

Innledning, Barents e-helsemøte 8. desember 2020

Statssekretær Audun Halvorsen

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen, friends of the Barents region

It is a great pleasure to welcome you all to this meeting. When Norway organised the first ever Barents health ministerial meeting in November last year, we expressed our ambition to follow up with an expert meeting to discuss digital tools for better health care.

We are very pleased to see politicians and experts gathered here for the discussions we are hosting today

together with our close partner, Västerbotten, the chair of the Regional Council. As chairs, our task is to continue to strengthen cooperation between the national and regional levels. The joint working group on health and social issues includes both national and regional participants. It is a good example of the unique dynamic between the two levels and illustrates Barents cooperation at its best.

I would like to thank the chairs of the group, Sweden and Karelia, for their hard work and for joining us today, at the political level, in these demanding times.

Norway chose **health** as one of our **chairmanship priorities** because this is an issue that **concerns us all**. The health and well-being of the **individual** is also a very important dimension in ensuring **dynamic and resilient Barents societies**. Of course, when planning for our chairmanship, we had no idea that international health cooperation and modern solutions would assume such a **pivotal place** on the international agenda.

The COVID-19 **pandemic** has demonstrated the need for dialogue and exchange across borders in the north all too clearly. **Societies in the Barents region are vulnerable**.

Many of our Arctic societies are remote, which has been underscored by the closing of borders due to the pandemic. Our young people have expressed concern regarding feelings of isolation and mental health problems. Issues that seem to have grown worse during the past months.

At the same time, however, we have seen just how strong our cooperation truly is. We are fortunate to be building on friendship and ties that extend back nearly three decades. At the digital high-level meeting on 26 October we all witnessed the strong commitment exhibited by the members of the Barents Euro-Arctic Council. As chair

Norway is determined to keep up the political momentum and make sure we move forward with energy and purpose. We will continue to work to expand the potential and the opportunities the Barents region has to offer.

People-to-people contact is the backbone of our cooperation, and we look forward to the day when cross-border activities can resume. We are confident that a new financial mechanism will give greater substance to Barents cooperation and provide much-needed support to the working groups. We hope to be able to launch a Barents financial mechanism by the end of our chairmanship.

Let me take this opportunity to thank Russia, Sweden and Finland for their support and valuable input in this process. Hopefully, once it has been established, the mechanism will also promote even stronger cooperation on health.

Knowledge is another priority of the Norwegian chairmanship. Education, research and competence are vital components of the health sector. Our medical experts have been working together for many years and Barents health cooperation is a success story.

We must also be able to work across sectors. Innovation and new technology will play an important part in solving

the health and social challenges that we face today in the Barents region.

For the Norwegian Government the input of young people has been a valuable added dimension to our work - in the Barents cooperation and in our Arctic policy in general. We appointed a youth panel to provide input to our newly published white paper on the Arctic. As chair of the Barents Euro-Arctic Council we cooperate with the Barents Regional Youth Council. This has inspired us. Many of the most forward-looking visions for the Arctic region come from our young people.

Therefore, I am pleased that we will be hearing from ambitious young entrepreneurs at today's meeting. We are proud to have Maria Arlén from Lifeness on the programme. Maria's company has provided a digital solution that can promote better health for many through lifestyle changes. This is what real entrepreneurship is about. Last week Lifeness was awarded the Social Entrepreneur of the Year prize by Prime Minister Erna Solberg.

Health is a topic of great importance to all of us. To find the best solutions, politicians, experts and businesses need to join forces and discuss how to proceed.

We need political leadership, we need knowledge, and we need innovation. All of this is the focus of today's expert meeting on e-health. So, on behalf of the Norwegian MFA, it is again my honour to welcome you and to launch today's discussions.

Thank you