

# How Sweden is governed



REGERINGSKANSLIET

Government Offices  
of Sweden

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# The Government and the Government Offices

## The Prime Minister and the other ministers

After each election the Speaker of the Riksdag (the Swedish Parliament) submits a proposal for a new Prime Minister. The Prime Minister is subsequently appointed by the Riksdag and tasked with forming a government. The Government, led by the Prime Minister, governs Sweden. The Government consists of the Prime Minister and a number of ministers, each with their own area of responsibility.

## The Swedish Government at work

The Government governs Sweden and is the driving force in the process by which laws are created and amended, thereby influencing the development of society as a whole. However, the Government is accountable to the Riksdag and must have its support to be able to implement its policies.

The Government governs the country, which includes:

- submitting legislative proposals to the Riksdag;
- implementing decisions taken by the Riksdag;
- exercising responsibility for the budget approved by the Riksdag;
- representing Sweden in the EU;
- entering into agreements with other states;
- directing central government activities;
- taking decisions in certain administrative matters not covered by other agencies.

The changes the Government wishes to make are set out in legislative proposals, or Government bills, which are then submitted to the Riksdag for approval. The Government is also responsible for drawing up a proposal for the central government budget.

When the Riksdag has taken its decision on a matter – for instance, a new law or the central government budget – it is up to the Government to implement the Riksdag's decision. If a new law gives citizens new rights or imposes new obligations, this also means new responsibilities for the government agency in charge of the area.

## Collective decision-making

The Government takes joint decisions on all government business at government meetings, which are held once a week. At least five ministers must be present for the Government to be able to take a decision. Government

decisions are the formal and final stage of a long decision-making process. A government decision is often preceded by several months of work at official level. Sometimes an item of business can involve the areas of responsibility of several ministers. In that case, it is prepared jointly by their staff. All ministers must be in agreement about the decision before it is taken up at the government meeting. Around 6 000 government decisions are taken every year. Information is available on [regeringen.se](http://regeringen.se) both before and after a decision is taken.

## **The Government Offices at work**

The Government Offices is a government agency that acts as the Government's staff and supports the Government in governing Sweden and realising its policies. The Government Offices include the Prime Minister's Office, the ministries and the Office for Administrative Affairs. The Government Offices has approximately 4 500 employees, some 200 of whom are political appointees. When there is a change of government, the political appointees resign while the non-politically recruited officials retain their positions.

The Prime Minister's Office leads and coordinates work in the Government Offices and is responsible for coordinating Swedish EU policy. The Prime Minister's Office is headed by the Prime Minister. The leadership of every ministry comprises between one and three ministers, one of whom is head of ministry. The head of the Office for Administrative Affairs is the Head of Administration, a non-politically appointed official.

The officials help the Government to produce background material and proposals for government decisions and to investigate both national and international issues. The legislative process and budget process are two of the largest tasks. Their work also includes governance of the agencies under each ministry.

All ministries are involved in European Union (EU) work, and officials from every ministry represent Sweden in the EU and prepare issues ahead of EU meetings.

Sweden has around 100 missions abroad. Embassies, representations, delegations and consulates all fall into this category. Together with the approximately 400 honorary consulates, they make up Sweden's foreign representation.

## **Activities of the Government Offices**

Each ministry is headed by a minister. In addition, a ministry may have other ministers with responsibility for specific portfolios. Every minister has a staff of politically appointed officials, for example state secretaries, political advisers and press secretaries.

Below ministerial level, a ministry's operations are directed by the ministers' immediate subordinate, the state secretary. Each ministry also has a director-general for administrative affairs responsible for ensuring that administrative matters that come before the Government are properly managed, and a director-

general for legal affairs responsible for drafting legislative proposals and ordinances. Most government business is prepared by officials in the various departments and divisions within the ministries.

### **Ministry of Culture**

The Ministry of Culture is responsible for the following areas: culture and conditions for creative artists, cultural heritage, media, film and sport.

### **Ministry of Defence**

The Ministry of Defence is responsible for the following areas: total defence and protection and preparedness against accidents, emergency preparedness, international peace support operations, international law in armed conflicts and security intelligence.

### **Ministry of Education and Research**

The Ministry of Education and Research is responsible for the following areas: pre-schools and schools, universities and other higher education institutions, research, adult education, education for people with learning disabilities, Swedish for immigrants, liberal adult education, space activities, gender equality, youth policy, and civil society policy.

### **Ministry of Employment**

The Ministry of Employment is responsible for the following areas: working life policy, labour market policy, integration policy, discrimination issues, human rights at national level, Swedish citizenship and minority policy.

### **Ministry of Enterprise, Energy and Communications**

The Ministry of Enterprise, Energy and Communications is responsible for the following areas: regional growth, energy, transport and infrastructure, IT, postal services, and the business sector. The business sector area includes enterprise and entrepreneurship, competitiveness and functioning markets, and needs-driven research and innovation.

### **Ministry of the Environment**

The Ministry of the Environment is responsible for the following areas: a toxin-free everyday environment, climate, seas, water, biodiversity, nature conservation, the system of environmental objectives, international environmental cooperation, ecocycles, nuclear safety and radiation protection, environmental legislation, environmental technology and environmental research.

### **Ministry of Finance**

The Ministry of Finance is responsible for the following areas: economic policy, the central government budget, tax policy, financial market issues, lotteries and gaming issues, international economic cooperation, state-owned enterprises, and local government finances and legislation.

## **Ministry for Foreign Affairs**

The Ministry for Foreign Affairs is responsible for the following areas: foreign and security policy, global development and development assistance, trade policy, assistance to Swedes abroad, international law and human rights, export controls of military equipment, international cooperation with countries and regions, and the promotion of trade, investment and Sweden.

## **Ministry of Health and Social Affairs**

The Ministry of Health and Social Affairs is responsible for the following areas: health and medical care, public health, children's rights, disabilities, elderly care, social services, sickness insurance, pensions and financial support for families, central government administration, housing, construction and religious communities.

## **Ministry of Justice**

The Ministry of Justice is responsible for the following areas: the Swedish Constitution and legislation in the areas of criminal law, civil law and procedural law, the judicial system, migration and asylum policy, business relating to pardons in criminal cases and certain other criminal law matters, democracy policy, and consumer affairs.

## **Ministry for Rural Affairs**

The Ministry for Rural Affairs is responsible for the following areas: agriculture and related environmental issues, rural development, forestry, fisheries and aquaculture, reindeer husbandry, Sami affairs, horticulture, animal welfare and health, foodstuffs, hunting and game management, and higher education and research in the land-based industries.

The ministries listed above have specific policy areas, but there is also an overarching organisation:

## **Prime Minister's Office**

The Prime Minister's Office leads and coordinates the work of the Government Offices. It is also responsible for coordinating Swedish EU policy. The Prime Minister's Office also includes the ministerial offices of the Prime Minister and the Minister for EU Affairs.

## **Office for Administrative Affairs**

The Office for Administrative Affairs acts as a joint resource for the Government Offices as a whole, and is responsible for cross-ministerial administrative concerns. These include change and renewal in the Government Offices, financial management, employer issues, skills provision, IT support, libraries, archives and registers, and information and communication.

## Government agencies

Each ministry is responsible for a number of government agencies tasked with applying the laws and carrying out the activities decided on by the Riksdag and the Government. The Swedish Migration Board and the Swedish Tax Agency are examples of government agencies.

Every year the Government issues appropriation directions for the government agencies. These set out the objectives of the agencies' activities and how much money they have available to them. The Government therefore has quite substantial scope for directing the activities of government agencies, but it has no powers to interfere with how an agency applies the law or decides in a specific case. The government agencies take these decisions independently and report to the ministries. In many other countries, a minister has the power to intervene directly in an agency's day-to-day operations. This possibility does not exist in Sweden, as 'ministerial rule' is prohibited.

The Government is responsible for recruiting and appointing the heads (directors-general) of government agencies. There are currently around 350 government agencies.

## The budget process

The central government budget is a long process that begins more than a year before the start of the fiscal year concerned. The process begins in December when the Ministry of Finance presents forecasts for economic development to the Government. Discussions within the Government on the orientation of the central government budget are held in March. The overall focus for the coming years is set out in the Spring Fiscal Policy Bill, which is presented to the Riksdag in April.

Work continues in the ministries throughout the spring and summer, and the Government submits proposals for the central government budget for the coming year – the Budget Bill – to the Riksdag in September.

While the Riksdag is considering the Budget Bill, the ministries produce appropriation directions for the government agencies. The Government adopts the appropriation directions for the government agencies before the end of the calendar year.

## The legislative process

The Riksdag decides whether to pass new legislation. The majority of legislative proposals are initiated by the Government. Around 200 bills are submitted to the Riksdag by the Government every year. Some of them propose entirely new legislation while others propose amendments to existing laws.

## Inquiries and committees

Some of the issues handled by the Government are more complex than others. In such contexts, the Government may appoint an inquiry chair (one person) or a committee of inquiry (a group consisting of several people) to investigate the

issue. The Government issues terms of reference setting out the mandate for the inquiry. Inquiry conclusions are gathered in a report which is published and made available to the public.

**When the Government wants to introduce a new law, the process is usually as follows:**

1. A government inquiry is appointed to investigate the issue. A committee or an individual is tasked with investigating the conditions for the measures the Government wants to introduce. The framework for the assignment is set out in terms of reference.
2. When the inquiry is complete the inquiry chair or committee drafts a report.
3. The report is sent for consultation to relevant government agencies, organisations, municipalities and other stakeholders, which can submit responses. If many of the bodies consulted take a negative view, the decision may be taken not to take the matter any further, or to attempt to find alternative solutions to those proposed by the inquiry.
4. The report is also sent to the Council on Legislation, which scrutinises the legal aspects.
5. The Government then drafts a proposal, in the form of a Government bill, to the Riksdag.
6. A parliamentary committee may submit views on the proposal (committee report).
7. The Riksdag votes on the bill. If passed, a new law can be promulgated in the Swedish Code of Statutes (SFS).

Some legislation affecting Sweden is enacted by the European Union. Certain laws adopted in the EU are directly applicable in Sweden without the need for the Riksdag to take a decision on the matter.



# The Swedish social model

## A democratic system with free elections

Sweden is a democracy with a parliamentary form of government, which means that all public power proceeds from the people. Laws are passed by the Riksdag, a parliament of 349 members elected by the people every four years. Following each election, the Speaker of the Riksdag proposes a new prime minister. The Prime Minister is then appointed by the Riksdag and tasked with forming a government. The Government, led by a prime minister, governs Sweden.

Formally, Sweden is a constitutional monarchy with King Carl XVI Gustaf as head of state. The monarch has a symbolic function as head of state and almost exclusively ceremonial duties.

When general elections are held in Sweden, the seven million people entitled to vote have an opportunity to influence who will represent the people in the Riksdag, county councils and municipalities.

To vote in the three elections, you must have turned 18 on election day at the latest. Various specific rules also apply:

- To vote in the parliamentary election you must be a Swedish citizen and be, or have been, registered as a resident in Sweden.
- To vote in municipal and county council elections you must be a Swedish citizen or:
  - a citizen of an EU country, Iceland or Norway, and registered as a resident in the municipality/county council area concerned, or
  - a citizen of another country not listed above, have been registered as a resident in Sweden for at least three consecutive years and be registered as a resident in the municipality/county council area concerned.

In addition to voting in elections, there are other ways to influence policy in Sweden. These include joining a political party, submitting views on inquiry reports and taking part in referendums.

Every five years there are also elections to the European Parliament, the only EU institution that is directly elected. Everyone who is a national of an EU Member State and is registered as resident in Sweden is entitled to vote in Sweden.

## **The Swedish administrative model – three levels**

Sweden is governed at three levels: national, regional and local. In addition to these there is the European level.

### **National level**

The Riksdag, which has the power to pass legislation, represents the people at national level. The Government governs Sweden by executing decisions taken by the Riksdag and initiating new laws and legislative amendments. The Government is supported in this by the Government Offices and the government agencies.

### **Regional level**

Sweden is divided into 21 counties. Each county has a regional central government authority, the county administrative board. Some other government agencies also operate at regional and local level. There are 20 county councils. They are led by political assemblies elected by the people. The main task of county councils is health care. Counties and county councils cover the same geographical area (with one exception) so they are usually regarded jointly as the regional level. The highest decision-making bodies are the county council assemblies or regional councils. The county councils' activities are governed by the Local Government Act, but there is scope for autonomy, i.e. decisions in each municipality, county council or region are taken in the sector in question.

### **Local level**

Sweden has approximately 290 municipalities. The municipalities are responsible for the majority of public services in the area where you live. Their most important responsibilities include preschools, schools, social services and elderly care. The municipalities are governed by politicians elected by the people. The highest decision-making bodies are the municipal councils/city councils. The municipalities' activities are governed by the Local Government Act, but as at regional level there is some scope for autonomy.

### **European level**

Sweden is covered by the EU regulatory framework and participates in the process whereby new common rules are drafted and adopted. The Government represents Sweden in the European Council and the Council of the European Union, which lays down guidelines for future cooperation. The Prime Minister also has overall responsibility for developing and coordinating Sweden's EU policy.

## **The Swedish Constitution**

The Constitution takes precedence over all other laws, and no other law may conflict with its provisions. Nor can it be amended as easily as other laws. Amendments require the Riksdag to take the same decision on two separate occasions. A parliamentary election must also have taken place between the two decisions.

The Constitution concerns Sweden's form of government, succession to the throne, freedom of expression and of the press, and other fundamental freedoms and rights.

- The 1974 Instrument of Government embodies the basic political principles by which the state is governed. It defines and delimits the tasks of Government, establishes the basic rights and freedoms of the people of Sweden and prescribes the procedures for elections to the Riksdag.
- The 1810 Act of Succession governs how the Swedish throne is inherited, that is, who becomes king or queen.
- The 1949 Freedom of the Press Act contains provisions on freedom of the press and the right to access official documents.
- The 1991 Fundamental Law on Freedom of Expression guarantees freedom of expression in radio, television, film and similar new media.

## Human rights

Responsibility for ensuring that human rights are not violated rests with the Riksdag, the Government and the national, regional and local government administration as a whole. The Government's longterm goal is to ensure full respect for human rights in Sweden.

In Sweden, human rights are primarily safeguarded through the Constitution and other laws and ordinances. In addition, the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms has applied as law in Sweden since 1995. There are also other international intergovernmental agreements establishing human rights.

The Government's efforts to promote and protect human rights permeate both national policy and all aspects of foreign policy. Central government, municipalities and county councils must:

- ensure respect for the fundamental freedoms, e.g. freedom of expression, freedom of information and freedom of assembly;
- protect people from violations such as torture and arbitrary detention;
- fulfil basic needs, such as housing and education;
- combat discrimination of persons on grounds of gender, ethnicity, religion or other belief, disability, sexual orientation, age or transgender identity or expression.

## Gender equality

Sweden has a long tradition of work for gender equality. Gender equality means that women and men enjoy the same rights and opportunities in all areas of life, for example equal opportunities on the labour market, shared responsibility for the home and children and economic equality. One important date in this respect was 1921, when women gained the right to vote. Many reforms and laws have been introduced since that date.

## Power and influence

The proportion of women on the Swedish labour market has increased rapidly since the mid-1960s, and today women work to almost the same extent as men. But the balance of power and influence between women and men still varies between different sectors of society. Politics is one of the most gender-equal sectors. The proportion of women and men in the Riksdag is 45 per cent and 55 per cent respectively. There are fewer women in leading positions in other areas, such as science, culture, mass media, the Church of Sweden and business. Despite certain changes in recent years, the business sector is the most heavily male-dominated.

## Public access

### The principle of public access

The principle of public access means that, as far as possible, the activities of government agencies, the Riksdag and local government decision-making bodies should be open. To guarantee transparency in these activities, the principle of public access to official documents has been enshrined in one of the fundamental laws, the Freedom of the Press Act.

The principle of public access entitles the general public to access official documents. Documents that are received or sent out by the Government Offices and other government agencies, e.g. letters, decisions and inquiries, usually constitute official documents. As a general rule, all incoming documents should be registered by the receiving authority.

Notes and draft decisions are not normally classified as official documents. If you want to know what documents are held by a government agency or to get hold of them, you should contact the agency in question.

The principle of public access also means that officials and others working in central government, municipalities and county councils have freedom of communication. This means that, with some exceptions, they have the right to tell, for example, the media about matters that would otherwise be secret without punishment and without the employer finding out who provided the information.

## Ombudsmen

An important function in guaranteeing transparency in the public sector is the system of ombudsmen, a concept which has spread to several other countries.

Sweden has the following official ombudsmen:

**The Ombudsmen for Justice (JO)** – or Parliamentary Ombudsmen, as they are officially known – are elected by the Riksdag to ensure that government agencies and public officials comply with existing laws and other regulations in the performance of their duties.

**The Office of the Chancellor of Justice (JK)** is primarily responsible for supervising the government agencies and courts on behalf of the Government, representing the State in court cases, settling claims for damages directed at the State, acting as prosecutor in freedom of the press and freedom of expression cases and acting as a legal adviser to the Government.

**The Consumer Ombudsman (KO)** defends the interests of consumers against companies in the courts. The primary task of the Consumer Ombudsman is to ensure that companies follow the Marketing Act, the Consumer Contracts Act, the Product Safety Act and the Distance and Doorstep Sales Act.

**The Office of the Equality Ombudsman (DO)** ensures compliance with the Discrimination Act.

**The Ombudsman for Children in Sweden (BO)** represents the rights and interests of children and young people based on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

**The Child and School Student Representative (BEO)** is tasked with promoting the rights of children and pupils in accordance with the Education Act.

## **Scrutiny of the State**

The Committee on the Constitution (KU) is a Riksdag committee that scrutinises the ministers' performance of their official duties and the handling of government business. It also prepares matters concerning the Constitution, the Riksdag Act and the choice of auditors-general.

The Swedish National Audit Office, which is an agency answerable to the Riksdag, scrutinises government agencies and enterprises and ensures their compliance with directives, rules and regulations. It also verifies that they achieve their objectives, i.e. that the Government and other agencies are doing their job.

Some central government agencies are also supervisory authorities, that is, they exercise scrutiny themselves. In this way, the State scrutinises and supports the work of the county councils, regions and municipalities. The Swedish Schools Inspectorate is, for example, a supervisory authority that inspects schools to ensure that they comply with laws and regulations.

# Sweden in the world

International and EU-related work has increased with globalisation and Sweden's membership of the EU. All of the ministries undertake EU-related work, prepare Swedish positions and monitor matters and cases in the Court of Justice of the European Union.

## Sweden and the EU

Sweden has been a member of the European Union since 1 January 1995 following a national referendum in 1994. Membership means that Sweden takes part in the EU's work and has the possibility to influence the decisions taken there.

For the time being, Sweden remains outside the Economic and Monetary Union (EMU), the members of which have the euro as a common currency. A referendum was held in September 2003 on whether Sweden should join the single currency. The result was that 55.9 per cent of voters said no.

Around 1200 Swedes work in the EU. Some of them represent Sweden and Swedish interests, while others are part of the EU administration, working for example at the European Commission or similar institutions.

## Sweden and the United Nations

Sweden became a member of the United Nations (UN) in 1946, the year after the organisation was formed. Since then, active involvement in the UN has been an important element of Swedish foreign policy.

Sweden's Government, with broad support in the Riksdag, views cooperation within the UN as the most important instrument for dealing with the major global life-and-death issues. This requires a strong UN and close cooperation with local organisations, individual countries and civil society in all parts of the world.

Since the 1960s, Sweden has taken part in most UN peacekeeping operations. Over 70 000 Swedes have served in UN operations over the years and several Swedes have worked as UN mediators.

Sweden works within a broad spectrum of UN areas of activity and has been a driving force behind significant initiatives. The abolition of the death penalty, children's rights, the abolition of apartheid, the Convention against Torture, disarmament, the environment and the fight against drugs are examples of issues in which Sweden has taken an active hand. Sweden is one of the largest donors to various UN bodies in the sphere of multilateral development cooperation.

## **Nordic cooperation**

Formal cooperation between the Nordic countries is one of the oldest and most far-reaching examples of regional cooperation in the world. The political cooperation is built on common values and a desire to achieve results that contribute to dynamic development and increase Nordic expertise and competitiveness.

### **The Nordic Council**

The Nordic Council, which was established in 1952, comprises 87 members from Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, the Faroe Islands, Greenland and Åland. The members of the Council are members of the countries' parliaments, nominated by their respective party and chosen by the parliament. There are no direct elections to the Nordic Council.

### **Nordic Council of Ministers**

The Nordic Council of Ministers was formed in 1971 and is the body for Nordic intergovernmental cooperation. Despite its name, the Nordic Council of Ministers is not one council of ministers but several. The Nordic ministers for specific policy areas meet in the Council of Ministers several times a year. The exceptions include the foreign ministers and defence ministers, who are outside the Nordic Council of Ministers. Of course, this does not prevent these ministers from holding meetings at Nordic level.

# Facts about Sweden

**Capital city:** Stockholm

**Population:** Approximately 9.6 million inhabitants

**Language:** Swedish. Recognised national minority languages: Finnish, Sami, Meänkieli, Romani Chib, Yiddish

**Form of government:** constitutional monarchy, parliamentary democracy

**Parliament:** popularly elected unicameral Riksdag comprising 349 members.

**Area:** 450 000 km<sup>2</sup>, the third largest country in western Europe

**Currency:** Swedish krona (SEK)

## Further information:

[www.regeringen.se](http://www.regeringen.se) (Swedish) [www.government.se](http://www.government.se) (English)

[www.sweden.se](http://www.sweden.se)

## More statistics

[www.scb.se](http://www.scb.se)

# Contact

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See [www.government.se](http://www.government.se)





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