



# The importance of the Welfare Watch in 2009 to 2013: The relation between the Welfare Watch and government

An evaluation

Ásdís A. Arnalds

[aaa1@hi.is](mailto:aaa1@hi.is)

Project Manager

Social Science Reserach Institute





# Evaluating the products of the Welfare Watch

Qualitative content analyses was used to:

a) gain information on which of the working groups' proposals were presented in the steering committee's reports...

and ...

b) to trace the fate of these proposals.

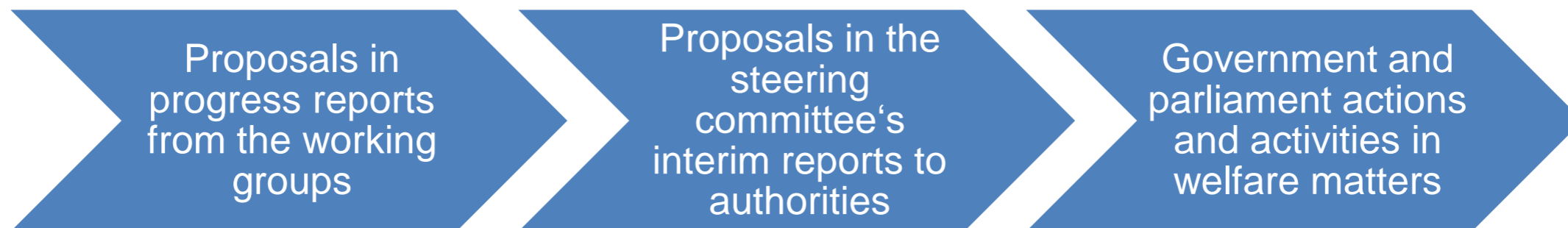
- Texts that were analyzed:
  - Reports from the working groups
  - Reports from the steering committee
  - Official websites that provide information on government run operations  
(for example documents and other written material presented on the national parliament's website)





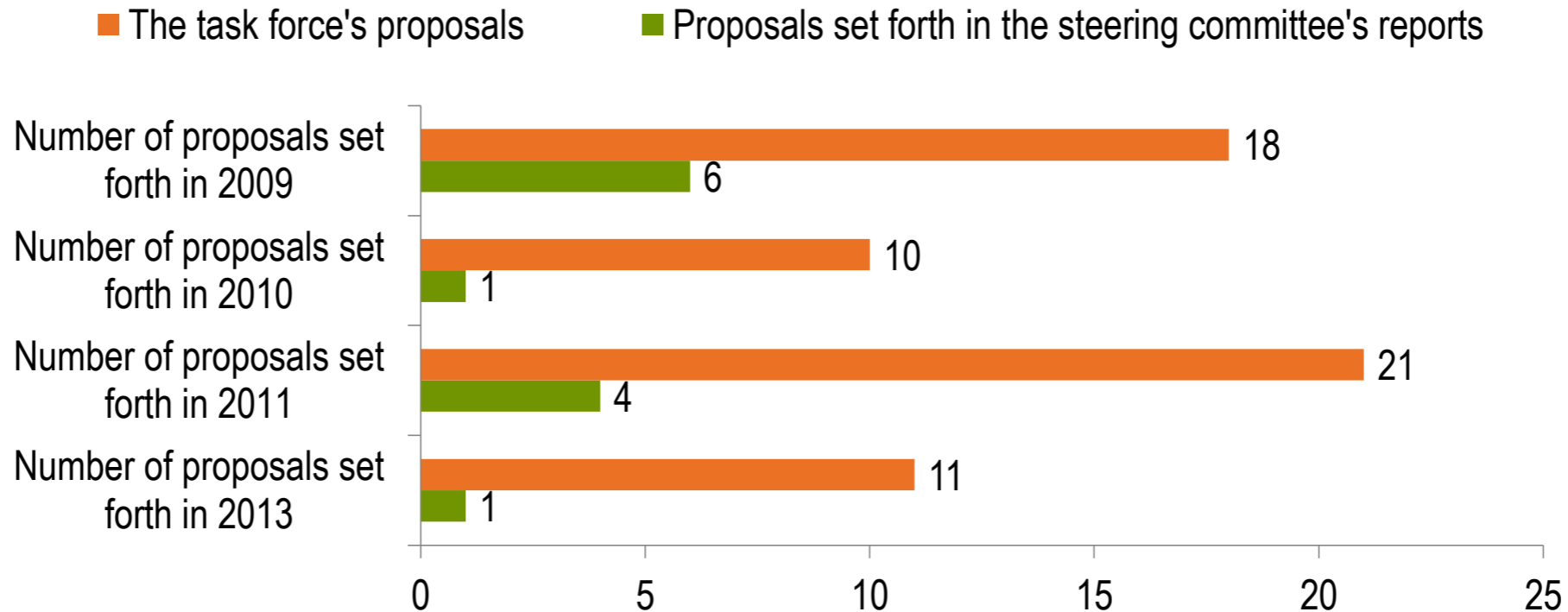
# Proposals

- Each of the working-groups set forth proposals in progress reports that were delivered to the steering-committee.
- Welfare Watch proposals, set forth in the steering-committee's reports, were based on working-group reports.
- The role of the Minister for Social Affairs and Social Security (later the Minister for Welfare) was to take on board Welfare Watch proposals and try to bring to them to fruition.





# Proposals from the working group on *children and families with children*



Working group proposals on  
children and families with  
children

Steering committee  
proposals

Fate

**2009**

Steps should be taken to ensure that children receive lunch in all schools in Iceland.

**2009**

Special attention should be given to the position of families with young children.

**2009**

Particular attention should be given to marginal groups in society, i.e. the handicapped, the chronically ill, immigrants and the disabled.

**2009**

Children, and families with young children, should be guaranteed access to professionals, with an emphasis on family counselling by the health services and social services.

**2011 & 2013**

Payments to parents taking parenting and maternity/paternity leave are not to be reduced more than is the case at present. The payments should be raised to their previous level so that both parents use their entitlement and children enjoy the company of both parents during the earliest stage of their life.

**2011–2013**

Special funds are to be allocated to healthcare centres to ensure mental health and psycho-social services for children.

**2011 & 2013**

The government should increase support and take specific action to improve the welfare and financial situation of low-income families with children, particularly single parents and their children.



Working group proposals on  
children and families with  
children

Steering committee  
proposals

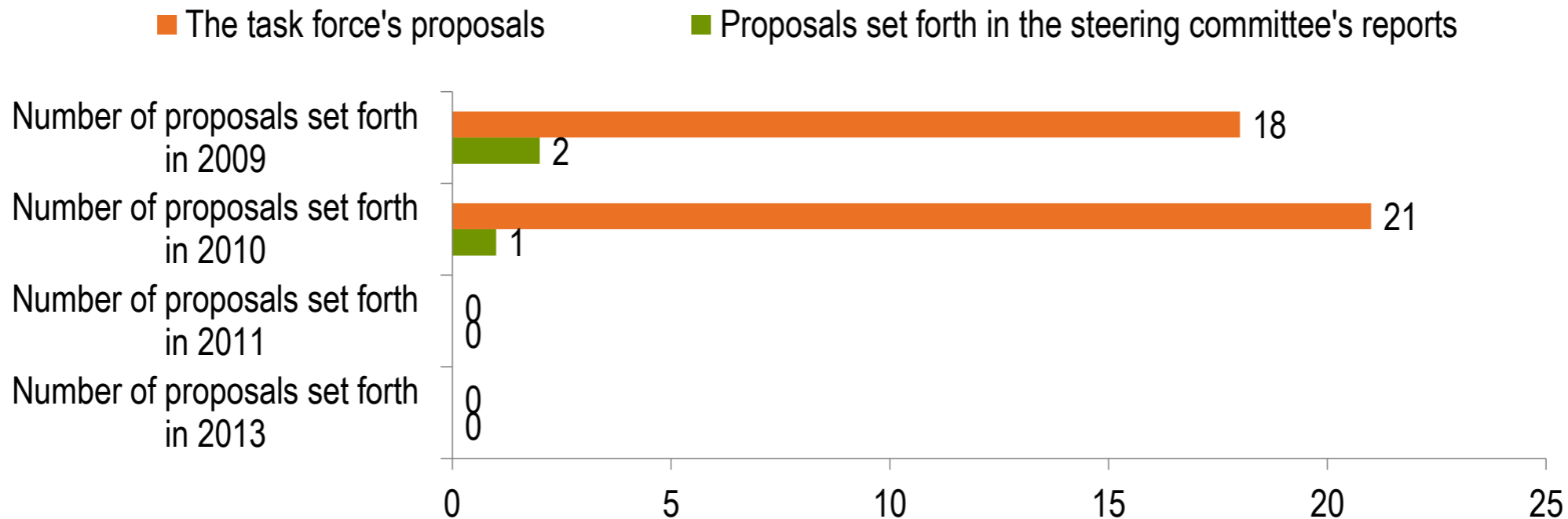
Fate

- In early winter 2009, the Welfare Watch sent a request to all municipalities and school boards to ensure and monitor by all possible means that school children in their purview should receive lunch on every school day. The letter was sent in consultation with the Association of Icelandic Local Authorities. The proposal was adopted.
- Co-operation agreement on an experimental project to support chronically ill children and children diagnosed with ADHD.
- Parliamentary resolution on improved health care and the health of young people. Approved by Parliament on 15 May 2012.
- Policy formulation. Association of Local Authorities in Iceland 2011-2014 (e.g. Articles 1.4., 3.7., 3.9. and 3.11).





# Proposals from the working group on *persons at risk* both before and after the crisis



Working group proposals on  
persons at risk both before and  
after the crisis

Steering committee  
proposals

Fate

**2009**

Collaboration between the Directorate of Labour and the local authorities' social services should be increased, not least as regards young persons, the long-term unemployed and persons who are seeking employment but do not qualify for unemployment benefit payments.

**2009**

The work of the "third sector" (NGOs) should be co-ordinated, with deliberate measures to utilise social resources.

**2011**

A study of conditions of those 16-year-olds opting not to continue in secondary education after completing primary education should be examined, with the aim of finding ways for them to undertake suitable studies, whether academic study, vocational study or training. Similarly, the conditions of students dropping out of secondary education should also be looked at and efforts made to find them a way back into study.





**Working group proposals on  
persons at risk both before and  
after the crisis**

**Steering committee  
proposals**

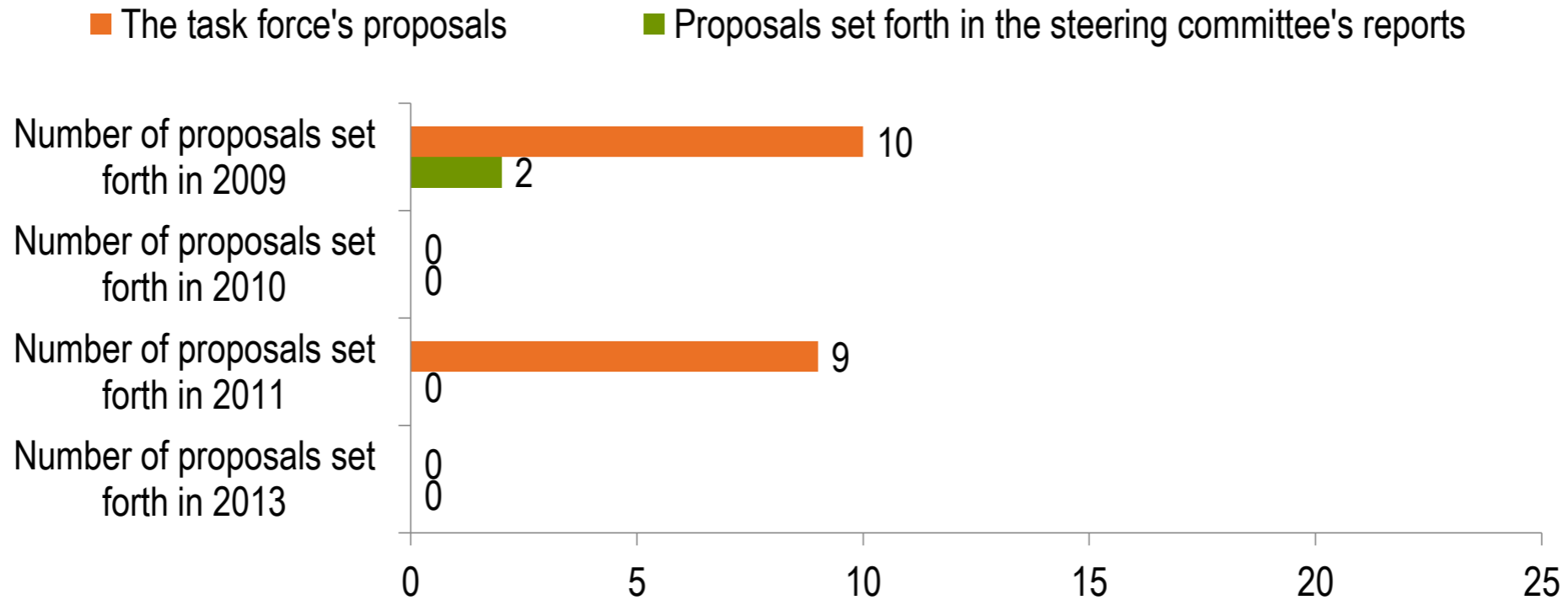
**Fate**

- The Welfare Watch working group on the voluntary sector was set up to co-ordinate the activities of the voluntary sector and public agencies and to plan targeted action to use social capital in the best way possible.
- The Workplace Learning Fund Act entered into force in 2012. The Fund supports workplace learning and self-training (defined as part of professional training in the National Curriculum for secondary schools).





# Proposals from the working group on *recession and health*



Working group proposals on  
recession and health

Steering committee  
proposals

Fate

## 2009

Steps must be taken to ensure that a deterioration in people's financial position should not prevent them from having access to health services, that the healthcare services take the initiative on contacting care recipients who are in risk groups, that the level of the healthcare services should not be lowered and that changes in demand for health care be monitored closely.

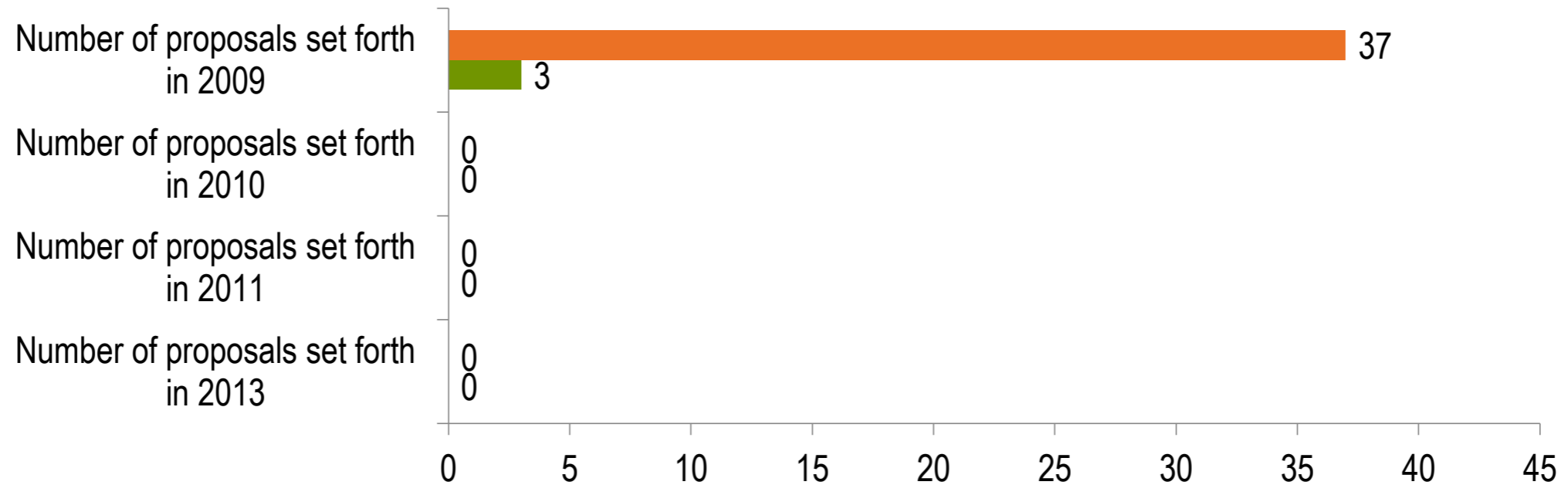
- The Directorate of Health monitors key figures on health-service usage in Iceland. The Welfare Watch regularly keeps up with any changes in health-service usage through the Director of Health, who is a member of the steering committee. These figures include mortality figures, particularly data on medication use and suicide.





# Proposals from the working group on *youth and young people*

■ The task force's proposals      ■ Proposals set forth in the steering committee's reports



Working group proposals on  
youth and young people

Steering committee  
proposals

Fate

**2009**

Young people (aged 18–25) in special circumstances should be enabled, financially, to pursue studies in senior school, senior schools should accept all pupils who apply for admission and pupils pursuing practical subjects should be guaranteed the opportunity to complete their studies.

**2009**

Special remedies must be initiated for unemployed young people who are entering the labour market for the first time. The moral responsibility of employers, and particularly of the state and local government sectors, must be harnessed as regards engaging young unemployed people in supply positions and summer jobs.

**2009**

It must be ensured that the courses, and academic and vocational counselling, that have been available in continuing educational programmes to persons with shorter formal education continue to be provided.



Working group proposals on  
youth and young people

Steering committee  
proposals

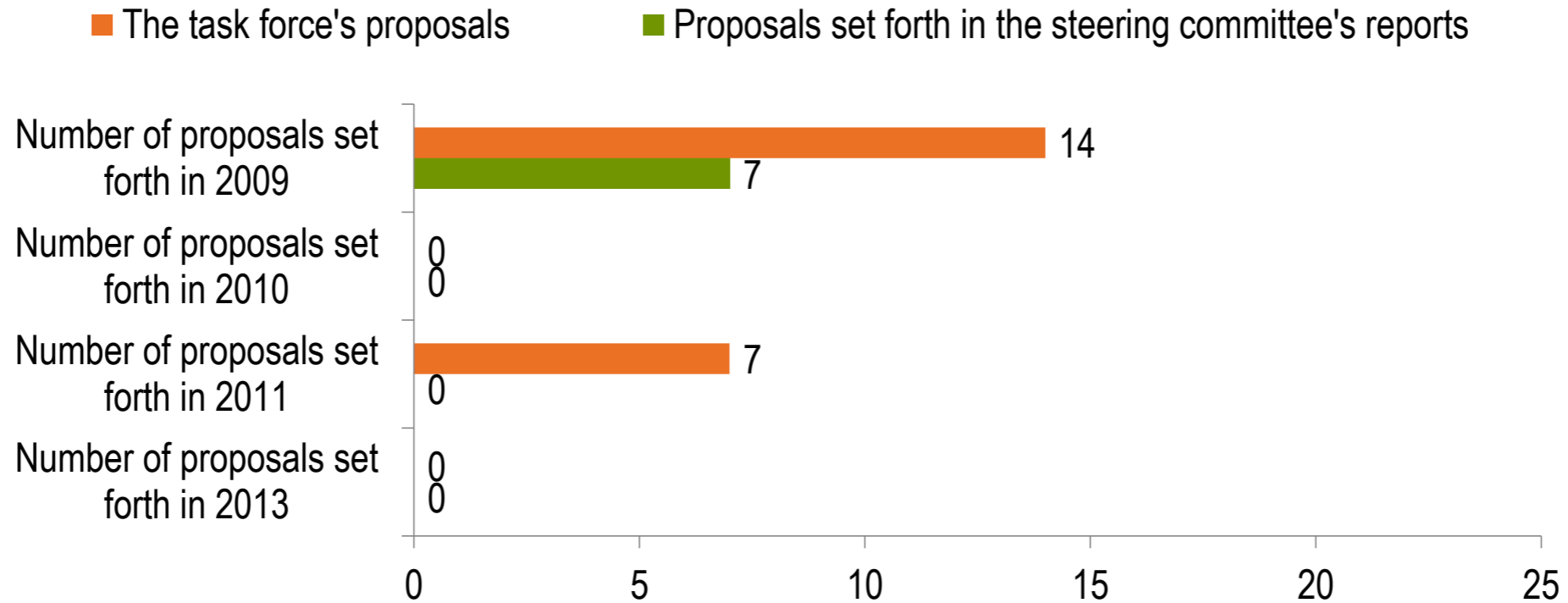
Fate

- Learning is a winning formula: Secondary schools – 1000 new learning opportunities for jobseekers.
- Continuing Education Acto 27/2010.
- In 2010, the operations of the Business Education Centre were extended, with the approval of the Federation of State and Municipal Employees, the Association of Icelandic Local Authorities and the Ministry of Finance.
- Parliamentary resolution on education and job creation for young people, passed by the Icelandic Parliament on 7 June 2011.
- Employment Centre: Co-operation project between municipalities, Directorate of Labour and the Ministry of Welfare offering services to young people on financial support and those in search of work and coming out of benefit entitlement.
- Report from the Minister for Social Affairs and Housing on the success of job-market measures for young people, requested by Árni Páll Árnason (Parliamentary Documentary 70 in Case 31 in the 142th Legislative Session of 2013).





# Proposals from the working group on *the unemployed*



## Working group proposals on the unemployed

### Steering committee proposals

#### Fate

**2009**

Attention must be given to co-ordinated measures involving local authorities, central government and the social partners, with the aim of avoiding a situation in which unemployed people remain stuck in dependency on social benefit payments.

**2009**

Through collaboration between the Directorate of Labour and the local authorities' social services, methods should be examined of assisting families in which there are dependent children up to the age of 18 and both parents are seeking employment.

**2009**

Plans to revise the social security system should be speeded up, with a particular examination of the disability assessment system and the structure of disability benefit payments. In addition, the work on the revision of the rules regarding maximum payments in the healthcare system should be brought to completion as soon as possible.

**2009**

Close and smooth collaboration must be established between the Vocational Rehabilitation Fund, the Directorate of Labour and the Social Security Institute.

**2011**

New and more diverse labour-market measures are to be offered to ensure that the measures appeal to and are of use to the long-term unemployed.

**2011**

Young people seeking work who are not entitled to unemployment benefits are to be granted access to the labour-market measures of the Directorate of Labour.





Working group proposals on the unemployed

Steering committee proposals

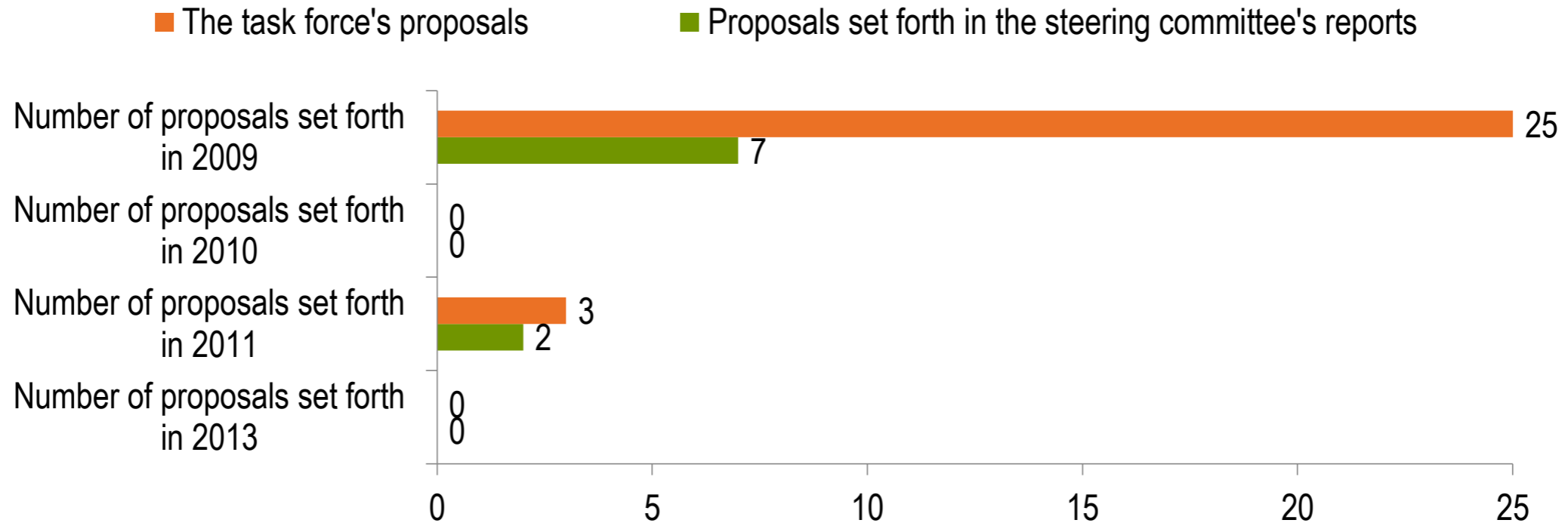
Fate

- Reply of the Minister for Social Affairs and Housing to a question from Guðlaugur Þór Þórðarson on the implementation of job-market measures, what they consist of, where they are offered, how many have taken advantage of them, etc.
- Parliamentary bill on social-security pension rights and social support.
- Reinforcement.* An agreement between municipalities, the State's and job-market representatives in late 2012.





# Proposals from the working-group on *fincancial difficulties of housholds*



## Working group proposals on financial difficulties of households

### Steering committee proposals

#### Fate

**2009**

Solutions aimed at ameliorating the financial difficulties faced by households should be of a comprehensive nature, with the aim of creating a chain of solutions aimed at: a) helping those in the greatest difficulties, b) assisting those who are at risk and are likely to experience difficulties, c) supporting those who are still able to cope and who, through the simple actions of the authorities and creditors, can lower their payment burdens and thereby survive the difficulties that are likely to emerge in the next 1–2 years.

**2009**

Measures adopted by the government to enable households in financial difficulties to tackle payment difficulties should be assessed and analysed regularly, with particular attention given to those who are in the worst positions. The measures should be revised if necessary.

**2009**

The government should state clearly whether any further steps will be taken to address the position of those who are experiencing difficulty paying off exchange-rate-linked mortgages.

**2009**

Measures should be launched to assist persons who are basically still able to cope but are potentially at risk of becoming ensnared in financial difficulties, in order to prevent an expansion of the group of persons in financial difficulty.

**2011**

The government should form a working group to assess the authorities' measures as regards household debt problems. The working group should consist of independent experts who are to examine why significantly fewer took advantage of the measures than was anticipated in the report prepared by the group of experts on household debt problems in November 2010. The group should both assess the measures and submit proposals for improvements so that a greater number of households can reap the benefits.

**2009**

The government should launch measures to help those who are in financial difficulty due to loans taken in foreign currencies to purchase automobiles.

**2011**

The government is to ensure the adoption of a centralised database on the financial position of households in order to enable the analysis of the financial position and difficulties of households in a comprehensive manner.

**2013**

The government should speed up, as far as possible, the formulation of a comprehensive housing policy and then initiate an action plan for support to low-income families with housing problems.



Working group proposals on  
financial difficulties of  
households

Steering committee  
proposals

Fate

- Debtors' Ombudsman Act
- 110% method: Act amending Act No. 44/1998 on housing issues, as amended (reduction of Housing Financing Fund mortgage claims)
- 110% method – measures for over-mortgaged homes
- Act on measures for individuals, households and companies in the aftermath of the bank and currency crash
- Act on debt adjustment for individuals (entered into force in 2010).
- Act on temporary debt adjustment for real-estate mortgage claims for residential accommodation (entered into force in 2009)
- Reciprocal interactions that curtail benefits are to be abolished (cf. amendments to legislation)
- Amendments to the Act on Social Security
- Policy formulation. Association of Local Authorities in Iceland 2011-2014 ([e.g. Article 3.10. Housing issues](#))



## Steering committee proposals in 2009

### Fate

**2009**

A Welfare Watch counterbalance fund should be established and used for: – Necessary studies of welfare issues. – Co-ordination of projects carried out by the "third sector" (NGOs) and other partners. – Support for staff who work with the persons the most affected by the crisis. – Campaigns to assist specific groups of persons who have been the most affected by the economic crisis. – Other necessary projects.

**2009**

All official publicity and communication channels should be examined in collaboration with the "third sector" and ways found to ensure effective presentation of information on remedies and offers to those in need of them (both individuals and families) and also for advisors both inside and outside the public executive structure. It is important that people should be able to take informed decisions regarding their own welfare, not least regarding their financial affairs, and the prerequisite for this is the availability of sound and clear information.

**2009**

Central and local government service institutions should define what constitutes basic services, prioritise their work according to this definition and ensure that these services are not cut or downgraded; the definition should include services in the schools, healthcare system and social services.

**2009**

Experts should be engaged to prepare social indicators which can be used to monitor the situation on a regular basis.

**2009**

A simpler system should be established to enable individuals who are experiencing severe difficulty with paying their debts to renegotiate them.

**2009**

Basic social indicators should be published each month; the government should also make collaborative agreements with selected local authorities which represent the variety of Icelandic society, in which more detailed information should be recorded.

**2009**

The Welfare Watch should take steps to establish closer collaboration with the media.

**2009**

University students, and persons who have completed training courses which grant professional employment entitlements, should be offered vocational training places in functioning enterprises without forfeiting their right to unemployment benefits.



## Steering committee proposals in 2010-2013

### Fate

**2011**

Special labour-market measures and other measures that foreign citizens seeking employment can take advantage of.

**2011**

Students who participate in the campaign *Education is the road to employment* are to be enabled to continue their studies in the 2012 spring term by ensuring them maintenance assistance during their studies.

**2013**

Payment participation will be reduced for patients who suffer from severe and chronic illnesses, as well as social and financial difficulties.

**2013**

The government, state and Association of Icelandic Local Authorities are to present a comprehensive, scheduled action plan on how to eliminate poverty in Iceland.

**2013**

The Ministry of Welfare and the Association of Local Authorities are to initiate efforts for the purpose of formally establishing collaboration between the schools and local authorities' social services as regards the issues of children and families with children.

**2013**

The local authorities' home services are to be strengthened, as are the number of placements in nursing facilities, in accordance with the predicted increase in the geriatric population in Iceland.

**2013**

The Welfare Watch will continue to operate in one form or another but will be reorganised after requesting the appointment of representatives from public bodies, local authorities, the employment sector and the "third sector" (NGOs).



## Steering committee proposals in 2010-2013

### Fate

- The Welfare Watch Counterbalance Fund was set up in 2009. Part of the fund was used for specific Welfare Watch projects, e.g. social indicators, development projects for measures for young unemployed people and co-ordination of voluntary-sector projects (Parliamentary Document 714, 2009–10).
- Improve information provision of the Association of Icelandic Local Authorities and the municipalities (Item 4.1 of the Policy Guidelines of the Association of Icelandic Local Authorities for 209 and 2010 – action plan).
- Work on social indicators began in 2009, when Welfare Watch put forward a proposal to put together Icelandic social indicators. Statistics Iceland took on the task in 2012 of publishing and regularly updating social indicators, which are a collection of diverse statistical data on the social conditions of various groups in Iceland. Debtors' Ombudsman Act from 2010.
- Health nursery schools and Health primary schools under the Directorate of Health.
- Internet-driven growth – build, connect, participate: State and municipal policy on the information society 2013-16
- Regulation on workplace learning and on-the job training
- Stability pact: The object of the pact is to promote the resurrection of the economy.
- New Welfare Watch appointed by Eygló Harðardóttir





# The importance of the Welfare Watch in the eyes of the ministers of welfare and members of the steering-committee

Interviews with former ministers of welfare and members of the steering-committee revealed that:

- The lack of funds was the main reason for some Welfare Watch proposals not being implemented.
- The Watch's work often had an indirect impact on welfare in Iceland by raising awareness about issues that require attention.







*“When such a large group, as we were, comes together with a variety of contact networks and backgrounds, it's able to call a great deal of attention to various issues and to follow up on such issues elsewhere. It is a bit like a spider's web. Someone begins and then someone else comes along and carries the issue forward” [member of the steering committee].*





# Conclusion

- The study's findings suggest that the Welfare Watch played an important role in Icelandic society after the financial crash.
- The content analysis revealed that many government operations were in line with what had been proposed by the Welfare Watch.
- Interviewed members of the steering-committee said that the Welfare Watch played an important role in promoting welfare issues in Iceland, and that a number of associations and NGO's had carried out tasks that were in line with what the Welfare Watch proposed.

