

Strategies in Digital Child Protection

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Abstract. Digital child protection faces numerous challenges in ensuring the safety and well-being of children in the digital age. This chapter highlights key strategies for handling these challenges and discusses Norway's digital strategy, which focuses on leveraging digitalization for societal development and public services, including child protection. The strategy encompasses initiatives related to digital transformation, infrastructure, skills and education, data security and privacy, and digital inclusion. Digital transformation is a crucial aspect of child protection, involving the integration of technology for early detection, streamlined reporting, and collaboration between relevant stakeholders. A competence model for digital guides on the essential skills and competencies needed within government agencies to navigate digital transformation effectively. The new administrative digital system for child welfare is presented. In conclusion, addressing challenges in digital child protection requires comprehensive strategies encompassing legislation, collaboration, education, technology, and international cooperation. These strategies aim to create a safer digital environment for children and ensure their protection from online risks and harm.

Keywords: *Digital Child Protection, Public Services, Digital System*

1 Introduction

This paper presents strategies for handling some challenges related to integrated child and youth protection systems, more specifically the digital in child protection. The digital in child protection is a large and comprehensive topic, including different levels and user groups in society. Norway is used as an example to refine this topic. The article first briefly presents the work with digital transformation for the Norwegian government, second, the model for knowledge/learning of technology by the Directorate for Digitalization (Digdir), and at last the new administrative digital system for Norwegian Child welfare. The digital strategy for Norway (2019-2025) follows up Meld. St. 27 [15]. The strategy is cross-sectoral and defines the common goals and focus areas for digitalization activities towards 2025 and will support digital transformation throughout the entire public sector¹. The Directorate of Digitization is the Norwegian government's foremost tool for faster and more coordinated digitization of

¹ Kommunal- og moderniseringsdepartementet, 2019

society². Part of the presentation of the digital strategy for Norway, Digdir, and the new administrative system is translated by the author from the website regjeringen.no, Digdir, and Bufdir.

1.1 Digital Transformation

There is no unique definition of the term Digital Transformation. There are also inconsistencies in the existing literature [3], and several researchers claim that there is a lack of a universal and comprehensive understanding of the digital transformation concept [6, 8, 9, 13]. This situation can lead to researchers and practitioners having challenges in promoting the theory and practice of the subject [19]. Research and review of the term Digital Transformation shows that it has implications at several levels of analysis [24]. However, the term Digital Transformation is also used inconsistently by managers in various businesses to describe various strategies and organizational activities [25], which can trigger different disciplines within research and influencing practice [10]. Consistent definition of digital transformation provides clearer means for researchers to communicate with practitioners and to provide them with better prescriptions to understand and develop digital transformation [14]. A unified definition of digital transformation has been developed to bring some clarity about this concept and its associated core primitives and defining attributes [7]. The unified definition of digital transformation is as follows:

“A fundamental change process, enabled by the innovative use of digital technologies accompanied by the strategic leverage of key resources and capabilities, aiming to radically improve an entity and redefine its value proposition for its stakeholders.”* (*An entity could be: an organization, a business network, an industry, or society.) (7, p.12, 2021).

1.2 The Norwegian Strategy

The Norwegian Digitalization Agency is the Norwegian government’s foremost tool for faster and more coordinated digitalization of the Norwegian public sector. The Norwegian Digitalization Agency are subordinate to the Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development³. The Norwegian government’s digital strategy [20] describes digital transformation as:

- *a process where the business changes how it performs its tasks, offers better services, works more efficiently, or creates entirely new services*
 - *where user focus and the user experience are the core of the change*
 - *which is based on the use of digital technology*
- *a fundamental and comprehensive change, and not a minor adjustment*
- *redesign of the business at all levels – people, processes, technology, and management*

² Digdir.no

³ Digdir.no

The Norwegian strategy ([Digdir.no, 2019-2025⁴](#)) points out 6 topics as particularly important for public administration related to digital transformation, 1) User Orientation and Experience, 2) Digital Technology, 3) Business and management, 4) Innovation, 5) (Exploit) data and 6) The Ecosystem. The citizens' expectations of more connected services and new enabling technologies place great demands on the public sector. To meet some of these challenges, you need digital transformation.

2 Competence-model for digital transformation

The Norwegian government by [Digdir](#) has developed a competence model⁵ for digital transformation. The model has three levels that build on each other and should provide a comprehensive picture of the need for expertise in your business and the public sector. The three levels are:

1. Policy and overall guidelines - Provide an overall introduction to the political guidelines in the area and understand the social significance of working with digital transformation, and how your business can change the fundamental ways in which it solves its tasks with the help of technology.

2. Management of digital transformation - Introduce what digital transformation entails for the business and what it requires of managers inspire how to work with the development of digital transformation in the business.

3. Professional knowledge and skills - Contribute to managers being able to work systematically both with their expertise and to provide support for building expertise in the business giving academia and suppliers an incentive to package current and future offers in a way that supports the government's goals.

Digdir has developed an overview that shows specialist knowledge and skills for digital transformation.

3 The Norwegian Child Welfare Services

3.1 Child Welfare

The primary aim of child welfare services is to ensure that children and young people living under conditions that may harm their health and development will receive the necessary assistance when they need it, and to contribute to giving children and youth safe conditions for growing up⁶. See a short introductory film from Bufdir⁷.

3.2 Division of Responsibility in the Child Welfare Services

Both the local and central authorities have duties and responsibilities in the child welfare field, and the municipality is responsible for performing those functions under

⁴ [Hva er digital transformasjon? | Digdir](#)

⁵ [Kompetansemødel for digital transformasjon | Digdir](#)

⁶ [Child Welfare - regjeringen.no](#)

⁷ [How can Child Welfare Services help? YouTube](#)

the Child Welfare Services Act which are not assigned to a central government body. All municipalities must have child welfare services that are responsible for the day-to-day work under the Act⁸. The child welfare services are responsible for providing advice and guidance, undertaking investigations, and making administrative decisions under the Child Welfare Services Act. The purpose of the Act is to ensure that children and young people who live in conditions that may be detrimental to their health and development receive the necessary assistance, care, and protection at the right time. Anyone can find themselves in a situation where they need help and support to provide proper care for their children. The Child Welfare Services must provide help to families in such cases. The Act is intended to help ensure that children and young people are met with security, love, and understanding [12]. The ministry ensures that experiences gained from the application of the Act are evaluated and then undertakes the necessary amendments.

3.3 BUFDIR & BUFETAT

The Norwegian Directorate for Children, Youth and Family Affairs (Bufdir) and five regional offices under the central authority; Office for Children, Youth and Family Affairs (Bufetat) are responsible for matters relating to state-funded child welfare services, family counseling, and adoption (Directorate for Children, Youth and Family Affairs). The main task is to provide children, young people, and families in need of help and support with appropriate, high-quality assistance nationwide.

4 The Project: Digibarnevern

The social mission of the Child Protection Agency is to help children and young people. The municipal child welfare service manages values and power and manages legal security for children and families. To achieve this, child welfare services need good tools and solutions. But neither the families who were in contact with child welfare, the employees, the managers nor the child welfare partners have received sufficient support and information from the digital solutions that were used before 2023. However, not all county in Norway have implemented the new digital solution which is presented in this chapter. The Bufdir presented some feedback from the different actors before the project Digibarnevern were established (DigiBarnevern | Bufdir). The main points were:

- Employees receive too little help in existing subject systems to work efficiently and responsibly.
- Managers get too little and too much poor information to lead and report.
- Child welfare services cooperate too little with other services and lack good one's solutions for digital communication and transfer of information.
- Children, youth, and guardians lack an overview of their own cases, and assessments, and connections in the child protection case are not documented, and the possibility of the desired degree of digital participation.

⁸ Division - regjeringen.no

Based on this, a national project called DigiBarnevern (Digital Child Welfare) was established in 2016 to increase child welfare services' ability to provide good and effective help to children and youth who need it. DigiBarnevern consists of two projects, a 8th municipal, and a state project. The project's aim was to increase the quality of municipal childcare, among other things by providing better technological solutions.

Children and families who need help must receive help that works at the right time. They must meet a cooperative child protection system that provides real participation and must provide strengthened legal certainty. DigiBarnevern will also contribute to ensuring that child welfare services are experienced as safe for the children, provide equal services, and that trust in child welfare services is strengthened.

Digdir points out four major challenges associated with Child protection [18]:

- The task solution in child protection
- The distribution of responsibility between the state and the municipality
- The need for competence in child protection
- Use of private actors in child protection

4.1 National portal for reporting concerns

The first part of DigiBarnevern, the National portal for reporting concerns, was presented in 2020. The reports of concern are sent securely and quickly to the child welfare services digitally and contribute to messages being more specific about what the concern is about. This contributes to a more secure assessment of the content of the reports of concern. The solution also allows you to send messages of concern directly from specialist systems in other sectors (no time delays) for example schools, kindergartens, and health and both the child welfare service and the dispatcher service achieve savings by avoiding double registration and improved work processes. The municipalities that have adopted the service report that the content of the messages is more specific and aimed at the conditions surrounding the children that are considered worrying. By the end of 2021, the portal had been used by over 187 municipalities and made available to more than 4 million residents.

4.2 Child Welfare Professional Quality System (CPS)

The next part of the project was presented in 2022. The Child welfare professional quality system (CPS) is a framework that provides child welfare professional and legal quality support, especially for the discretionary parts of case management. The system helps to strengthen the quality and legal certainty of the proceedings. Bufdir points out that the knowledge on which the Child Protection quality system is anchored contributes to a common and solid child protection professional platform for the employees in the service. "The child's needs in the Centre" forms a central part of the content of CPS, in addition to other forms of support. Attention directed to the child's needs and the child's best interests provides both a structure and a knowledge base for the child protection service's work in all phases of a child protection case. When the case manager receives quality-assured support in the case management itself, this has an impact on the manager's overview, control, and time spent. Bufdir maintains and updates the content according to changes of both a legal and child welfare nature. Bufdir, in

collaboration with Statistics Norway, is also working on establishing a new reporting solution for the state.

4.3 National Child Protection Register

National Child Protection Register simplifies and streamlines reporting through automatic reporting via new professional systems safer and faster-updated knowledge base for the central government. The reporting solution will also ensure automatic extraction of data from the municipalities' professional system, and ensure a better data basis for management, service development, and research. Concept catalog improves communication through unambiguous, official definitions of terms used in child protection. National Child Protection Register solution will free up time for both the manager and employees of the municipal child welfare since they will spend significantly less time on reporting. There is no need to check that the data is correct and that you report within the deadline, and thus have time to extract insights from the figures, among other things.

4.4 Dialogue between partners.

These three systems interact with each other and make better dialogue between partners. The child welfare professional quality system provides, support for cooperation and dialogue, implementation and documentation of analysis and assessments and a clearer decision-making basis. Most important is better information for children and parents and a clear connection between the phases and processes in the child protection case. The child welfare professional quality system emphasizes participation and involvement from children, young people, and parents throughout the entire course of the child welfare case. This includes, among other things, good information for those about whom the case is concerned, and about planning so that children, young people, and parents can recognize the information in the case. The case manager receives support to document analyzes and assessments in the case, so that the basis for ongoing and final decisions is presented in the case's documentation.

5 Challenges in digital child protection

Digital child protection faces several challenges that need to be addressed to ensure the safety and well-being of children in the digital age.

Existing Legislation: One of the primary challenges in digital child protection is the need for adequate legislation that can effectively address the evolving risks and harms children face online. Existing laws may not be comprehensive enough or may not have kept pace with the rapid advancements in technology. However, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) recognizes children as rights holders and provides them with individual rights. It is crucial to have clear and updated laws that can appropriately deal with issues such as online grooming, cyberbullying, child pornography, and exploitation. Child welfare workers are bound by the requirements of the law and follow the guidelines for child welfare with children and youth in general. Researchers claim that *“we must also address the question of access to technologies which has important*

social justice implications beyond the question of solely whether ICT can be utilized" [21,p.1495]. New laws and guidelines need to be developed that take into account the particularities of the Internet and where it intersects with the child welfare services' exercise of public authority. There are certainly challenges in digital child protection and existing legislation. Artificial intelligence has been used in products targeting children for several years, but legislation protecting them from the potential impacts of the technology is still in its infancy. UNICEF has developed a draft Policy Guidance on AI for Children to promote children's rights and raise awareness of how AI systems can uphold or undermine these rights.

Education: Lack of awareness and education among children, parents, and educators about online risks and safety measures is a significant challenge. Child welfare and social workers need to move thoughtfully and assisted by research, develop applications that enhance service user participation [21]. Children need to be educated about responsible digital citizenship, privacy protection, recognizing and responding to online threats, and seeking help when needed. Parents and educators also need to be equipped with the knowledge and skills to guide and support children in their online activities. How child welfare workers understand, navigate, and use social media and different digital systems is of central importance to the future of child welfare work.

Ethics: Balancing the ethical considerations of child protection with the need for privacy and freedom of expression is a complex challenge. While it is crucial to protect children from harm, it is equally important to respect their rights and autonomy. Ensuring ethical practices in digital child protection requires careful navigation of these competing interests. Researchers claim that *"an ethical dilemma in the tension between children's need for protection, provisions, and participation. The Internet offers both pleasures and worries, risks and possibilities. It is complex, a different arena for children to navigate and for social workers to follow in the digital landscape. One aspect of this is that even very young children have access"* [4,p.241].

Digital Competence: Digital competence is becoming a critical factor for the digital transformation capability of government agencies and their ability to realize benefits from digitalization. Due to intensive digitalization in the public sector, employees and managers in welfare sectors need to have the necessary competence to see and utilize the opportunities provided by new technologies. For social workers in Norway, like many in other technology-driven societies, digital competence is now a professional capability measure. The Norwegian Regulation on National Guideline for Social Work Education requires explicitly that higher education institutions should help their students to 'master digital tools, including knowledge of digital security, and be able to assist in the development and use of suitable technology, and know their opportunities and limitations in practice' [16]. UNESCO has identified a strong demand for initiatives to strengthen the capacities of government officials to leverage digital technologies. With the right digital competencies, policymakers and regulators are empowered to digitally transform their institutions with policies that take advantage of the opportunities offered by new technologies, while navigating the many risks and challenges they can bring. By digitizing processes and making organizational changes, governments can enhance services, save money, and improve citizens' quality of life.

As technology continues to advance, digital competence becomes increasingly important for government agencies and relevant stakeholders involved in child protection [1, 2]. They must understand and effectively use digital tools and platforms to prevent and respond to online risks. This includes the ability to leverage technologies for early detection, reporting, and intervention in cases of online child abuse. Researchers [26] point out that *“We need more in-depth discussions with social work educators and students across institutions to determine how digital competence can be better integrated and evaluated into the formal curriculum level and the actual teaching and learning process”* [26,p.13]. Digital competence in social work practice and education: experiences from Norway. A recent study discusses which knowledge areas of digital competence are vital for Norwegian social work education today, based on the EU Digital Competence framework (DigComp) and expectations from frontline practice [26]. The results reveal that the integration of digital competence knowledge areas across Norwegian social work education is still highly limited. There is a significant gap between the EU’s digital competence requirement and the Norwegian social work curricula, although the DigComp framework demonstrates its limitation in conceptualizing digital competence that is relevant to the social work domain. There is also a gap between the practice in NAV and Norwegian social work curricula regarding digital competence [26].

Information Security:

There is a legal dilemma in striking a balance between information and secrecy. Protecting children’s personal information and data privacy is a critical aspect of digital child protection. The increasing amount of personal data being collected, stored, and shared online poses a risk if not adequately protected. Ensuring robust information security measures, including encryption, secure storage, and data handling practices, is essential to safeguard children’s privacy and prevent unauthorized access or misuse of their information.

Another fact is that risk factors, such as bullying and parental neglect, as well as protecting factors, such as communicating with friends, take new forms that demand not only new skills but also a new understanding of how to fulfill the societal mandate of protecting children [4, p.241].

Addressing these challenges requires a multi-faceted approach involving collaboration between governments, law enforcement agencies, educational institutions, technology companies, and civil society organizations. It necessitates the development of comprehensive legislation, promoting digital literacy and education, fostering ethical practices, enhancing digital competence, and prioritizing information security in the context of child protection.

6 Concluding Remarks

The digital revolution has greatly changed our society over the past three decades. There is a constant need for knowledge about how digitization affects children and youth so that we can give good professional advice and develop our service offering adapted to the times in which we live. It is therefore necessary to develop a separate strategy for digital competence in the public sector. Future competence needs are

essentially based on how the opportunities that lie in technology can be exploited in the agencies. Digitalization and digital transformation are ongoing and grow apace, transforming the relationship between businesses, individuals, and governments internationally. International cooperation strengthens initiatives to combat cross-border online crimes against children and promotes the harmonization of legal frameworks. Collaboration and partnerships between government agencies, law enforcement, educational institutions, technology companies, and civil society organizations play a critical role in developing coordinated strategies and sharing knowledge and resources related to the digital child protection.

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