the restrictions had to be implemented locally. Schoolchildren were sent home, and swimming halls and the skiing facility closed. Shifts in most of the town institutions as well as in schools were reorganised, and assembly limits (*sóttvarnarhólf*) were set to respect the restrictions on how many people were allowed to meet. The same applied to institutions for the elderly and the handicapped. The crisis had arrived in Akureyri. The chairman remarked that the wave of cases did not reach Akureyri as quickly as the capital area in the southwest, probably due to distances and the dramatic reduction in travel between regions. As such, the authorities in Akureyri had a little more time to prepare for the pandemic by seeing how others reacted and with what results.

The key actors in the municipality at this point were the Akureyri Crisis Group and people in management positions in the school and social sector. Other key institutions in the context but from outside the municipality were

the Akureyri Hospital and Health Care Institution of North Iceland, which operates health clinics in the region. Akureyri's connection with the central authorities in Reykjavík (Directorate of Health) was in no way direct at this time. All contacts were indirect and were through links between the local and the state level. These links were: (1) the Civil Defence Committee for the Eyjafjörður area; (2) the Police Authority in North-East Iceland; and (3) the chief of the Akureyri Fire Brigade, who was also responsible for ambulance services. According to the mayor, the situation for connections with actors at the state level was similar for all Icelandic municipalities except Reykjavík, which had direct contact from the beginning. One meeting was held with the Minister of Education about the situation in primary schools. Hence, any decentralisation of decision-making power to the municipal level was absent. Municipalities simply implemented what they had to regarding the restrictions and regulations from state authorities. The chairman of the local council shares this perception of these connections.

Phases 3 and 4. Mobilisation and Implementation of Actions

The mayor was clear about the connection and cooperation between politics and administration. Local politicians took a step backwards and left matters to the town administration, relinquishing power from the political side, she explained.

The municipality had contacts with and cooperated with other external actors outside the public sector to develop polycentric solutions to collective action problems (see Chapters 1 and 16). However, the mayor mentioned that there was no direct cooperation with other municipalities on the crisis reactions; instead, cooperation occurred through mutual regional institutions. However, contacts and cooperation with businesses in town was a fact, mostly regarding ensuring payment channels and issues connected to ensuring stable transportation of goods. Contact with *Almannaheill*, a third sector organisation, was also established. The chairman of the board tells us she went into quarantine rather early in the pandemic. She used part of her 'gained' time there to call owners and managers of the biggest firms in town to hear how things were going. She also noted that local businesses did not require anything from the municipality except to be left alone.

The mayor did not indicate that there were any tendencies to protest or opposition to state actions in the pandemic: 'The fear was overwhelming, and we never experienced any opposition or protests. People seemed to have full confidence in what was being decided and done.' When vaccinations arrived, some protesting voices emerged locally, but most of this resistance occurred nationally. Although decisions on vaccinations and vaccine types were 100% centralised, some municipalities came into the picture when vaccinations

began in early spring 2021. All vaccinations in Akureyri and its neighbouring areas were implemented at the Akureyri Fire Brigade Station. The municipality loaned the fire station (partly) to the state authorities, but the vaccinations continued there with contributions from the state. Additionally, the municipality invested substantial effort into sharing information about the vaccinations in schools and kindergartens. Handicapped individuals were vaccinated in their homes. At this point, the role of Akureyri town grew and was likely greater than in most other municipalities.

Phase 5. Re-opening Society and Learning

In autumn 2022, when the pandemic seemed to have diminished to the point that a total re-opening of society had occurred in most Western countries, it was time to look back and consider what we could learn. In Akureyri, there are several points to mention.

The mayor of Akureyri specified *changes in organisation and work procedures* in the administration and politics. In general, digital and electronic contacts and services increased significantly during the pandemic and technical breakthroughs can be discussed. All meetings remained digital, months into 2022, and various other processes have been introduced to increase efficiency and safety. Beyond the Akureyri administration, contacts, meetings and consultation between municipal mayors increased greatly – all this a consequence of the pandemic, according to the mayor. The chairman highlighted that the new approaches to meetings have lowered travelling costs as flying down to Reykjavík for a 30-minute meeting was now a thing of the past. Meetings became digital and many have remained so. This has also had a positive effect on the environment, producing a *smaller carbon footprint*.

Concerning democracy and the municipal institutions of democracy, a *broad political solidarity* between political parties and opponents became apparent. No disputes arose between parties in the majority and opposition. In Akureyri, this went so far that in autumn 2020 all six parties with mandates in the local council decided to work together, and those three that had been in the majority dissolved their coalition.¹⁰ This does not seem to have roots in disputes amongst the majority and was instead a reaction to meet new challenges. The pandemic therefore united people on the political scene. There was never any disagreement on methods or reactions. The chairman commented that ‘Our tasks were un-political’ and that there was never a question about policy or policymaking; they simply reacted to what came up. ‘Nobody wanted to be the

¹⁰ <https://www.icelandreview.com/politics/akureyri-city-council-abolishes-governing-majority/>.

boring one either,' as the mayor put it. It was only when the vaccinations came that protests and populist tendencies emerged, and this was more among the public than in the political arena in Akureyri.

The chairman's view on the most important lessons to be learned from the COVID-19 pandemic offers a nice closing point. Young people (15–25 years) were *prevented from physically attending school*. This social experience was taken from them, and they were among the prime victims of the pandemic. According to the chairman, in the case of another pandemic, we must be ready and have social solutions for young people so they will not be as isolated as in 2020–2022.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

The case study of Akureyri municipality in Iceland showcases how the COVID-19 pandemic was handled in Iceland. The Icelandic way of handling the crisis was highly centralised, with institutions at the state level making all the decisions and those at the local level (municipalities) implementing these decisions. A fresh report published by the Prime Minister's Office on the government's reactions in the pandemic states that though municipalities in Iceland have a constitutional right to decide their affairs, they are still a part of the executive power and therefore shall be seen as part of the government and subject to ministerial authorities (Forsætisráðuneytið, Október 2022). There is also clear evidence of how the interplay between politics and administration ended in a takeover by the administration in deciding reactions to this pandemic crisis – to the extent the municipality had any possibilities of making any decisions. In Akureyri, politicians stepped back, and administrators and experts took over. According to the chairman of the Town Council, the local politicians did not see managing the crisis as a political issue.

The case study of Akureyri presents a holistic picture of the individual, local, and state levels. Reactions to the pandemic in Iceland were characterised by top-down management. The mayor and leading politician of Akureyri at the time indicated that this was the case in other municipalities as well, nor does any other media suggest that this was different elsewhere. It seems reasonable to state that top-down steering was the general rule in Iceland's political system. A citizen survey conducted in all Nordic countries (see Chapters 20 and 21) in summer 2022 supports the fact that the people of Iceland were loyal to the state authorities.

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