

High North Cooperation Report 2024





High North Cooperation (HNC) Report 2024

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High North Cooperation (HNC)

1 Introduction

The overall purpose of HNC cooperation is to further strengthen and expand regional cooperation in civil preparedness between the counties through:

- Establishing a process and framework for cooperation within the area of civil preparedness.
- Mutual learning and exchange of knowledge on general organizational principles and experiences in the field, focusing on areas of common interests and responsibilities.

The objectives are to increase contact across national and county borders, extend existing networks and establish points of contact within civil preparedness units at regional level.

The regional cross-border cooperation is based on a jointly prepared MoU document, which was updated in 2024. The first MoU was signed in 2016. Several facts show that close cooperation in High North is needed now more than ever.

The most important issues related to HNC cooperation in 2024 have been compiled in this report.

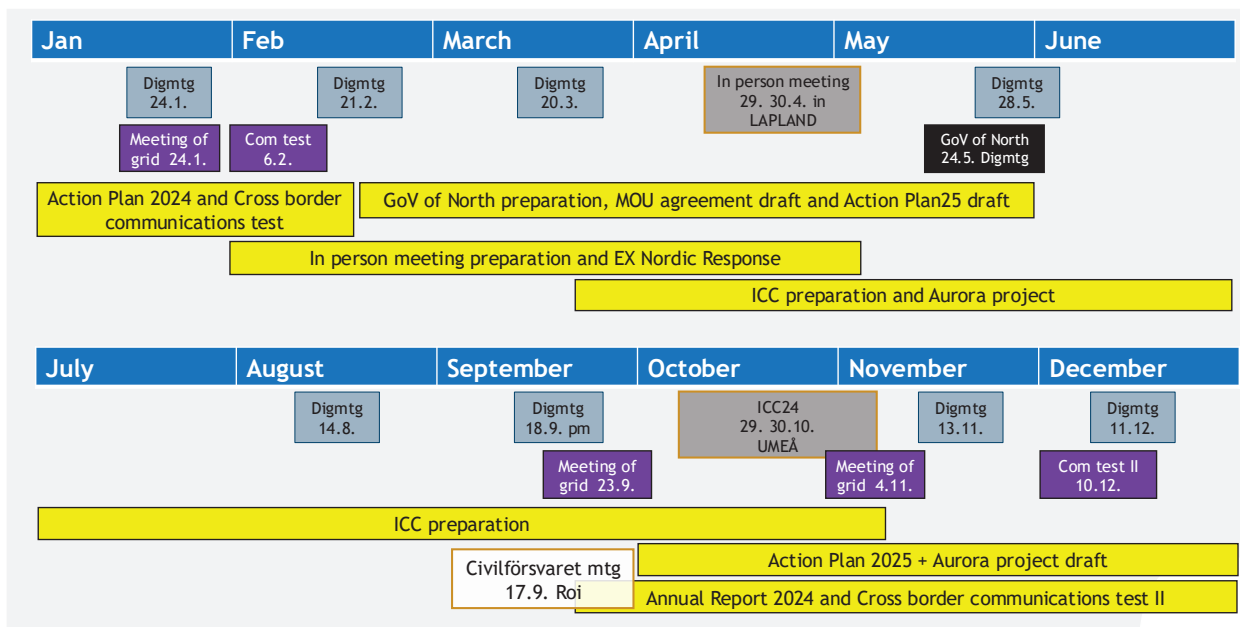
2 Action plan and goals 2024

The updated action plan 2024 was approved at the first HNC meeting of the year on the 24th of January. The principles and goals of the actions are based on the active and diverse cooperation between the actors in the region in 2023-24. Cooperation has deepened since the significant change in the security environment led to Finland and Sweden applying and being accepted as NATO members.

Regular cooperation is structured in monthly situation and coordination meetings. The in-person event of the HNC group took place in Rovaniemi in April. In addition, several planning meetings have been organized: meetings of the crises communication network, connection tests, situation briefs in Nordic Response 24 exercise and national Northern Finland SÄDE24 exercise, Aurora project meetings and especially preparations for the International Cooperation Course 2024 (ICC24) event

The HNC timeline of plans for the year 2024 is shown in the picture.

High North Cooperation - Timeline 2024



Aluehallintovirasto
Regionförvaltningsverket
Regional State Administrative Agency
Northern Finland and Lapland



Länsstyrelsen
Västerbotten
County Administrative Board
of Västerbotten



Länsstyrelsen
Norrbotten
County Administrative Board
of Norrbotten



Statsforvalteren i Nordland
County Governor of Nordland



Statsforvalteren i Troms
County Governor of Troms and Finnmark

3 Realized events and projects

MoU document update

The original Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) regarding cooperation on civil emergency preparedness between parties was written and signed in 2016. There was a need for updating the document and the work started already in 2023. All parties were involved with suggestions and the issues were discussed in detail at Rovaniemi meeting in April. Governors and Director Generals reviewed and verified the document on their annual meeting and the MoU was signed electronically in August.

The main changes in the new 2024 MoU are:

- The concept of civil preparedness is widened from emergency preparedness to all civil preparedness including crisis communication.
- This wide cooperation is based on comprehensive security.
- The name High North Cooperation (HNC) was launched.
- Objectives and subjects of sharing information were clarified.
- The need for yearly action plan and long-term targets was emphasized.

Governor's meeting May 2024

Governors North meeting took place in May as a digital meeting. The following ongoing HNC activities 2024 were introduced in the meeting:

- International Cooperation Course (ICC) 2024
- Communication test for responsible regional officials
- EU Interreg Aurora project application plans for HNC actions
- Pocket Guide 2023
- Action Plan 2025 and Medium-Term Plan Goals
- HNC Website and SharePoint platform
- HNC Contact List and Contact Cards.

High North Cooperation meeting April 2024 in Rovaniemi

At the planning meeting of the HNC group, there was an extensive discussion about the basis of the cooperation as well as goals and joint projects. At the same time, drafts of short and medium-term operations were drawn up. The meeting served as a preparatory meeting to produce the content for the governors' meeting. An idea of a joint risk assessment as a basis for cooperation was born in the meeting.

It is very important to organize an annual planning meeting to ensure the basis of HNC operations and ongoing projects. It is also important to know the regions HNC actors personally.

The MoU document as well as the short- and long-term goals for cross-border cooperation were approved at the meeting.

International Cooperation Course (ICC) 29.-30.10.2024

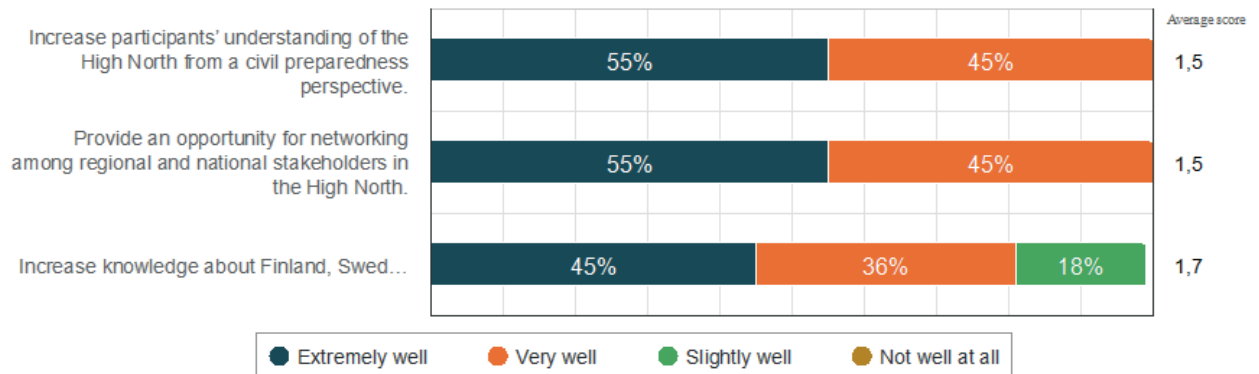
The most important HNC cooperation event was the ICC24 in Umeå. The focus of the ICC was NATO's fifth baseline requirement: the ability to deal with mass casualties and disruptive health crises. The course brought together stakeholders and experts from Finland, Sweden, and Norway for two days of networking, briefs, and workshops.

Course aims were:

- Increase participants' understanding of the High North from a civil preparedness perspective.
- Provide an opportunity for networking among regional and national stakeholders in the High North.
- Increase knowledge about Finland, Sweden, and Norway from a civil preparedness perspective with a special focus on management of mass casualties and disruptive health crises.

Target group: Regional-, municipal-, and national healthcare authorities, rescue services, armed forces, police/boarder guard and volunteer organizations. Total number of participants and organizers was about 60 persons.

The achievement of goals for the ICC24 was satisfactory as most respondents of the evaluation thought the goals were achieved extremely well or very well, as illustrated below.



Respondents also thought that it was an excellent opportunity to network and more events like the ICC needs to be organized.

Communication tests I-II

As part of the HNC cooperation year 2023 the FINOSE call groups were tested for the first time in Virve-Rakel-Nødnett. Several call groups could not be tested due to connection problems. As a result, it was decided that more tests had to be arranged.

Communication test I/2024 was arranged in February. In this test the call groups which were not available in 2023 were tested. As a result, the goals were achieved in the joint talk groups of the three countries (FINOSE) and almost bilaterally (FINO, FISE and NOSE). After test I/2024 also some minor checkups were done to the bilateral talk groups.

Test also included individual calls. The test results were variable. Detailed test results have been reported at HNC main group meetings. Problems with individual calls were possibly caused by the country's call settings or parameterization. The numbers and their logic vary from country to country, which is why the usability of individual calls is weak.

Communication test II/2024 was arranged in December. This test was organized for regional authorities in Finland, Norway and Sweden. A total of 23 authorities participated from emergency services, police and social and healthcare services.

Northern Finland radiation SÄDE24 exercise

The main goal of SÄDE24 regional preparedness exercise was to develop the region's preparedness for radiation hazard situations by improving capabilities for cooperation and updating contingency plans regarding the theme.

In connection with the exercise a cross-border situation meeting was organized as alarm notification with HNC group. The current exercise situation of the radiation threat was presented and at the same time a warning order was given.

Nordic Response/Steadfast Defender 2024 February – May

During the Steadfast Defender 2024 exercise in the northern region of Sweden, Finland and Norway, civil cooperation was substantial on both national and international levels. The collaboration between civil authorities and the military was crucial to ensure smooth integration of military operations with civil administration activities. Civil authorities played a key role in managing traffic and minimizing potential disruptions, which was vital given the high volume of traffic during the exercise.

During March, regular situation awareness meetings were held online, where information was shared using HNC network. Situation reports focused on logistics and security updates. Regular meetings were held until April when most troops were moved to Rovajärvi exercise area. Exercise highlighted the meaning of civil – military cooperation in enhancing overall resilience and preparedness. These observations will be used in planning future exercises (Lappi25 TTX and Rescue Borealis 2025) to ensure even better integration and effectiveness.

Troms & Finnmark's primary mission during Nordic Response was Host Nation Support. This included organizing and coordinating daily meetings between the civilian and military sides. The goal of the meetings was to share information of various kinds to contribute to the best possible common situational picture both in the exercise area but also in other areas in the county. An important part is to identify whether there are conditions outside the exercise that could affect the exercise in some way and that needed to be handled. The feedback on doing this was positive.

Troms & Finnmark agreed with the Finnish colleagues that Nordic Response would be used to share information as a basis for a common situational picture. We had regular meetings on an unclassified digital platform. From our point of view, this worked very well. We identified in the meetings that we had a lot of common information and that we also had different information that supplemented our situational picture. As a result, the exercise objective was achieved.

One thing we see is the need to look at how we can interact with each other on other communication platforms, both unclassified and restricted.

Interreg Aurora, High North Civil Preparedness Forum (HNCPPF)

In an effort to further increase knowledge and strengthen cooperation between Norway, Finland and Sweden a project application group has been formed. The groups task is to create a project application and apply for funding through the program Interreg Aurora (EU). Planning will continue until the 17th of March when the deadline for call 6 is.

The aim of the Interreg Aurora project is to support cross-border activities related to deepening cooperation to achieve long-term goals.

Crisis Communication Network activity

Crisis communicators from each region are part of the HNC. The communicators meet regularly to exchange information and share experiences. In 2024 we developed a communication strategy for the HNC with key messages. The aim is to promote understanding of the importance of preparedness and total defense in the northern regions and increase awareness of the cooperation among residents and relevant stakeholders.

Target audiences include local and regional and national authorities, residents of the northern regions, voluntary organizations, the media, researchers, and international partners.

In 2024, the High North Cooperation website was launched at highnorthcooperation.com. The site serves as a central hub for information about the HNC, providing the latest news and contact details.

Additionally, in 2024, the County Administrative Board of Västerbotten introduced a shared SharePoint platform for all HNC partners. This new platform allows us to centralize and efficiently share information in one accessible location.

Deterrence Horizontal Escalation Game in Stockholm

HNC network was represented in Stockholm in March during the Deterrence Horizontal Escalation Game. The game involved working with resilience in our geographic area together with other actors from, among others, the Ted Stevens Center (Nato Arctic) and representatives from national level from the three countries. The game has been conducted in collaboration between the Swedish Defense University and the US National Defense University. HNC had two participants in the game as experts of civil defense and the geographic area. The game went on for two days and the game report was evaluated by the network. The workshop aims to inform the following wargaming by framing dilemmas and challenges for the actors

and for selected driving forces.

The outcome after the workshops will be used by key decision makers to either explore and/or verify: - how to adapt and maintain deterrence and - security implications when the center of gravity shifts between different geopolitical areas.

Hanaholmen Finnish – Swedish bilateral seminar on civil defence

HNC network was represented in Helsinki in September during the Finnish- Swedish Bilateral seminar on civil defense. The aim of the seminar was to facilitate close contact and cooperation between relevant experts and civil defense authorities in Finland and Sweden as well as identify possibilities and areas for further cooperation regarding protection of civilian and our civil defense planning. We participated with three members during the seminar and had the opportunity to describe our High North Cooperation. In the summary of the seminar the HNC was an example on how to cooperate successfully and create deterrence. "Regional preparedness cooperation, such as the MOU High North for the regions in the High North (Finland, Sweden and Norway) should also serve as a positive example for other regions in Finland and Sweden, especially situation in connection to the Baltic Sea".

4 Principles of further planning and operation

Action Plan 2025 and medium-term goals for 2025-27

Main goals and priorities 2025:

- Deepen forms of cooperation and establishment.
- Share and plan common methods to disturbance situations.
- Expand joint events to several authorities.
- Participate in an exercise or possible joint exercise.

The main activities planned for 2025 are shown in the table:

Activity	Plan
Main event	Aurora or/and ICC25 seminar
Projects	Aurora, Website, Risk Assessment, Contact cards
Exercising	Table Top Exercise
Testing	Backup Grids: Virve, Rakel, Nødnett
Meetings	Regularly (at least once a month)
Reporting	Annual Report
Resources	Priorities (under planning)
Responsibilities	Working Groups

Main goals and priorities 2025–2027:

- Promote common operating models of regional cooperation.
- Develop common preparedness planning and preventive measures in interregional cooperation.
- Organize joint events or exercises to several authorities.
- Develop joint Home Nation Support (HNS) in practical measures.
- Participate in a joint exercise (NATO, if requested).
- Establish secure online tools and connection across borders.

5 Summary and conclusions

The HNC operating year 2024 have been highly active. The exchange of preparedness and safety situation information and the presentation of joint projects have been carried out every month. The annual plan with goals and schedules has been drawn up for the whole year, and the operation has been proactive and regular.

From the point of view of regional preparedness, cross-border activities have been extended to other authorities and actors in the region. This activity comes out especially from the ICC event and communication tests. Based on experience, there is a great demand and need for wide-range preparedness cooperation. NATO's security requirements and matters related to HNS support and the EU's resilience requirements serve as a common basis. There is also a focus on cross-border joint risk assessment.

Expanding and deepening cooperation also needs resources. With Interreg Aurora project, financial resources are sought for starting operations and joint training.

Summary of HNC activities 2024:

- International Cooperation Course 29.-30.10.2024 in Umeå
- Regular HNC group meetings (10 times)
- Governor's meeting May 2024
- Action Plan 2025 and Medium-Term Plan 2025-27 Goals
- Communication test 1 and 2 for responsible regional officials
- EU Interreg Aurora Project application draft for HNC actions
- Crisis Communication Network and HNC Website
- Joint platform of HNC (SharePoint)
- HNC Contact List
- Annual report 2024.

Pocket Guide updating and Contact Cards project was moved to next year 2025.

Norland has the Chairmanship in 2025 and the next in line is Norrbotten 2026: 2021 Lapland, 2022 Troms&Finnmark, 2023 Västerbotten and 2024 Northern Finland.

Finally, a quote from the Haga meeting of Nordic ministers in Oslo on 28.11.2024:

"It is important that the High North countries create a foundation for close civil-military cooperation across our national borders. Together we can

more effectively support national defense, while also safeguarding the fundamental functionality of civil society and protecting the civilian population. Now all HNC countries are members of NATO, creating the basis for increased cooperation in this area.

The HNC countries are closely intertwined through geography, values and traditions, and they share many of the same challenges. Important areas for cooperation are Nordic scenarios for armed conflict and crises, including hybrid threats, joint planning of Host Nation Support within NATO protection of the civil population as well as participation in civil-military exercises.”

Signatures

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HNC member authorities

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Regional authorities according to national distribution



High North Cooperation (HNC)



Regional State Administrative Agency for Lapland

Regional State Administrative Agency
for Northern Finland

Oulu 2024