



Old town in Fredrikstad



Viken County, Norway

General overview

Viken County was established in 2020 after a regional reform in Norway. The three former counties, Akershus, Østfold and Buskerud, were merged into one large region surrounding the capital, Oslo. Today, with an area of 24 595 km² divided into 51 municipalities, Viken is the most populated region in Norway with a population of 1 252 384 inhabitants (23% of the population (2021) (1). The gross domestic product (GDP) per capita is NOK 687 388 (2020) (€67 294 (2) and life expectancy at birth for males and females, respectively, is 81.6 and 84.7 years (3).

Viken has coastline, mountainous and agricultural areas. More than half of the region is forest and 10% of its total area is protected under the Nature

Conservation Act. This applies to national parks, nature reserves and landscape conservation areas.

Regional responsibility for areas, such as education, culture, planning, public health, transport, dental care and regional development lies with the democratically elected Viken County Council. The Council's aim is to promote public health through all service areas.

Norway is a well-developed welfare state in which overall public health is good; however, the three former counties differed on several public health measures, hence there is a large variation in public health within the region.

Regional activities linked to the WHO European Programme of Work

The following activities are linked to the three core priorities of the European Programme of Work (EPW): (i) moving towards universal health coverage (UHC); (ii) promoting health and well-being; and (iii) protecting against health emergencies).



Moving towards UHC

The Norwegian Government is responsible for providing health care in accordance with its stated goal of equal access to health care regardless of age, race, gender, income, or place of residence. The system is financed through taxes stipulating certain payment conditions and all residents are covered by the National Insurance Scheme. Social-security contributions finance public retirement funds, sick-leave payment and, for some patient groups, the reimbursement of extra health-care costs. Responsibility for primary health and social care lies with the municipalities, the Ministry of Health and Care Services playing an indirect role through legislation and funding mechanisms. The Ministry plays a direct role in the provision of specialist care through its hospitals and directives to the boards of the regional health-care authorities. Responsibility for public dental care lies with the county councils in the country.

Norway ranks among the highest of the member countries of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development in terms of absolute expenditure per capita on health. In 2020, 11.3 % of the GDP went to health expenditure (4).



Promoting health and well-being

The United Nations 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (5) form the basis of societal development in Viken, in basically everything the county does. The important goal of reducing social inequalities is related to all the work being carried out. In addition, Norway has passed the Norwegian Public Health Act, the aim of which is to strengthen social development towards the promotion of public health and the reduction of social inequity in health through long-term, systematic public health work. The Act stipulates that public health work shall promote population health and well-being, as well as good social and environmental conditions, and contribute to the prevention of mental-health problems and somatic diseases. Listing responsibilities at the local (municipality), regional (county) and national (country) levels, it specifies that the local and regional levels are the key stakeholders, but that it is the responsibility of the national level to support them.

Viken County Council has the overarching responsibility for promoting good public health in the region. This includes monitoring the status and key determinants of the health of the population and ensuring that health is included in all regional policies.



Protecting against health emergencies

Work to protect against health emergencies in Norway is organized at the national level. Protecting the population from and preventing the transmission of infectious diseases are central to the work of the Ministry of Health in the area of infection control.

The organization of infection control in Norway is characterized by the fact that the primary responsibility for infection control has been assigned to the municipal health services.

The National Health Preparedness Plan incorporates the overall framework for the prevention and management of all types of crises and disasters by the health and care sector.

The Infection Control Act and its regulations shall ensure that the authorities implement the necessary infection-control measures, coordinate their activities, and safeguard the rights of the individual.

Actions linked to the EPW flagship initiatives

(The Mental Health Coalition; Empowerment through digital health; The European Immunization Agenda 2030; Healthy behaviours: incorporating behavioural and cultural insights.)

Initiatives relative to the Mental Health Coalition

The Norwegian Directorate of Health has initiated measures to strengthen the efforts of the municipalities long term in promoting the health and quality of life of the population. A programme has been set up on the prevention of mental ill-health and substance abuse in children and adolescents, which is a central topic. The programme comprises 33 projects, focusing on improving mental health.

The COVID-19 pandemic and related lockdown measures have affected children and young people negatively in various ways. Viken County Council has set aside NOK 19 million for activities to help counteract these consequences. The aim was to strengthen low-threshold services in order to promote good mental health among children and adolescents. Nineteen projects in the region have received funding. Municipality and nongovernmental organizations are cooperating in running these projects, which must be free of charge and accessible to all.

Initiatives relative to empowerment through digital health

As an additional service provided in schools, Viken county has introduced an electronic health-care app entitled, "Student Service". All pupils in upper-secondary education are eligible to receive electronic health care through the app by means

of which they can chat with professionals about physical health, mental health, education, family relations, school environment, etc.

Initiative specific to Viken county

The regional planning strategy for Viken is based on the SDGs (5) and will serve as a driver for related work. Currently, Viken is working on a new regional master plan. This will be innovative in that, instead of there being many separate, smaller plans for the different areas, there will be three major plans, covering all areas. These will be:

1. the regional plan for increased quality of life, participation and equality;
2. the regional plan for competence and value creation;
3. the regional plan for area and mobility.

The three most important topics for collaboration within the Regions for Health Network

These are:

1. learning and sharing
2. creating synergies with other regions
3. international collaboration.

Main partners and collaborators

In Viken, the 51 municipalities are important partners in action related to public health. The Department of Public Health facilitates a network of professionals working in the field of public health in the region.

In addition to partnerships with the municipalities, cooperation with academia is very valuable. Viken county has formalized agreements with two of its largest academic institutions, namely, the Norwegian University of Life Sciences and Østfold University College.

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