

Cooperation between
municipalities and civil society
– inspirational examples from



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Swedish Agency for
Youth and Civil Society



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 Jönköping Municipality 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 major importance of civil society, develop and clarify the relationship between the state and civil society, and take a comprehensive approach to general issues concerning 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 Jönköping Municipality, 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

Jönköping: The benefits of a well-organised civil society

Jönköping Municipality is to be characterised by transparency and participation – this has been decided by the Municipal Council and is stated in our values. Such a position requires that both the municipality and the citizens take responsibility for making Jönköping Municipality a place where everyone can feel welcome and at home.



Photo: Magnus Nilsson/Sveriges Radio

On 1 May 2014, the church bells in Jönköping rang for an hour. Normally they ring for a minute, but while the Nazi-sympathising political party Svenskarnas Parti demonstrated in Jönköping, the Sofiakyrkan and Kristine Kyrka churches rang their bells to drown out the slogans. Letting the church bells ring for a long time also warns of danger.

The demonstration on 1 May 2014 marked the start of natural cooperation between Jönköping Municipality and civil society. There was a large turnout from churches, the Muslim Council, the sports movement, independent groups and others.

Extensive cooperation between the municipality and civil society

The municipality and civil society in Jönköping constantly cooperate to a great extent in various areas. Cooperation may regard information or knowledge sharing, planning for joint activities, co-determination, democracy and citizens' dialogue, or partnership on various development issues. Civil society also runs initiatives for groups and individuals who participate in the municipality's activities and carry out certain parts of the municipality's tasks for a fee. For example, this can concern integration, addiction or intimate partner violence. In such cases, the municipality and civil society can enter into a Voluntary Sector Organisation Public Partnership (VSOPP).

There are certain positions within the municipality tasked with leading the cooperation with civil society. But for most of the municipality's staff members, cooperation with civil society is part of their regular work.

A hearing to strengthen partnership

In 2016, the Municipal Executive Board of Jönköping Municipality decided to initiate work to further strengthen partnership between the municipality and the non-profit sector. To find out how civil society viewed the partnership and what developments they hoped for, a hearing with civil society was organised. The question posed in the invitation was "How can we increase cooperation between us?"

- "We wanted to discuss how the municipality and civil society can share each other's knowledge and experience to face common challenges," says civil society coordinator Thomas Yaftali. "We also wanted to find out how the municipality can foster involvement in helping vulnerable people, for example. The meeting was to form a basis for revising the municipality's guidelines for cooperation with civil society."
- "It was important to involve the full breadth of civil society, including more independent associations and networks such as Facebook groups. For this reason, we invited all organisations in the municipality's list of associations while providing information about the hearing in several different channels. Some people we were particularly keen to see were invited in person. In the end, around 200 people signed up from political committees, the municipality's own departments and civil society."

The participants were divided into groups, with each group having a secretary. The groups were determined in advance according to the area of activity, so that, for example, religious associations with the same focus were grouped together.

- We received both praise and criticism for this classification; some thought it was good to be able to share experiences with those with similar circumstances, while others think that they know each other too well for it to be an interesting exchange. This is something we have taken with us going forward.

SWOT analysis made as a starting point

The meeting was overseen by a facilitator, and the questions followed the model of a SWOT analysis in which we looked at strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. Quick questions were posed with the help of the Menti app so that the groups could get an idea of what the other groups thought during the meeting itself. All participants received feedback the week after the meeting.

The conclusion of the meeting was that the strengths of the cooperation between the municipality and civil society in Jönköping are the clear rules for grants and VSOPPs, as well being treated well, flexibility and a fundamental commitment to cooperation. The shortcomings include that information can be difficult to find and it can be complicated to get in touch with the right person in the municipality, especially if you have a new question or activity. It can also be difficult for new associations and constellations to be awarded grants. In addition, there is a shortage of premises and certain types of facilities, and there can sometimes be a lack of foresight in municipal decisions affecting associations.

The suggestions for improvement that emerged from the hearing were that organisations want more structured cooperation, along with a common vision of which issues should be prioritised for cooperation. There were requests for a larger number of general meetings but also meetings on individual issues. The municipality becoming too controlling and the process not being kept alive were seen as risks that could possibly arise.

General meetings and continuous meetings

As a result of the meeting, the Municipal Council was given the task of investigating the conditions for assisting civil society in meeting its needs for premises and of reviewing how to make it easier for civil society to get in touch with the municipality. The Municipal Council also decided to adopt a programme for the interaction between the municipality and civil society. The programme sets out a structured model for cooperation between the municipality and civil society. It focuses on broad dialogues to identify new issues and new networks and associations.

The model consists of two parts – two annual general meetings with different themes to be decided jointly and focusing on substantive issues, and continuous meetings between civil society representatives and the political leadership.

The general meetings are called Jönköping Civil Society Forum (*Forum Civilsamhälle Jönköping*) and they are held twice a year for representatives of civil society, political leaders and municipal staff members. These meetings provide a simple, quick and flexible means of direct contact between staff members, civil society representatives and politicians.

The first general meeting with 150 participants was held in autumn 2019 on the theme of *Ingen ska behöva vara ensam – vad kan vi göra tillsammans?* (Nobody should have to be alone – what can we do together?). The meeting resulted in ten specific proposals for cooperation on the theme. The Jönköping Civil Society Forum had to be cancelled in spring 2020, but it will be held at a later date.



Parts of the Civil Society Forum coordination group and the Coronavirus Network: Edward Eklöf, Dan Ahnberg, Joakim Kihlberg, Mona Forsberg, Elisabeth Öhrman and Marcus Arenfors.

The *Civil Society Forum* coordination group consists of two political representatives and two deputies appointed by the Municipal Executive Board, three municipal staff members and four civil society representatives appointed by Csam Jönköping (civil society cooperation group). The coordination group is responsible for organising the Jönköping Civil Society Forum twice a year. It also bears overall responsibility for overseeing and coordinating the activities and forms of cooperation that already exist in the interaction between the municipality and civil society. The group must also devise a long-term plan and clear objectives for how the cooperation will be developed and improved.

Six guiding principles

The programme for cooperation between the municipality and civil society contains six guiding principles that are to characterise the cooperation:

- **Autonomy and independence**
Civil society must operate independently of the municipality and be able to critically examine the municipality's operations.
- **Dialogue**
A continuous dialogue is a prerequisite for cooperation between the municipality and civil society.
- **Quality**
Civil society actors determine the actual quality of their own activities.
- **Sustainability**
The municipality facilitates civil society's planning by taking a long-term view.
- **Openness and transparency**
It should be easy for associations and organisations to get in touch with the municipality's organisations.
- **Diversity**
Civil society contributes to diversity by giving individuals more opportunities to pursue their commitments and interests.

The principles have been printed on postcards and distributed to municipal staff members and civil society representatives.

Invite in and listen to civil society!

There is a strong consensus among all parties in the Municipal Council on the importance of structured cooperation with civil society.

Municipal commissioner Mona Forsberg explains:

“I can say from the heart that I believe we would never survive without civil society. It was particularly significant when Svenskarnas Parti demonstrated in the city on 1 May 2014 and during the refugee crisis in 2015. I think it’s a hallmark of Jönköping that when there is a crisis, we stand together.”

“I am the chair of the *Civil Society Forum* coordination group. One of the strengths of the coordination group is that we have a wide range of different organisations representing the sports movement, faith communities, study associations and various social associations, among others.” “For municipalities wishing to establish good cooperation with civil society, I would advise inviting in and listening to its representatives. Get in touch with the larger organisations, such as a sports alliance, or if there is a partnership between churches and faith communities. Listen to how they view the municipality and its policy and tune into how they wish to cooperate with the municipality. I am absolutely convinced that civil society wishes to have better cooperation with the municipality. It may not be possible to implement all suggestions and requests, but discussing them means a great deal.”



I think it’s a hallmark of Jönköping that when there is a crisis, we stand together.

**Municipal commissioner
Mona Forsberg (Social
Democrats)**

**Mona Forsberg,
municipal commissioner.
Chair of the Civil
Society Forum
Coordination Group.**

Relationships, relationships, relationships

The study association Studieförbundet Bilda has cooperated with the municipality in various ways throughout the 2000s, in particular with the culture and leisure department on various festivals and concerts. For them, such cooperation is nothing new. Dan Ahnberg, Studieförbundet Bilda, explains:

“What’s new is that we are now being heard to a completely different extent. In recent years, the municipality has become more aware of the importance of civil society. We are invited by the municipality to engage in different contexts because we have a voice and a thought process. We have been able to influence, among other things, the grants system and the way in which various events are organised.”

Dan is a member of the Civil Society Forum, to which the associations in the civil society coordination group (Csam) have elected members who get to represent all associations. He thinks it can be difficult for civil society representatives to know about all the associations they represent. It is therefore crucial that agendas are relevant to both policy makers and civil society organisations. According to him, this has not yet been achieved, and he goes on to say:

“Civil society representatives in the coordination group are not remunerated for their work, while political representatives are. If civil society also had the opportunity to appoint representatives who could participate during working hours, this would give the cooperation more punch.”

Dan advises civil society organisations to learn how the municipality works and is organised. It can sometimes be difficult to know where to turn in the municipality when it comes to various types of issues; sometimes they may be local issues, at other times concern an event. For municipalities that want to ensure effective cooperation with civil society, Dan points out the importance of having good relationships with civil society outside office hours (8 am – 5 pm):

“Civil society is most active and has the most ideas in the evening. As a civil society representative, you often need to take time off work to get in touch with the municipality.”



**Thomas Yaftali,
civil society coordinator.**

Thomas Yaftali works as a civil society coordinator. He says:

“When I took up my post, I had a meeting with the responsible municipal commissioners from the political majority and the opposition. We agreed that we needed to structure the cooperation between the municipality and civil society. I was then tasked with bringing together a network of staff members that have a great deal of contact with civil society and formed what later came to be known as the Civil Society Network.”

The *Csam* reference group is attached to the civil society coordinator. The purpose of the reference group is to establish direct contact and dialogue, with the aim of developing and stimulating cooperation between the municipality and civil society. *Csam* is open to all civil society organisations, with around forty currently represented. In turn it appoints representatives to the *Civil Society Forum* coordination group.

Network for staff members’ many contacts

The Civil Society Coordinator has the specific task of developing the departments’ contacts with civil society, and the Civil Society Network aims to coordinate and develop the municipality’s work in relation to civil society and serve as a resource for committees and departments in terms of knowledge about civil society. Eventually, it was concluded that it was necessary to set up a more distinct organisation to carry out the task. This was the reason for the creation of the *Civil Society Working Group*.

The aim was to create a small group of staff members at senior management level who based on their function are able to influence development within their department. The Civil Society Network will continue to serve as a contact point, source of information, resource and partner for the working party in its ongoing development work.

There is also a group on the municipality’s intranet, *Civil Society Cooperation*, which is used to provide information to specific target groups or about upcoming meetings in different parts of the municipality and in different areas of activity.

In addition to the above, there are several partnerships, councils and dialogues with civil society – both across the municipality and those run by the various departments. Committees and departments carry out citizens’ dialogues and other partnerships, and there are 14 district development groups in which cooperation takes place with local associations for socially and environmentally sustainable development.

In what are known as the municipality’s priority housing areas, there are also area groups that work together with municipal departments, housing companies, non-profit associations and the local police. The municipality also has a municipal council for pensioners and a municipal council for disability issues.

Coronavirus Network

The Volunteer Centre (Frivilligcentralen) in Jönköping is run by a non-profit association under an agreement with the municipality. In connection with the coronavirus pandemic, the Centre was given the task of developing activities to organise support for individual local residents in cooperation with other actors. A postcard was sent to everyone aged 70+ who was not receiving help from social services, informing them that they could approach the Volunteer Centre if they needed help and support to comply with the Public Health Agency’s recommendations.

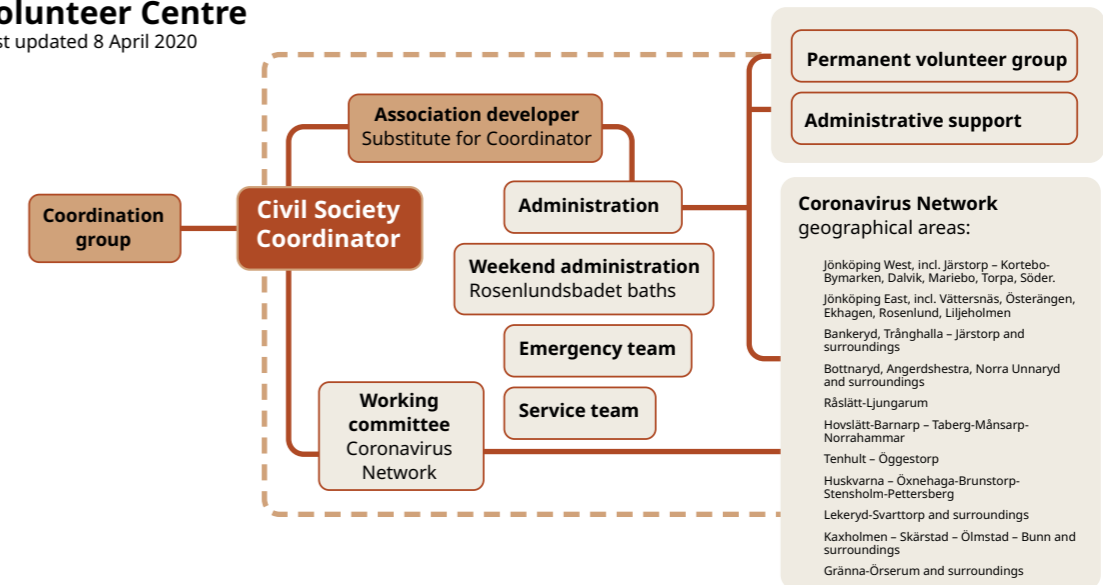
The Coronavirus Network is formed

Soon it became clear that a contingency plan was needed to cope with a sharp increase in the number of tasks. Together with staff from social services and the municipality’s crisis organisation, the Civil Society Coordinator convened a meeting with representatives of ten or so associations, including churches, scouts, student unions, etc. A Facebook group was also set up. The meeting marked the start of the Coronavirus Network.

The Network is a platform to help those who want to take action. It is also hoped that the Network will contribute to greater coordination and that vital experience will quickly be made available to more people. In spring 2020, the Coronavirus Network grew to include around 30 civil society organisations.

Volunteer Centre

Last updated 8 April 2020



The Volunteer Centre has developed procedures for financial management, safety, hygiene and equipment when carrying out tasks. Those tasks that for various reasons cannot be carried out according to the established procedures are handled by the Volunteer Centre's service teams, which consist of staff from the municipality and a contracted social enterprise. Marcus Ardenfors says:



The strength of the network is that it is not just churches and the municipality, but a real mix of organisations whose hearts beat as one.

Interview with Marcus Ardenfors, Pentecostal Church.

“Early on, when the coronavirus pandemic hit, we realised that the situation would mean many tough decisions for politicians and other decision-makers. We sent out an email to the local politicians of all parties asking if we could help. Our offer was quickly taken up by the local politicians, who responded that they really needed help.”

“It was natural for us to think about how we could help the elderly in our own church. But who helps those outside such communities? It's great that there's a number on the municipality's website you can call if you need help or want to talk to someone. At the same time, it's sad that it's necessary.”

“The strength of the network is that we don't just have churches and municipal staff members – we have a real mix of organisations whose hearts beat as one. We don't each do our own thing – we help each other. Those of us who are part of the Coronavirus Network are aware that it is very important, and we will benefit from this cooperation in the future.”

Marcus advises civil society actors that by having the courage to widen your circles, what you can achieve will multiply. You can learn from how others do things and avoid reinventing the wheel.

He advises municipalities that want to ensure effective cooperation with civil society to express their support more often to civil society organisations. This creates a sense of pride and a willingness to contribute. Civil society cooperation cannot be taken for granted – it must be nurtured. Marcus is convinced that greater financial support for civil society would bring benefits to the economy.

Coronavirus pandemic shedding light on loneliness

The state of affairs arising from the coronavirus pandemic has become more protracted than initially anticipated, but there is a huge willingness to help. Many volunteers have established regular contact with the people they help.

The flip side is the painful discovery of how many people are lonely. The Volunteer Centre has therefore started to organise telephone chat sessions between citizens, aimed at those aged 50 and over.

Network for refugee support and integration

1 May 2014 marked the start of a natural partnership in which civil society stood up to be counted: churches, the Muslim Council, the sports movement and independent groups declared by demonstrating that they did not accept groups such as Nazi-sympathising political party Svenskarnas Parti in society. Benita Josefsson from the Red Cross is part of the Network for Refugee Support and Integration. She says:

“I think the demonstration with the bell ringing made a lot of people think that they would like to do something for society. What can I contribute and where can I do it? It doesn't really matter where.”



The bell ringing to signal danger became a turning point for cooperation. It comes up all the time.

Benita Josefsson, Red Cross

The need for coordination grew

Soon after, the wave of refugees arrived and many organisations got involved in receiving them. After some time, there was a growing need for coordination among the various civil society actors; they needed to meet to discuss who was doing what and how best to work.

The municipality took on the role of convenor of the *Network for Refugee Support and Integration*. In the network, different actors can share experiences and receive support and help from each other. Over time, the meetings evolved to include more information from different actors such as the municipality and the Swedish Migration Agency.

Today, the organisations in the network have less need for coordination. They have each found their niche, while the number of asylum seekers has decreased. Instead, the priority must now be integration work with those who have been granted residence permits.

Benita advises municipalities wishing to cooperate with civil society to give civil society organisations recognition for the work they do. It is important that

the municipality sees what civil society does in the context of integration and supports it financially. This does not have to involve large sums of money, but it is important to show a willingness to sponsor them and give them appreciation.

This could involve a grant system that is not as static, with even less formal associations being eligible to receive grants. In addition, ongoing activities need a constant stream of funds.

Personal contacts important

Benita also stresses that it is important that the municipality does not close itself off in its various departments but instead works to reduce bureaucracy. During the wave of refugees in 2015, new solutions and partnerships were created that had not previously existed within and between civil society organisations. Personal contacts are important. Benita advises civil society organisations wishing to cooperate with the municipality and other organisations not to close themselves off in their own organisations but instead to look for partnerships: “Talk about the skills, experience and resources you have, make use of each other’s expertise and support each other. Here, the municipality can often serve as an enabler and door-opener, creating opportunities for different groups to meet. The relationships created will remain in place for a long time afterwards.

Summary and outlook

The municipality owes much to its long-established partnership with civil society for the rapid response to the coronavirus pandemic. Both when the *Network for Refugee Support and Integration* came into being and when the *Coronavirus Network* was created, the municipality had already been contacted by civil society about possible cooperation.

In a municipality the size of Jönköping, there may be a need to disseminate information internally about the groups already cooperating with civil society in the various departments. During spring 2020, all departments therefore made an inventory of the cooperation taking place between the municipality and civil society and the development potential that was apparent. A similar inventory was made by Csam.

It is hoped that the results of these inventories will provide a basis for further dialogue between civil society and the municipality when circumstances permit.

The inventory allows departments to learn about each other’s networks and contacts when reaching out to different groups in society. It is also possible to coordinate contacts between the different departments to avoid one actor being contacted several times by different parts of the municipality. The geographical structure created by the cooperation between the Volunteer Centre and the Coronavirus Network needs to be exploited and maintained after the pandemic period.

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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