

## What is Barnahus and how it works

### What is Barnahus?

Barnahus (which literally means Children's House) is a **child-friendly, interdisciplinary and multi-agency** centre for child victims and witnesses where children could be interviewed and medically examined for forensic purposes, comprehensively assessed and receive all relevant therapeutic services from appropriate professionals.

Barnahus originates in the Child Advocacy Model adopted in the US in the 1980s. It was firstly implemented in 1998 by Iceland followed by other Nordic countries (Sweden in 2005, Norway in 2007, Greenland in 2011, Denmark in 2013) under the name „Barnahus“ or Children's House.

The Barnahus model was adopted in order to create a specific legal system that responds to the special needs of children about whom there is suspicion that they have been subjected to violence or abuse. It also derives from the principle that the needs of children in these cases are totally different from those of adults in the same situation.

### The scope of Barnahus

- To ensure that children and adolescents who have been exposed to various types of abuse and crime receive **appropriate assessment, treatment and support**.
- To avoid subjecting children to repeated interviews by many agencies in different locations. Research has shown that when this happens, it can be very traumatic for the child. This **“re-victimization”** can even have more harmful effects on the child than the abuse itself. Furthermore research has shown that repeated interviews carried out by people that are not specifically trained in forensic interviewing are likely to distort the child's account of events by suggestive questioning and have a detrimental effect on criminal investigations.
- To provide a **child friendly environment for investigative interviews** which reduces the level of anxiety of the child which in turn is crucial for successfully eliciting the child's disclosure.

Simply said, the Barnahus exists to serve the best interests of all children and, also, to ensure due process of law.

### Target group

- children about whom there is a suspicion of sexual abuse (Iceland);
- children who are suspected or had been subjected to violent crimes (crimes against life and health), unlawful deprivation of personal freedom, trafficking,

unlawful duress, unlawful threat, harassment and other crimes (crimes against freedom and peace) (Sweden);

- children who have witnessed violence against a relative (Sweden);
- women subjected to female genital mutilation (Sweden);
- adults with developmental disabilities (Norway).

## Environment

- The premises are located in residential areas and the interior is child friendly;
- Most of the Children`s Houses have no operations for adult perpetrators on their premises.

## Services provided

- Forensic interviews
- Medical examination
- Therapeutic services
- Family Counselling/ Support

## How it functions

A Barnahus is described as having four ‘rooms’ and each contains a particular operation. These are: criminal investigation, collaboration/protection, physical health and mental health. Moreover, Barnahus is a place at which the social services, the police, the public prosecutor’s office, forensic medicine, pediatrics and child and adolescent psychiatry (CAP) can confer and collaborate, particularly in the initial stages of the preliminary investigation and the social investigation.

### ***Interview***

The child is interviewed in a special room by a trained investigative interviewer according to evidence based protocol and it is adapted to the child’s developmental age.

### ***Listening-in***

In order to spare the child from having to tell his or her story on several occasions and to several individuals, the interview is observed in a different room (a listening-in room) by a judge, who is formally in charge of the procedure, a social worker from the child protection authorities, the police, the prosecution, the defense attorney and the child’s advocate. The interview is videotaped and is used in court at the main proceedings if an indictment is made. This arrangement makes it possible to do with only one interview with the child as the child need not appear in court.

### ***Medical examination***

After the interview the child may have the medical examination in the medical room of the house. The job of healthcare personnel at a Barnahus is to investigate the child’s

somatic status, assess the presence of injuries, and investigate, assess and meet the child's need for somatic treatment. The purpose of the medical investigation is to document injuries and issue a forensic certificate on the basis of the examination results.

***Crisis support and treatment***

Crisis support for children, parents and other family members may be offered on site by specially appointed personnel or team members, as long as the investigation and the legal process are ongoing or they may be referred to other care providers at another site.

The House also provides **treatment services** for child victims of sexual abuse and their families. The child is assessed for therapeutic purposes and an individual treatment plan is designed and executed either at the facilities or, if the child lives outside of the capital area, as near to her/his home as possible.

*The overview has been prepared by Felicia Nica for Child Protection Hub for South East Europe, 2016.*