

Cooperation between municipalities and civil society – inspirational examples from



BORÅS STAD

mucf

Swedish Agency for
Youth and Civil Society

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Foreword

All Swedish municipalities currently work with civil society issues and attempt to strengthen the foundations of civil society organisations in various ways. This is achieved through cooperation, dialogue, advice and support, grants, support in terms of knowledge and more. This publication is part of the work to promote cooperation between public actors and civil society and is intended to serve as inspiration and knowledge support. It describes how the City of Borås has worked with civil society and how they have cooperated locally.

The aim of the publication is to enable civil society organisations to expand their knowledge of how municipalities support and cooperate with civil society. At the same time, the story can inspire other public actors to strengthen their cooperation with civil society.

Multi-level cooperation is needed to meet society's challenges, and best practice and lessons learned are presented here to inspire more people to view cooperation with civil society organisations as an opportunity to come up with creative solutions to future challenges. Civil society organisations also need support to help them carry out and develop their core activities. For example, this may involve reducing the administrative burden; simplifying the conditions for funding; simplifying and clarifying opportunities for support and information; or access to premises.

The Swedish Agency for Youth and Civil Society (MUCF) is responsible for promoting the achievement of the objectives of civil society policy by developing, collecting and disseminating knowledge. Furthermore, we are tasked with promoting cooperation between public actors and civil society and developing knowledge support for civil society.

The publication was produced by Development Manager Omar Nur of the Knowledge Support Department.

Lena Nyberg, Director General

The Swedish Agency for Youth and Civil Society

Introduction

This publication is part of a series of publications and has been produced to illustrate different examples of relationships between municipalities and civil society organisations. Six municipalities in Sweden have been asked to describe how they have worked with civil society issues and how they have supported and cooperated with civil society. Sweden has a civil society policy. Through this policy, the government wishes to highlight the crucial importance of civil society, and develop civil society and its conditions. The aim of civil society policy is to make it easier for civil society to continue playing a key role in democracy – involving people and contributing to the development of society and to welfare. This is to take place in dialogue with civil society organisations.

Civil society consists of a formalised part and a non-formalised part. Within the formalised part of civil society, there are a number of different organisational forms, the most common being non-profit associations, registered faith communities, foundations, economic associations, limited liability companies with a special limitation on dividends, and community and joint ownership associations.

Municipalities emphasise the importance of cooperating with civil society organisations to meet current societal challenges and those they envisage in the future. Improving the conditions of civil society requires a better understanding of its needs and conditions. The publications include several examples that aim to meet civil society's need for knowledge in different ways. It should be possible to use them as inspiration for development and cooperation – both within civil society and between civil society and other sectors of society.

There seems to be a great deal of variation between municipalities on issues of supporting and cooperating with civil society. Although differences may exist between municipalities, there is a clear interest in working more on these issues. There are many different initiatives taken by municipalities that seek to work with civil society to better deliver social benefits. This publication focuses on the City of Borås, but you can also read more about the work of the other municipalities in our series.

Borås

An agreement led to deeper partnership

Ekerö

From global disaster to local cooperation model

Linköping

Gender equality in sport leads to successful development

Lund

Creative culture grants and structuring networks

Helsingborg

One grant system for all associations

Jönköping

The benefits of a well-organised civil society

Borås: An agreement led to deeper partnership

Borås has a wealth of different associations, and civil society initiatives form a crucial part of the city's welfare provision. NGOs and the City of Borås felt that there was an interest in and a need to work together even more on welfare challenges, and that more structured cooperation was necessary in this regard.

Based on a joint agreement

In 2015, a process for a joint agreement was initiated. This took place following a political decision and political encouragement, together with the expressed will of a number of NGOs in Borås and the Church of Sweden. The work was based on the principles underlying the national agreement adopted by the Riksdag (Swedish Parliament) in 2008.

Six principles underpinning the work

For two years, several general meetings and focus groups were held at which we in Borås Municipality tried to establish a common language, with the aim of reaching a joint agreement. This agreement was then adopted by the Municipal Council in December 2016, after which more than 70 NGOs have chosen to officially sign it.

The agreement describes how the NGOs and the City of Borås will develop and deepen their partnership with the aim of maintaining and developing welfare in Borås. It is based on six principles:

- autonomy and independence
- openness and transparency
- diversity
- dialogue
- quality
- sustainability.

We are to relate to each other and work together based on these principles. The common areas of cooperation concern jointly developing welfare in Borås in terms of democracy, public health, integration, community and social cohesion. By working together, we strengthen trust and social cohesion while giving the people of Borås greater opportunities for participation and influence.

Consultation group creates a good relationship

The value of the joint agreement was largely created during the process leading up to the joint document. Dialogue enabled us to understand each other better, which in turn laid the foundations for long-term relationships that enable new partnerships today. We have a consultation group made up of a number of politicians and heads of departments and an equal number of representatives from NGOs. Dialogue, in which we learn about each other and maintain relationships, is an important instrument for achieving the spirit of the agreement and enabling cooperation with the City of Borås.



Quotes from focus groups, 2016

“It’s about both parties. Many associations work on the same things but they don’t know about each other and don’t work together. Many of them are constantly reinventing the wheel. At the same time, we need to know the conditions for welfare. It’s about people after all. Health care, schools, social care, care of the elderly. Subjects are needed. Loneliness is an important factor to look at. Can we do something together in that area?” (Comment from person active in an association)

“We must protect both parties, who are to be equal. The municipality should not just step in and make decisions. As a municipality, we can instead create platforms – so that there’s a dialogue between us and the associations. We can mobilise and identify partners.” (Comment by staff member)

In order to learn about each other and develop our cooperation, regular forums need to take place at which municipal organisations, NGOs and other local actors meet. These meetings generate knowledge and understanding of each other’s tasks and interests.

In parallel with the development of the agreement and concurrent reorganisation in the City of Borås, in 2017 politicians took on the task of increasing local influence in the municipality and supporting rural development to a greater extent. This led to a structure in which NGOs and different organisations in the City of Borås meet in networks based on common areas of interest.

The work on the agreement and local influence were interwoven to create structured forms and common forums in which we meet, aiming to develop our cooperation. At the same time, the approaches highlighted in the agreement are important as a starting point if you wish to exert influence in local cooperation.

Area networks and rural councils work locally

There are currently seven area networks in the more central residential areas and four rural councils in rural service areas. In the seven area networks, the municipality is responsible for inviting groups of NGO and municipal actors to discuss common challenges and local issues together. In the four rural councils, the NGOs organise meetings bringing together representatives from different backgrounds, but the City of Borås listens to what is being said and tries to support their efforts. All rural councils are also offered financial support to develop their local work.

Participation in the different networks and councils varies according to the actors operating in the areas and the common challenges in each area.

Formal and informal meetings create good relationships

In addition to the networks, there are traditional councils on various issues in which NGOs, politicians and staff members meet. These include the leisure council, the pensioner council and the disability council. Thematic meetings are also organised when a party wishes to discuss and develop joint efforts on a specific issue with the organisations concerned. Such areas have included traffic issues, activity sites, facilities for NGOs and activities for children and young people.



Comments from the evaluation of the work on local influence, 2019

“Much greater insight into organisations around the city and local area, and increased influence and partnership. (Comment from an association in an area network)

“Positive effects are knowledge of each other and each other’s organisations, insight into our similarities and challenges. Some specific cooperative activities have emerged out of the network (two or more actors that did not cooperate previously and have now started to do so), i.e. they have “found each other”. (Comment from a municipal organisation in an area network)

In addition to joint meetings, the NGOs also meet individually in networks, councils and other forms to work together and develop, so that they can jointly become a stronger counterpart to the municipality. Similarly, the municipality’s departments work together to share experiences and lay the foundations for cooperation. Process managers in the agreement and in the cooperation task regarding local influence help to ensure sustainability in this work.

There are many meeting places that provide impetus for the work and generate a common understanding. Training sessions are organised, an annual general meeting is held and meetings also take place at informal lunches.

The meetings known as SEED meetings (*forum för relationer i överenskommelsen – forum for relationships in the agreement*) are organised about four times a year on different themes. They are an opportunity for both the municipality and the NGOs to meet each other in a more informal setting. This generates a common understanding and provides impetus for the cooperation between the parties.

On the NGO side, there is an association council with over 100 member organisations attempting to protect their common interests and taking part in cooperation, but the large non-profit organisations that have their own staff or support from a national organisation do not participate in the council's activities.

”Had a meeting with a department. I brought LEGO pieces with me and poured them out onto the table. It creates a sense of belonging.”
(Comment from association)

Insufficient resources and a silo organisation make things difficult

A constant challenge is to keep knowledge of the agreement and the cooperation alive. The City of Borås has over 10,000 municipal employees. At least 14 municipal departments are directly or indirectly involved, and many NGOs are driven by their own mission statement. Cooperation can only take place when NGOs and the municipality have common interests that coincide at the right time and with the right conditions, but it can be difficult to ask the right question and clearly define the issue when there are many people involved.

One difficulty highlighted by both NGOs and organisations under the City of Borås is resources. If it is not possible to reallocate or get more out of resources by coordinating joint resources or non-profit efforts, new resources are needed. Quite often, however, areas for cooperation are on the periphery of what departments see as their regular mission. In such cases, the municipality is not always able to contribute financial resources. This requires greater cooperation between departments and clarity regarding responsibilities. This is positive in principle, but it can be a little difficult in the traditional municipal silo organisation.



From the 2018 agreement follow-up

“Financial conditions for cooperation with associations, as associations are largely based on non-profit work. Can offer non-profit initiatives and added value, but this usually means that the municipality must provide all the funding for the activities to be included.
(Comment from committee/department)

“The lack of sufficient financial resources, which limits the possibilities of achieving what we want to achieve in the future.” (Comment from NGO)

“To find the time to take part in the cooperation and develop it.”
(Comment from NGO)

“Some associations find it difficult to encourage members to get involved; it is easy to wear out those who are already active.” (Comment from committee/department)

Understanding and trust have increased

The City of Borås has been working closely with NGOs for a long time, but the systematic work on the agreement and local influence has given the work a clearer direction, with more opportunities to meet and cooperate in the long term. Today, there are more partnerships between the city and NGOs. This gives citizens greater opportunities for participation and influence, which in turn strengthens the trust and social cohesion that are so crucial for a functioning welfare state.

It is important to be aware of each other and establish personal contact to make things easier when an idea for cooperation arises. The pathways to the right person in the city and in NGOs have become shorter.

As there are more regular opportunities to meet, it is also easier to find common areas of cooperation between the municipality and the NGOs, but also among the NGOs themselves. This has been particularly evident during the outbreak of COVID-19, during which several partnerships quickly got underway. The perception is that more committees and departments in the municipality consider NGOs a party to work with.

The perception is also that trust in the municipality has increased among the NGOs. At the beginning of the process, there was greater suspicion and frustration based on past experiences of meetings with the municipality that were not perceived to have worked. These misunderstandings often seem to be based on a lack of understanding of each other's roles and tasks.



From the 2018 agreement follow-up

“With the agreement, the role of the NGOs in the cooperation has become clearer. With joint forces and resources, we are able to take action and create things together, which is positive for the people of Borås.” (Comment from NGO)

“In the long term, good relationships are established between the City of Borås and civil society.” (Comment from committee/department)

Voluntary Sector Organisation Public Partnerships (VSOPPs) are the method

The Voluntary Sector Organisation Public Partnership (VSOPP) is a form of cooperation that has been widely used in the City of Borås due to major interest from civil society, politicians and staff members. The possibility of creating VSOPPs has existed since 2016, when the Municipal Council decided on local rules for VSOPPs in Borås.

Several VSOPPs have already been implemented and expired, and today there are 16 VSOPPs in Borås. The objectives vary, but several VSOPPs have focused on cooperation to improve the conditions for people to enter the labour market, organise drop-in activities for children and young people, and improve the conditions for physical activity.

All VSOPPs are preceded by joint dialogue

Borås has used the VSOPP as a form of cooperation when the municipality and civil society have identified a common challenge in our joint welfare system that we need to work together to address and implement a solution. A prerequisite is that it should benefit both the association and the municipality’s welfare mission. All our VSOPPs have been preceded by joint dialogue – something that does not take place in the same way when applying for a grant based on established rules or when tendering for a contract. The initiative for an initial dialogue has been taken either by the municipality or the association.

The agreement is shaped and followed up together

In addition to shaping the agreement together, the intention is that we will work together and follow up the work during the term of the agreement. How we should relate to each other in the partnership is described in the joint agreement between the municipality and the NGOs. A reference to the agreement always forms part of the contract.

What is a Voluntary Sector Organisation Public Partnership (VSOPP)?

- VSOPP is a model for partnership between NGOs and the public sector. A VSOPP regulates a specific partnership and the finances surrounding it.
- The activities must be carried out on the initiative of the association – not in the form of an order from the municipality through which the activities are controlled in detail.
- The activities must not compete with other similar activities on an existing market.
- The activities provide services that contribute to the general benefit of society.
- The activities are outside the standardised association grant system.
- The activities are part of the implementation of a political programme or plan, such as an agreement, in which the NGOs are specifically mentioned.
- The activities are financed by both parties through money or various contributions.
- The activities are intended to continue for a long time.

VSOPP is a form of cooperation

There are still misunderstandings about VSOPPs. Initially, many people equated them with the Borås agreement, but more people have gradually come to understand that a VSOPP is a form of cooperation. Another misunderstanding was that as an organisation, you can apply for a VSOPP. This is probably due to the traditional relationships the municipality has had with associations and organisations in the grant provision process and to the fact that the initiative for a VSOPP should come from the NGO itself.

Several associations have contacted the municipality and said: “We would like to have a VSOPP for this”. In all cases, the municipality has said to them that it would be happy to meet the association to discuss whether partnership is possible in a subsequent stage, and if so, in what form. In some cases, an agreement has been made; in others some other form of cooperation or no cooperation at all has been agreed upon.

Similarly, the municipality may sometimes act based on past practices, but we try to remind each other and make improvements together. Otherwise, VSOPPs are perceived by both parties as a simpler form of agreement than the Public Procurement Act (LOU), as agreements are not created for organisations subject to competition. Sometimes, the city may also suggest the VSOPP as a form of partnership after getting a picture of the needs and circumstances of the association.

Agreements run for three years with ongoing follow-up

VSOPPs in Borås tend to last for three years, with follow-up at least twice a year. These are longer periods of time than the municipality traditionally employs when awarding grants, which lays solid foundations for running activities. Most VSOPPs require both parties to be active in various aspects in order for the activities to be carried out, although today NGOs are responsible for most of the implementation.

It has been important for the activities to be followed up and for this to be the responsibility of both parties. For this reason, some form of steering group usually meets 2–4 times a year, including representatives from the NGOs and the public sector, but other partners may also be invited. Impact evaluations are not based on quantity and results, but on the perception of partnership and benefits to the organisation.

VSOPPs generate commitment and added value

The main reason for choosing the VSOPP as a form of partnership is the added value of having the NGO do certain things instead of the municipality. Examples of such added value could be that an organisation may have easier access to citizens and is less controlled by regulations and organisation. But above all, the added value lies in the fact that the NGOs have a genuine commitment to issues close to their own mission statement. This commitment and the joy of doing something or helping someone together is one of the main reasons why many people choose to get involved in the non-profit sector or become an employee of an NGO.

Checklists and templates with suggested headings are available to help those wishing to choose the VSOPP as a partner model. The municipality also usually recommends and disseminates the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions' design and planning tools, which can be used to ensure an effective dialogue on equal terms. The City of Borås also has a lawyer who has studied VSOPPs and can provide help when needed.



“The VSOPP partnerships have strengthened ties and generated greater understanding of the different roles of civil society and the city. Municipalities will never be able to cope with future welfare needs on their own – civil society is a prerequisite. We can say that, in the best of worlds, we are preventing any negative impact of the major challenge facing public services by building trust and confidence in each other. (Head of Leisure and Public Health Department)

The collaboration develops and we learn from each other

The work to develop collaboration between the non-profit organizations, the other civil society and the City of Borås need to be maintained through good meetings and new collaborations. Collaborations also evolve as organizations and people learn from each other. In the long run, we hope that we can create IOP around many even more complex societal challenges. However, it requires us to succeed create a common formulation of the problems and what roles are mentioned, administrations and idea-driven activities should have.



WE MAKE KNOWLEDGE GROW

At the Swedish Agency for Youth and Civil Society, the focus is on the conditions of young people and civil society. This is where knowledge grows that decision-makers use when deciding which initiatives for young people and civil society to prioritise. We pass on this knowledge in our encounters with people at national and European levels. We also distribute government grants that enable organisations large and small to carry out their activities. This also gives young people the opportunity to volunteer, study or do an internship in another European country.

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