

Reykjavik as an Intercultural City

Policy 2026-2030



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Contents

Introduction:	3
Definition of terms:	4
The policy:	5
Objectives of the action plan:	6
Department of Finance and Risk Management:	7
Department of Human Resources:	7
Department of Culture and Sports:	7
Department of School and Leisure:	8
Department of Environment and Planning:	8
Department of Welfare:	8
Department of Service and Innovation:	8
Human Rights Office:	8
Office of Chief Executive Officer:	9
Office of Communications and Events:	9
Appendices:	10
Terms of reference for the steering group:	10
Questions sent to departments and offices:	10
Reference documents:	11

Introduction:

At the City Council meeting on 23 September 2024, the terms of reference for a new steering group were approved. The group was tasked with formulating a comprehensive policy on matters concerning immigrants, refugees, and applicants for international protection. The steering group was also assigned to a comprehensive action plan for services to immigrants, refugees, and applicants for international protection within the city. This policy was to be a continuation of the City of Reykjavík's policy on matters concerning immigrants, refugees, and applicants for international protection, which was in effect from 2018 to 2022.

The main tasks of the steering group were:

- To analyse the situation of immigrants in the city by reviewing existing data, including a detailed analysis of current policies and action plans.
- To consult with stakeholders both outside and within the City of Reykjavík.
- To draft a comprehensive policy for Reykjavík as an intercultural city including an action plan guided by the principle of inclusion and the City of Reykjavík's intercultural declaration.

The work was based on the following factors: the City of Reykjavík as a public authority; as an employer; as a service provider; as a contracting party and client. The policy was to be based on the city's human rights policy and the guideline of the Intercultural Cities project, of which the City of Reykjavík is a member.

A great deal of important work concerning immigrants is carried out daily in the City of Reykjavík's operational units, such as Icelandic language teaching for children or measures to increase the participation of foreign children in organised leisure activities. This work has become established within the city and shall not be detailed here, nor is it part of the new impulses introduced here.

The working group was composed of Sabine Leskopf, chairperson, Magnea Gná Jóhannesdóttir, and Magnús Davíð Norðdahl. Magnús was later replaced by Oktavía Hrunn Guðrúnar Jóns, and Friðjón R. Friðjónsson and Sanna Magdalena Mörtudóttir also joined the group. The steering group's staff was initially Aleksandra Kozimala, and later Gerður Gestsdóttir Valgerðardóttir. The group was supposed to submit its findings to the City Council by the end of May 2025, but due to both staffing issues and a political changes in the city, the group's work was delayed, but delivered its report in November of the same year.

Shortly after the group's appointment, the Ministry of Social Affairs terminated its agreement with the City of Reykjavík regarding services for applicants for international protection. That agreement expired at the end of July 2025. This changed the City of Reykjavík's services, and the number of staff in this area was reduced. In June, it was also announced that the Ministry of Social Affairs did not intend to renew its agreement with the City of Reykjavík on the coordinated reception of refugees, which expires at the end of 2025. The plan was to transfer most of that service to the Directorate of Labour, and it therefore proved necessary to lay off

some of the staff. At the time this report is written, there is considerable uncertainty about how the City of Reykjavík's services for refugees will be organised in the coming years.

The steering group requested information from all departments on how this issue related to their work and what direction they want to take in the coming years based on the fourfold role of the City of Reykjavík as a public authority, employer, service centre, as well as contracting party and client. A list of the questions can be found in the appendix. Among other things, all departments were asked what priorities they want to emphasise in this area in the years 2026 to 2030. These answers will be important in the continuing work for their action plans.

This policy is a sub-policy of the City of Reykjavík's Human Rights Policy and the City of Reykjavík's Action Plan on Equality and Human Rights 2023–2026. Other current city policies were reviewed, and a preliminary analysis was carried out on how they include this issue in relation to the activities and responsibilities of each department. The policy was presented to councils and committees, particularly the Human Rights Council, which serves as the Multicultural Council. The council also held an open meeting with parents of foreign origin and suggestions from that meeting proved particularly valuable for this policy.

Definition of terms

Inclusion: Inclusion involves recognising and respecting that people are diverse and always accounting for that. Inclusion is about enabling all people to participate and allowing a diverse group of people to take part in decision-making.

People with diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds: People who have one or more mother tongues other than Icelandic and belong to more than one cultural environment. This can include people who have one foreign parent or were born in Iceland with both parents being foreign. This is a larger group than the one defined as immigrants.

Immigrant: A resident of Iceland who was born abroad and whose parents were also born abroad, as were both of their grandfathers and both of their grandmothers. This term also covers refugees.

Refugee: Individuals who have been granted a residence permit in Iceland as refugees. This can be a residence permit for international protection, subsidiary protection, humanitarian reasons, or due to mass displacement.

Asylum seeker: An individual who has arrived in the country and has requested international protection here but has not received it. People in this situation have neither a residence permit nor an ID number and enjoy very limited rights.

Interculturalism: Emphasising interculturalism refers to accepting, respecting, and acknowledging diverse cultures, backgrounds, and identities within society. The foundation of intercultural societies is a respect for diversity, equality, and meaningful intercultural interactions.

The Policy:

This policy is a guiding light for all the city's activities, and its priorities will be woven into all our operations and policymaking. Our work shall be based on the best knowledge and experience at any given time. Each city department shall take the lead within their own field and ensure that this policy and inclusive working methods are implemented in all their work. Immigrants are residents, employees, users, and/or partners of all departments and offices of the City of Reykjavík, and this shall be considered in all activities. Reykjavík's Multicultural Policy is one of the city's main policies and intertwined with its other policies, as almost all the city's activities directly or indirectly affect the health and well-being of all city residents. The Multicultural Policy supports, among other things, the goals of the Green Deal, which is the City of Reykjavík's action plan until 2030, with the aim of making the city economically, environmentally, and socially sustainable. By removing barriers for immigrants, the way is also paved for other groups in society, such as those who need easy-to-read texts, have dark skin, or have sign language as their mother tongue.

Reykjavík is an empowering, sustainable, and diverse urban community that encourages active participation, ensures safety, and promotes the well-being of all.

To promote positive development in a modern society, diversity must not only be accepted but celebrated.

1. The City of Reykjavík strives to welcome new residents.
2. The City of Reykjavík works according to an inclusive approach which includes, among other things, respecting that people are diverse and always keeping this in mind.
3. The City of Reykjavík strives to support civic participation of all inhabitants, to enable a diverse group of people to take part in decision-making processes on their own terms, to create a safe environment and to promote the well-being of all.
4. Residents of Reykjavík with diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds feel part of the city community and are given the opportunity to be active participants.
5. The City of Reykjavík acts in accordance with the principle of servant leadership and is a workplace that meets the needs of people regardless of their origin.

The City of Reykjavík has a fourfold role that affects how the city's units work with inclusion and interculturalism:

- As a public authority, the City of Reykjavík has set itself the goal of being at the forefront when it comes to equality, human rights and cooperation with residents of foreign origin. Decisions made on behalf of the city are transparent and guided by the interests of city residents and the city's duty to provide guidance. The city takes responsibility for establishing connections with and disseminating information to residents with diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

- As an employer, the City of Reykjavík works systematically against discrimination. Active efforts are made to ensure that employees can fulfil their potential in the city's workplaces, regardless of origin, and receive the support they need to fully utilise their abilities. Diversity is a strength, and the city aims to increase the number of immigrants in positions of responsibility.
- As a service provider, the City of Reykjavík works systematically and methodically to develop services, cultural activities, education and information dissemination for the benefit of a diverse society. Everyone should have equal access to services, which consider people's different needs. The city's staff take the initiative in making services available because they are aware that immigrants are less familiar with the administration and their rights than other residents. Positive communication and mutual respect are reflected in all of the city's services.
- As a contracting partner and client, the City of Reykjavík emphasises cooperation with other parties working on immigrant issues. Emphasis is placed on ensuring that all parties with whom the city does business respect the rights of their staff. The city supports the innovation of immigrants and their initiative in job creation.

Objectives of the action plan:

The following suggestions for action plans are based on responses and interviews with the City of Reykjavík's departments and serves as a basis for continued work in the departments themselves. New objectives are presented here, but the departments themselves will formulate actions to achieve these objectives, which they will submit to their respective council for approval, or to the City Council where applicable.

Immigrants make up around 20% of the city's population, but it is expected that the policy will benefit an even larger group, such as Reykjavík residents with darker skin who may experience similar challenges.

It is agreed that:

1. All departments and offices will familiarise themselves with this policy and analyse how this issue affects their operations in their roles as employer, service provider, contracting partner and client.
2. Subsequently, the departments shall develop time lined actions withing the scope of this policy, taking into account the new priorities suggested here.
3. The implementation plan for these actions will be submitted for approval to the relevant council by 1 March 2026 and will subsequently be referred to the preparation of operational and financial plans as applicable.
4. The Human Rights Office will follow up on the implementation of this policy and evaluate the progress of the action plan in the Human Rights Council once a year during the policy's term.

Department of Finance and Risk Management:

1. Analyse how social development regarding immigrants affects planning and long-term scenarios in the city's finances.
2. Analyse what data collection regarding residents of foreign origin is useful for both the department itself and other city policymaking.
3. Complete the review of the procurement policy and rules with a special emphasis on vulnerable groups.

Human Resources Department:

1. Actively increase the proportion of staff with diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds in positions of responsibility.
2. Analyse how inclusion can be a guiding principle in the new human resources and management policies.
3. Ensure that all workplaces participate in giving immigrants the opportunity to attend Icelandic courses during working hours. Analyse the financial need for substitutes in line with other educational activities.
4. Design a mentor project for staff who are learning Icelandic and explore the possibility of a reward system for that support.
5. Provide information for staff on Torgið (e-learning platform) about the assessment of education and experience from abroad.
6. Develop procedures for responding to comments regarding hate speech or discrimination, like procedures in bullying cases.
7. Develop an incentive system for staff to improve their Icelandic skills.

Department of Culture and Sports:

1. Seek ways to increase the participation of senior immigrants and refugees in sports and health promotion.
2. Seek ways to increase the participation of immigrants in cultural activities, both as artists and as users, cf. Reykjavík's cultural policy.
3. Strive to support non-governmental organisations of immigrants and others by supporting them through the free-of-charge or low-cost meeting facilities of the City Library and Hitt Húsið.

Department of Education and Youth:

1. Enhance the cultural sensitivity and multicultural competence of staff and their ability to work with all children with an emphasis on inclusion.

2. Support and empower parents of foreign origin in their role as school parents.
3. Create a platform and opportunities for increased social skills, networking and empowering communication for children in school and leisure activities.

Department of Environment and Planning:

1. Analyse how the department's activities as a service provider, employer and partner support inclusion.
2. Enhance the participation of marginalised groups in consultation processes.
3. Educate frontline staff about human trafficking.

Department of Welfare:

1. Increase the number of staff with diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds to support frontline services.
2. Enhance cooperation with parents of children of foreign origin with complex problems or social challenges.
3. Increase the activity and social participation of senior citizens of foreign origin.
4. Pay special attention to young people aged 16–18 with diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Ensure they have access to education, activities and other forms of empowerment that will strengthen them both now and in the future.

Department of Service and Innovation:

1. Work towards digital inclusion by ensuring that all digital services, applications and service portals are accessible and understandable in other languages.
2. Conduct a review of language use and how different groups experience access to digital information.
3. Work on expanding the use of the language model for machine translations in cooperation with the departments.
4. Support the democratic participation of people of foreign origin.

Human Rights Office

1. Review existing policies and action plans, see terms of reference.
2. Follow up on this policy annually.
3. Examine the status of immigrants among other groups covered by the human rights policy, such as LGBTQ+, disabled people, senior citizens, etc.

Office of Chief Executive Officer:

1. Finalise the language policy with an emphasis on changes in society and the impact on communication in Icelandic, as well as quality criteria for communication in other languages.
2. Enhance data collection on the participation of immigrants in the city community (democratic participation, staff, service users) with special regard to data protection considerations.

Office of Communications and Events:

1. Emphasise improved information dissemination to immigrants.
2. Improve access and encourage participation in city events.

Appendices

Terms of Reference for the Steering Committee

Questions sent to departments and offices

1. Does the department have a specific policy regarding immigrants? Are they specifically mentioned in the policies that concern the department? If not, why not?
2. Are specific staff members formally responsible for overseeing and having knowledge of the department's work concerning immigrants? Is this their full-time job, a defined part-time role, or just alongside other duties? If not, why not?
3. Is data collected on the department's activities and used to improve work and policy, e.g., regarding users, staff, or partners? Is this data analysed by origin? If not, why not?
4. What statistics are missing that could help the department to enhance its work and policy?
5. Is information intended for staff, partners, and users of the department accessible to those who do not speak Icelandic (website, brochures, forms, applications, etc.)? If not, why not?
6. Are there any actions from the last policy that the department considers important to continue in the next policy and action plan?
7. What emphasis does the department want to place on this issue in the years 2026 to 2030?

Reference Documents

Skills and labour market integration of immigrants and their children in Iceland, OECD 2024.

ICC index analysis 2020: Reykjavík, Intercultural Cities 2020.

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Model framework for an intercultural integration strategy at the national level. Intercultural integration strategies: Managing diversity as an opportunity. Steering committee on anti-discrimination, diversity and inclusion (CDADI) 2021.

Rethinking welcoming policies from an intercultural perspective. Intercultural Cities. 2022

Green urban planning for intercultural cities. Intercultural Cities. 2022