

The Administrative Reform and the County Road Responsibility: Division of Power, Management Dialogue and Interaction

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by

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Summary

IRIS has carried out a study, commissioned by The Norwegian Association of Local and Regional Authorities, addressing three research questions:

- *Have the power and the authority in the transport area really been transferred to the county councils?* Yes, we will answer in the affirmative to this question. The division of power has productive effects. The county council possessed power based on its economic resources, formal authority, and access to administrative resources, while the county road administration achieved power through its technical expertise and sector responsibility.
- *How has the administrative interaction between the county road administration and the county council developed?* The interaction has developed both towards hierarchy and towards equality. The regular meetings are based on reporting and control, and the form is hierarchical, while the interactions about plans, projects and cases are characterised by equality between the parties, based on dialogue and problem-solving.
- *Has the increased interaction between the regional transport agency and the county council caused an improved contract strategy and less total costs?* We find little interaction about contract strategy in the counties so far.

The administrative reform has been carried out in accordance with the policy intentions

The administrative reform was implemented on 1 January 2010. As a consequence of the reform, the responsibility for approximately 17,000 km classified roads and many ferry services was transferred from the state to the county councils. The county councils now have the responsibility for planning, building, administration, operation and maintenance of a 44,000 km county road network. The public road administration still has the sector responsibility for the state and the counties, and the administration is the road authority for 21,000 km of classified roads.

The regional road director belongs to the Directorate of Public Roads with regard to classified roads and to the county councils with regard to county roads. The regional road administration is the administrative body both for the classified roads and the county roads. Each county has a state road administration office subordinate to the regional road director.

Three years after the implementation of the administrative reform we find that the reform has been implemented in accordance with the intentions of the [White paper. nr. 10 \(2008-2009\)](#) Regarding a law on amendments to administration legislation etc. (implementation of the reform of government administration) .

A qualitative study was carried out by document studies and interviews in ten counties in 2011 and 2012. The administrative managers and political leaders of the transport area in the county councils and the county managers at the county road administration were interviewed.

Power is still divided between the county councils and the Public Roads Administration

The analysis took as a departure point that power depends on access to administrative and economic resources and formal authority. The analysis shows that the county councils have obtained increased access to administrative and economic resources, and that they have most of the formal authority. The county councils exercise superior governance and control of the schedule and the economy with regard to investment, operation and maintenance of the county road network, while the county road administration exerts the operational governance and control. The political body of the county council makes the decisions regarding what roads to build and on the standards for operation and maintenance of the road networks and the ferry services.

The county road administrations also held some power for the county roads network on the basis of their technical expertise, capacity, sector responsibility and management of the national road standards. We, therefore, assert that while the formal authority lies at the county council, the power for the county roads network is divided between the county councils and the county roads administrations.

The division of power between the county councils and the county roads administrations is connected to the capacity and competence of the county councils' transport administrations and how they perform the role of "road-owner."

The county councils and the county road administrations are dependent on each other in order to exert power. The fact that the power is divided between the two parties is productive in many ways. The division contributes to more discussion about what the best solutions are and to a more equal relationship between the county councils and the county road administrations than would have been the case if one of the parties had all the power.

The interaction between the county councils and the county roads administrations is characterised both by hierarchy and equality

The theoretical perspective is that the relation between the county councils and the county roads administrations can be characterized by hierarchy or equality. The interaction can be report and control or dialogue and solution. The analyses shows that it is more both/and than nor/neither: both the relationship and the character of the interaction varies according to what the interaction is about.

The interaction in the regular meetings is, to a large extent, about reporting and control of progress and economy for road investment and maintenance projects. These meetings have clear hierarchical characteristics. This is a general feature in all counties. The analysis also showed that the demand for reporting and control from the county councils has increased.

In other parts of the interaction, i.e. contact between the meetings, the cooperation regarding plans, projects and coordination related to raising objections to municipal planning interaction turns on information exchanges, consultations, dialogue and negotiations. The interaction is solution-oriented and characterized by equality between the two agencies.

Wide variation exists between the different counties with regard to the extent of cooperation about plans, projects and cases. However, cooperation is improving. Interviewees in many of the counties noted that the interaction has improved since the reform.

In some of the counties, we found that the county councils wanted to discuss technical subjects related to roads, and that, as a matter of course, they do not take technical advice from the county road administration in the county. The county road administrations are sceptical about county councils becoming too involved in technical matters. This issue shows that there are challenges related to too much interaction on technical matters between the agencies. From the county road administrations point of view, a division of work based on order and delivery instead of cooperation would be more suitable in order to secure professional independence.

Little degree of interaction with regard to contract strategy in the counties

The study shows that there exists little cooperation between the county councils and the county road administrations. In most of the counties, the county road administrations took care of all contractual work after the county councils had indicated the standard for operation and maintenance.

A research work related to contract strategy is going on, and both the county councils and the Public Roads Administration are participating in this research. Since this is ongoing, no conclusions have been reached, and therefore, possible changes have not been implemented in the counties yet.

More local democracy and more bureaucracy

The county roads administrations found that the transfer of the road responsibility to the county councils mainly positive. They noted that transport budgets have increased and that interest and engagement in transport issues has improved among county politicians. Moreover, decisions are made more quickly, and these decisions are rooted in knowledge about local needs. On the other hand, the county roads administrations experienced much more political interference in matters that had been delegated to the county roads administration before the reform. On the other hand, county roads administrations are also more involved in political meetings.

There has been a large increase in the number of road cases sent to councils. Both the county politicians on the county transport committees and in the county councils are very engaged and both small and big cases attract attention and are discussed.

This suggests that the decisions, at present, are made closer to the users than when the Ministry of Transport, the Directorate of Public Roads and the regional roads director made the decisions. As a consequence, however, more preparation of political issues and more bureaucracy have occurred in the county councils and the county roads administrations. The

county councils also use much more time for decision-making, but this is needed in order to have control with the use of resources and the progress in relation to the budget and the plans.

The increase in bureaucracy is also connected to the fact that the requirement for reporting to the Directorate of Public Roads not has been reduced in spite of the transfer of many of the roads to the county councils.

The transport administration in the county councils finds the transfer of the responsibility for roads challenging. There are many projects, large budgets and great expectations among the county politicians. The transport administration is small, both in and of itself, and also in relation to the regional road agency.

Some county councils experienced that the governing of the transport field is challenging not only because the field is so big and diverse, but also because the county roads administration and the regional roads agency are a big and complex organisations which they only can govern indirectly. However, other county councils experienced that the interaction with the county roads administrations worked very well and that they used the services from the county roads administration and that all of the staff were available to the county councils. This suggests that there is a wide variation between the counties on this matter.