Sweden: A joint IT administrative system to improve the availability and quality of municipal welfare services

ESPN Flash Report 2021/22

KENNETH NELSON – EUROPEAN SOCIAL POLICY NETWORK MARCH 2021

The government has launched a process to implement a joint IT administrative management system for municipal welfare services, in order to free up resources, create a better working environment, and improve childcare and long-term care, social services as well as primary and secondary education. The legal, financial, and organisational hurdles are now being investigated, and the debate will likely intensify after this analysis.

Description

On 19 December 2019, the Swedish government appointed a "Welfare Commission" to identify and analyse concrete actions to sustain the welfare services of the municipalities, including those related to childcare and long-term care, the social services, as well as primary and secondary education. The Commission is chaired by the Minister of Finance and includes representatives from the central government (also other ministers), the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (*Sveriges kommuner och regioner*) and the trade unions.

In December 2020, the Commission proposed an initiative to introduce a joint digital administrative management system for the municipal welfare services, to make more efficient use of public resources, improve the working environment, and increase the availability and quality of services.

For decades, poorly designed and inadequate IT systems have added to the administrative burden of assistant nurses, teachers, social workers, and other employees of the municipal welfare sector (including primary and secondary education), rather than freeing up working time to provide more and better services. Each administrative unit or municipality could also run their own IT system, with little or no connection to those of other welfare services or geographical areas.

The need for a joint digitalised administrative management system for the public authorities has been highlighted in several previous government-commissioned investigations - most recently (in 2020) in the so-called Municipal Investigation (*Kommunutredningen*). The issue was also raised by the Swedish Agency for Public Management (*Statskontoret*) in 2020, and by the Swedish National Audit Office (*Riksrevisionen*) in 2016. However, the new digitalisation initiative from the Welfare Commission is special as it specifically targets core welfare services at municipal level.

The new IT system is supposed to serve all municipal welfare services. In addition, it is expected to be able to communicate with similar digital systems at other levels of government to improve cooperation between the municipalities and the regions, as well as with the state. Unlike today, it should be possible for employees in one service area or municipal unit to access digital services of another public authority. A digitalised and searchable hub for accessing information about licensed staff is also envisioned, as well as common technical standards for sending and receiving secure messages between administrative units and across governmental levels.

In response to this Welfare Commission initiative, the central Government commissioned the Agency for Digital Government (*Myndigheten för digital förvaltning*) to investigate the legal, organisational, and financial pre-requisites for implementing a common digitalised framework for municipal welfare services. The investigation should be carried out in close cooperation with the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and

Regions, and the final report is to be delivered by 15 June 2021. This will be followed by a period of political negotiation to define the exact content and design of the new joint IT system, and which parts of the services it will cover. The negotiation phase is expected to be finished by September 2021.

Outlook and commentary

Around 25% of the Swedish work force is employed in the municipal welfare sector (including primary and secondary education). In order to meet the demands for welfare rising from population aging, this share will need to increase substantially, unless resources are used more efficiently. A more adequate and smooth-running IT system is arguably a step in the right direction to free up valuable resources.

In 2019, the trade union Vision, which has around 200,000 employees in the municipal service sector, carried out a survey among its members about their experiences of working digitally. According to this survey, each employee loses around 34 minutes per day due to poorly functioning IT systems. In many municipalities, the COVID-19 pandemic has further highlighted the need for better digital administrative systems in the public sector.

There has been very little debate around the Welfare Commission's initiative, except for a call by Swedish IT and telecom industries to be invited to the negotiations. The discussion will most likely intensify as the process continues

and the plans become more detailed. There are a number of controversial issues involved, not least the implications for personal integrity and the sharing of financial costs.

Previous attempts by public authorities to set up new IT systems raise concerns. Despite IT investments of 2 billion SEK (€200 million), the new digital communication centre for the Swedish police turned out to be a failure, and is currently on the verge of being abolished. The city of Stockholm recently terminated the attempt to implement a new IT system for long-term care and the social services, after having spent around 250 million SEK (€25 million) on a new digital platform that did not even survive to the production stage. In 2019, Karolinska University Hospital (one of Europe's premier health facilities) abolished a project to introduce an IT system for "value-based care", after having invested 190 million SEK (€19 million) in the new digital platform. "Value-based care" is a delivery model which focuses on patient health outcomes. It is sometimes used to increase competition and "marketise" healthcare.

The list of failed IT investments in the public sector is a long one; this should send a clear signal to policymakers involved in the current initiative to implement a joint digital administrative management system for municipal welfare services. Some lessons from previous failures are to avoid overly ambitious plans for digitalisation, and to make sure that users of the new IT system are involved even in the planning phase of the digital infrastructure.

Further reading

Infrastrukturdepartementet (2020). Regeringsbeslut I2020/02241/DF: Uppdrag att genomföra en analys om förutsättningar för kommuners och regioners deltagande i den förvaltningsgemensamma digitala infrastrukturen [*Assignment to conduct an analysis of the pre-requisites of municipalities and the regions to take part in a joint digital administrative management system*]. Regeringskansliet.

Finansdepartementet (2019). Bilaga till regeringsbeslut: Välfärdskommissionen [*Attachment to Government decision: the Welfare Commission*]. Regeringskansliet.

Regeringskansliet (2021). Välfärdskommissionen enas om flera nya åtgärder på årets första möte [*The Welfare Commission agrees on new measures at this year's first meeting*]. Regeringskansliet.

SOU (2021). Starkare kommuner – med kapacitet att klara välfärdsuppdraget [*Stronger municipalities – with the capacity to sustain the welfare mission*]. SOU 2020:8.

Statskontoret (2020). Styrning av digitala investeringar – Delrapport [*Steering of digital investments – Progress report*]. Statskontoret.

Riksrevisionen (2016). Den offentliga förvaltningens digitalisering [*Digitalisation of public authorities*]. Statskontoret, rir 2016:14.

Author

Kenneth Nelson (Swedish Institute for Social Research, Stockholm University)