

# Governance of COVID-19

Iceland

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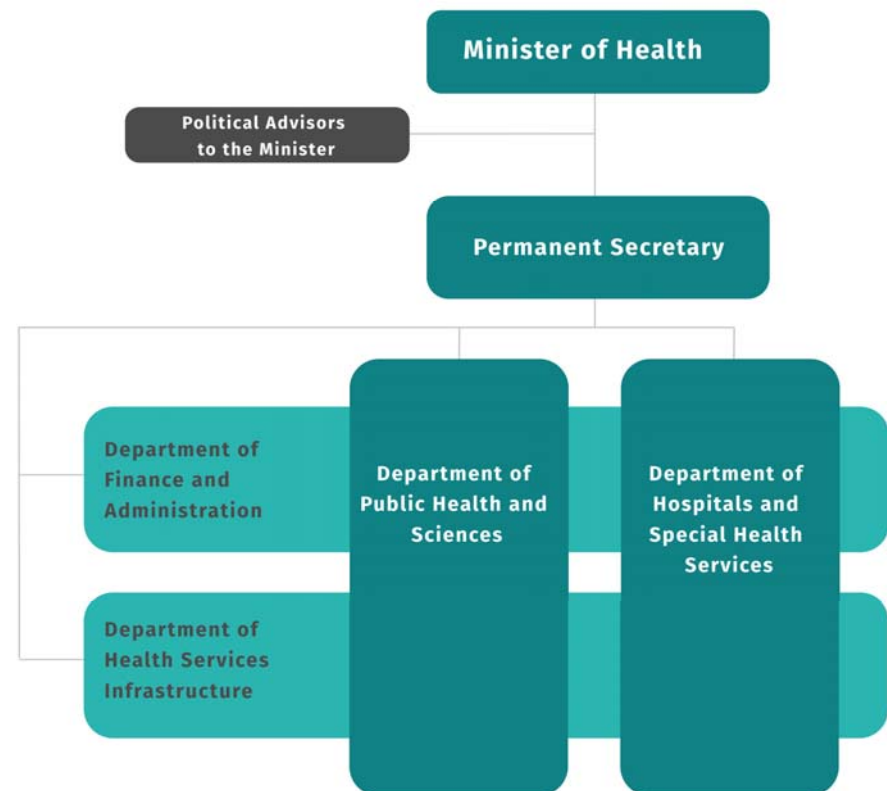
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# Characteristics of the governance system

- Iceland is a parliamentary representative democratic republic. The President is the Head of State but the Prime Minister serves as the Head of Government.
- Alþingi, the Icelandic parliament, has 63 representatives that have legislative powers elected every fourth year.
- Traditionally the country is governed by a coalition government. Currently the cabinet consists of 11 Ministers in 10 Ministries.

# Governance of the Health Care System

- The Ministry of Health is responsible for governing the health care system in Iceland and developing health policy
- Major agencies under the Ministry are: the Directorate of Health, Landspítali University Hospital in Reykjavík and the Hospital in Akureyri, Healthcare centers and the Icelandic Medicines Agency
- Health care centers that provide primary health care are located throughout the country and are all funded and administered by central government



# COVID-19 pandemic

- **Timeline for 2020**

- **January 27 - 'Uncertainty alert level' regarding coronavirus declared in Iceland**
- **February 28- First case detected**
- **March 16- First ban of gatherings and public events over 100 people announced, high schools and universities closed and elementary schools remained open with restrictions**
- **March 22 - The Minister for Health announces further restrictions on gatherings in line with recommendations from the Chief Epidemiologist. The limit is set at 20 people**
- **April 24 - Everyone arriving in Iceland must quarantine for 14 days from arrival**
- **May 25 - Easing of restrictions on gatherings and school operations**
- **June 15- Passengers arriving in Iceland can take a COVID-19 test instead of having to quarantine for 14 days**
- **22 August - 2058 numbers of confirmed cases (or 0,56% of the total population)**
- **22 August - Number of fatalities 10 (or 0,0027% of the total population)**

# Governance of COVID-19

- The Icelandic government has based their decisions and actions on the experience and knowledge of experts and academics, placing them in the frontline of decision making
- The Directorate of Health and the Department of Civil Protection and Emergency Management are the responsible government agencies leading efforts to curb the pandemic
- Researchers at the University of Iceland have contributed to the fight by developing a prediction model for the number of individuals diagnosed with COVID-19 to help with decision making
- When the hospital had trouble testing all that had symptoms, deCODE genetics, a biopharmaceutical company based in Reykjavík, stepped in and began screening the general public
- Trust in the healthcare system has not measured higher in 20 years, with 77% of the population having a high level of trust in the healthcare system and 92% of the population being happy with the governments infection controls

# COVID-19 and economies

- The Icelandic government did not resort to a full national lockdown but responded to the pandemic with effective information disclosure to the public, extensive testing to ensure early diagnosis of infection, quarantine at home for people exposed and isolation for infected persons
- The general public has for the most part been satisfied with the governments measures for infection control and has adhered to regulations
- There have been some reservations from business owners and the travel industry regarding the economic effects of COVID- 19 restrictions
- The Government of Iceland introduced economic counter measures with state-backed bridging loans for companies, deferral of tax payments, financial support for the tourism sector and up to 75% of salaries paid as part-time unemployment benefits, as well as a campaign encouraging Icelanders to travel domestically to support the tourism industry

# COVID-19 and borders

- Iceland in contrast to some of its neighbouring countries did not close its borders
- In the beginning of the pandemic everyone coming to the country was subjected to a 14 day quarantine
- The rules on the borders were revised in June 2020 when the first wave was over. Travelers arriving in Iceland were given the opportunity to be tested for COVID-19 rather than be quarantined for 14 days
- After a period of rather slack controls regarding travelers arriving in Iceland, infections started to rise again in August. This led to stricter regulations with travelers needing to undergo two tests for COVID-19 with a five day interval quarantine or decline testing and quarantine for 14 days

# COVID-19 vaccines

- The Icelandic government made agreements with the European Medicines Agency regarding buying coronavirus vaccines
- Iceland has signed contracts with Pfizer, Moderna, Astra Zeneca and Jansen
- First shipment of vaccines arrived in the country on December 28th
- As of April 9, 27.801 individuals have been fully vaccinated and 58.567 individuals have received the first dose
- Growing frustration in Iceland regarding slow start of vaccinations. Media discussion about the government failing to procure enough vaccines through their deal with the EU



# Conclusion: Lessons and prospects

- Iceland had a national pandemic response plan in place before the pandemic hit
- Because of the threat of natural hazards the civil protection and emergency management system is very strong in Iceland
- Wide spread and proactive testing and contact tracing was easier because of the small size of the population
- The government's strategy was to ensure that the infrastructure, especially health care, would withstand by flattening the curve, protecting the elderly and making sure that all necessary equipment was available
- A partnership with the private sector was key. Partnering with deCODE Genetics based in Reykjavik made widespread testing possible
- The pandemic revealed the same vulnerability as in the economic crisis in 2008 – a reliance on a limited number of sectors
- The heavy dependence on the tourism sector that saved Iceland's economy after the crash in 2008 has had tremendous negative effects on Iceland's economy following the COVID-19 crisis