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E-services

Swedes raise barriers on all fronts

It's official: Sweden's e-services are the best in Europe. E-customs monitor its borders, tax forms are filed online and everyone has an ID number. **Michael Cross** asks how they do it

Michael Cross
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Driving a lorry across Sweden's border with Russia usually means hours or days waiting at customs. But now drivers heading east don't even need to pull in. A text message to their mobile phones tells them their load has been cleared and provides them with a reference number in case they are stop-ped for inspection. An electronic customs seal on the load, monitored by a GSM mobile phone signal, confirms nothing has been tampered with.

This is just one of a number of e-services from Sweden's virtual customs agency, which does almost all its business online. And the agency is only one arm of one of Europe's most e-savvy government.

The European Commission's latest benchmarking survey of e-government rated Sweden the number one for sophistication of services (the UK was eighth). Globally, according to the latest annual survey of e-governments by the consultancy, Accenture, Sweden lies in equal fourth place - behind only Canada, Singapore and the US. Almost all transactions with Swedish government bodies are available electronically. Like its Nordic neighbours, Sweden has a high proportion of internet users: over 80% of the population is online, and three-quarters of web users visit government sites.

Almost everyone has a mobile phone. This year, more than 1 million of the country's 7 million taxpayers filed tax forms electronically, including 90,000 who approved their assessment by text message.

Sweden was the first national government to make all its laws - and supporting policy documents - available on the internet.

Surprisingly, this is a country with no national e-government plan, only a general expectation that everything should be online unless there is an overwhelming cost penalty. This is because Sweden's government is unusually fragmented. Most public services, including healthcare, are run by local authorities over which central government has no control. Most central agencies, too, are highly indepen dent: they are judged on their performance rather than being micro-managed by ministers. No one knows the total spending on IT or e-government.

Gunnar Lund, the finance minister in charge of public administration, says decentralisation is "a strength rather than a weakness". The Swedish

model gets things done including, where necessary, shedding staff. "Ten years ago, we had 420,000 employees at state level. There are now about half that number."

However, e-government enthusiasts say that if Sweden is to keep up the pace, central government should take a firmer grip on the tiller. As in Britain, the fault lines are perceived to be in local government and health services.

"We have a problem in local government," says Knut Rexed, director general of Statskontoret, a state agency charged with reforming public administration. "There is no one who can take central decisions, just 290 local municipalities all doing the same thing."

As a result, local e-government is highly patchy. At one end of the spectrum, the city of Kariskrona broadcasts a town guide on the 3G mobile phone network. Yet a large number of authorities have little or no outward-facing IT.

Rexed's solution is to talk directly to innovative authorities and to encourage 30 to set up a consortium to develop shared back-office functions. "Thirty is a sufficiently large critical mass for success, then we hope it will set a de-facto standard." He says he is confident that local authorities will see the logic of joining in.

Healthcare, currently the responsibility of 21 county councils, is also being electronically joined up under a nationally driven project. However, in an almost comic contrast with the NHS's £6bn national programme for IT, the Swedish electronic IT project is being steered by an agency with a dozen employees and an annual budget of about £200,000.

Carelink, half-funded by central government and half by county councils, plans to create shared electronic health records based on extracts from hospital systems by the end of 2005.

Mats Larson, the agency's director, says the link will cost each county an average of £70,000. Electronic prescribing is another priority. About one quarter of prescriptions are sent electronically by doctors to the state pharmacy monopoly, Apotek.

Other moves are on the way to install the final links in Sweden's e-administration. One advantage that Swedish officials have over their British counterparts is that sharing personal data by public agencies is both accepted and technically feasible.

Sweden has had a central population register since 1580, which was computerised in the 1960s. The citizen ID number - based on a scrambled date of birth - is used for all purposes.

In November last year, Lund set up a "24x7" committee, made up of senior officials, to drive e-government progress further and to persuade agencies to share systems rather than develop their own.

As in Britain, one question crying out to be tackled is how to authenticate citizens' identities on the web. Digital signatures offered by the banks (more than 5 million Swedes have internet accounts) have been slow to take off. So far, most government agencies needing users to prove their identity have relied on personal identification numbers issued for the purpose.

Rexed says that setting up a sustainable infrastructure of affordable digital signatures is still an obstacle, the more so as Sweden will have to accept digital certificates issued anywhere in Europe. "The real thing that is holding us back is providing secure identities at a reasonable cost," he

says.

Yet in keeping with Sweden's liberal traditions, there is no talk of making e-services compulsory. "There is a general principle that people should have the ability to see a civil servant face-to-face."

The main weapon driving take-up of e-services is Nordic rationalism. "If they are better, people will use them," says Rexed. "If they are not, they should not exist."

Weblinks

Swedish customs: www.tullverket.se