



A new assignment

Coordinating libraries in Sweden



National Library
of Sweden

New roles for the National Library

In the autumn of 2009 the Swedish Government proposed in its culture bill that the National Library should have overall responsibility for libraries financed by public funds. We would be responsible for providing a national overview, promoting cooperation, driving development forward and monitoring the public libraries. Briefly, we would become a central administrative authority for the entire Swedish library system.

The Government later tasked the National Library with formulating a plan for how to carry out the new duties. We created a joint consultation group with representatives from various types of libraries to participate in the planning. In addition, we held meetings around the country. To encourage open discussion we started a blog on the National Library website. We submitted the finished plan to the Ministry of Culture on April 16. This pamphlet briefly describes the National Library's proposal.

The report can be found in Swedish in its entirety at kb.se.

Background

The Internet and technological development of recent decades have blurred the boundaries between various types of libraries. Users are less likely to allow organizational divisions to pose an obstacle, which has strengthened the need for cohesive networks and nationwide solutions. New search tools have made the libraries' collections more visible and more accessible. Distance education and e-learning are becoming increasingly popular.

In 1997 Sweden implemented legislation for the public libraries in which the Government adopted a cohesive approach to libraries as a common national resource, in which each principal organization accepts its responsibility. As a natural consequence, the Government and the Riksdag are now mandating the National Library to be the central regulatory authority for all libraries.

A break in the trend

To date, Swedish public and research libraries, as in most countries, have acted in separate spheres, with different assignments and different regulatory structures. The National Library will now become the central regulatory authority for the entire library system. This departure from a lengthy tradition will facilitate convergence between the different library traditions, though various types of libraries will continue to have different assignments and different user groups.



Both public and research libraries are central bodies that have had a limited assignment, which had to be balanced against municipal autonomy and the sovereignty of the individual institutions of higher learning. The National Library is now accepting collective responsibility in a comprehensive approach that will entail development, coordination and better resource utilization.

Our current roles

The National Library currently provides direct or indirect support to the entire Swedish library system. Our task is to collect, describe, preserve and give access to Swedish printed works. Since 2009 the assignment also includes legal deposit copies of movies, phonograms, videos, radio and television. One important task is to be responsible for cataloging Swedish publications in the national bibliography.

The deposited printed material must be made visible as quickly as possible in the national LIBRIS library system and entries can be freely retrieved on the Internet. Since 1988 we have been responsible for operation and development of the research libraries' common catalog, LIBRIS, which has a strategic role in Sweden's national information policy.



The National Library is also responsible for other significant resources produced for the entire library system. We have microfilmed Swedish daily newspapers since the late 1970s. We are currently engaged in a project to prepare for handling and preserving electronic documents. We are also responsible for other digitization and long-term preservation initiatives. The National Library has a leading role in the collaboration among the archives, libraries and museums.

Collaboration and coordination

Since 1988 the National Library has been responsible for coordination and development initiatives involving research libraries. The project includes research library statistics, national license agreements for electronic resources, open access, development and continuing education of librarians.

A central library agency

As part of our new assignment, we will develop national goals and strategies for publicly financed libraries. We will be responsible for following up the practical application of the Swedish Libraries Act. We would like to develop quality criteria and indicators for assessment, promote bibliographic development and search systems, and work with accessibility, copyright and national development issues.

The libraries play an important role for society's communication of knowledge and culture as well as for the free formation of opinions. Both current material and older collections convey knowledge about values and social development in different times. The library must deliver high-quality, accessible services, especially for children and young people. We must provide them with skills so that later in life they can use the resources collected in libraries.

The Swedish library system holds its own relatively well in international comparison. However, there are certain problem areas. One is the school libraries, where standards vary greatly. Another is the special libraries. Many of these have built up unique collections, but diminishing resources have led to a corresponding reduction in opening hours and accessibility.

The expanded assignment will broaden the National Library's traditional target groups. Development initiatives should therefore be formulated and adapted to the special needs and target audiences of the public libraries, such as children and young people, as well as various groups of adult students.

Statistics are more than numbers

Reliable, comprehensive library statistics are necessary for a national overview and for following the development of libraries and the practical application of the Swedish Library Act in consultation with the regional libraries. Maintaining collective library statistics will therefore be one important element of our assignment. We will require several development initiatives, including collection and processing of statistics, as well as development of methods and indicators for follow-up and assessment. These statistics can be used as a basis for comparative analyses and to follow up the practical application of the library act.

We are currently working on gathering all library statistics in one database. Among other things, the system will generate statistics for libraries, policy-makers and the public. The libraries will also be able to design their own customized runs.

Promoting collaboration

Library participants are already cooperating in a number of fields. Some collaborative efforts cross library boundaries, such as common rules for cataloging and classification, common search systems such as LIBRIS and the system of interlibrary lending. In municipalities, public and school libraries often cooperate, leading to better resource utilization and providing students with better access to advanced library services.

Promoting cooperation includes identifying and developing national library services and systems. A further development of LIBRIS as a base for a national catalog is a top priority to strengthen collaboration among various libraries and provide users with central information about the libraries' collections. As a key player the National Library can also create forums for collaboration among different types of libraries.

Driving development

Driving development can involve a number of different means. The focus can also shift from time to time. In general, initiatives should focus on development of a national character – the kind that the individual library is unable to carry out. Such development initiatives should be of general interest within the field, serve as a catalyst for change, enhance skills or be sector-wide.

One important area for development is digitization, which requires significant investment and technological expertise. Digitization of the libraries' content increases accessibility, especially to the older collections, which may have restricted accessibility for protection purposes.





Digitization requires better search systems. Here the National Library has developed various cooperative search systems in collaboration with other agencies to benefit both research and the greater public.

The digital gap

However, accessibility of the digitized content can be limited due to copyright issues, such as in the case of the National Library's audiovisual material. Even this part of our cultural heritage should become more accessible. The National Library will initiate pilot projects at a number of public libraries to test how material could be used in a local context, such as within education, local historical research and by the general public.

Accessibility also involves having access to, and being included and participating in the digital society, having both knowledge and the opportunity to use the digital services that are available. Today some groups are on the other side of the digital divide or the digital gap; here, the libraries can cooperate with other parties in major initiatives to bridge these gaps. The libraries already have an infrastructure and are geographically located nationwide, which makes them particularly appropriate as partners for such supportive measures.

Library lab

Development initiatives can be conducted in many ways. For example, the National Library could work regionally in cooperation with one or more county libraries. Another possibility would be for a few selected libraries to be tasked with functioning as library labs, which could engage in full-scale experiments in a particular field. Regardless of the form, development projects should be analyzed with outside expertise participating in the evaluation process. Another area in great need of coordination and skills development involves preservation, particularly with respect to older printed collections in the libraries.

The expertise of the National Library and the large research libraries would be able to support a national development initiative in this context.

Forum for dialog

The National Library is currently engaged in dialog with university libraries in particular with expert and study groups focused on statistics, digitization, open access, competency issues and the LIBRIS system. The experiences are overwhelmingly positive. We will continue to build on this structure and develop and adapt to new target groups.

The existing groups will be expanded with representatives from the entire library field. In addition, several groups will be created to focus on developmental issues. These groups will identify needs and develop activities for children and young people. They will work on initiatives for school libraries, develop methods to promote reading and encourage multilingual library activities and provision of literature. These groups are expected to provide valuable support in the development and formulation of the National Library's expanded assignment.

Timetable

The Riksdag is expected to take a decision during the autumn of 2010 on resource allocation, according to which beginning in 2011 the National Library will have the role of central library authority. However, the new assignment requires some preparations. We will therefore develop the new assignment in project format during 2011 and 2012. Certain measures such as development of cohesive library statistics and development of LIBRIS as a national catalog will initially require major resources.

Moreover, the need for coordinated services for the municipal libraries must be more closely analyzed in consultation with the sector. Collaborative efforts between the National Library and the regional libraries must be developed with the purpose of establishing a more permanent organization. In addition, dialog forms need to be developed. A permanent organization for the new duties is expected to come into force in 2013.



The Swedish library landscape

The Swedish library landscape consists of a large number of independent participants. There are approximately 6,300 library entities of various sizes, standards and assignments and with the municipality, county council or the state as the responsible organization and financier.

There are 290 municipal library systems with more than 2,000 lending branches, including approximately 550 integrated public and school libraries.

The 6,078 elementary and high school/upper secondary schools have approximately 4,000 school libraries.

There are also 38 college and university college libraries, as well as about 75 special and government agency libraries.

The 20 county libraries provide support to the public libraries, along with three lending centers, including one lending center for materials in foreign languages and one depository library.

The Library of Talking Books and Braille is responsible for production of materials for people with reading disabilities and serves as a lending center mainly for the public libraries. It is increasingly responsible for arranging special services for university students with reading disabilities.

The National Library is responsible for coordination of library services within higher education and research.

The municipalities are responsible for the public and school libraries. The university libraries are financed through the respective institution of higher education. Special libraries and government agency libraries are financed via the parent institution. The National Library and the Library of Talking Books and Braille receive their grants directly from the Swedish state.

The regional libraries are co-financed by the County Councils and the Swedish State, with the county councils providing the larger share of financing, even though the county councils' share of the costs varies. Lending centers and depository libraries are financed via contributions from the Swedish state, which are channeled through the Swedish Arts Council. Hospital libraries are financed by the county councils.

