

## Norway: Local Government & Services

Central government has overriding authority and supervision of municipal and county administration. There is a programme of decentralisation of power from central government to the regions. The government's main representative supervising local authorities is the County Governor who co-ordinates the activities of central government bodies at the county level, eg environmental and anti-pollution regulations, and acts as ombudsman for an individual's rights at local level. Local government expenditure is 13.0% of GDP, income is 17.8% of GDP and it employs 19.8% of the working population (2006). In Troms and Finnmark, 40% of employees are in public administration as the scattered population requires more people to maintain the level of services. Over 40% of income comes from local taxes, most of the rest comes from government grants on a per capita basis biased in favour of sparsely populated areas to encourage growth and development.

Elections are held every 4 years, midway through the parliamentary term, for representatives to both municipal and county councils; non-nationals resident in Norway for the previous 3 years can register to vote in local elections. Turnout is about 60% and declining, especially among the young; more women vote than men. 38% of those elected are women and the proportion is increasing. The elections are based on proportional representation using a list of candidates put forward by registered parties and other groups. There is a minimum number of representatives elected, at least 11 for a municipality with a population under 5 000, at least 19 for a population from 5 000 to 10 000. An equivalent system determines the size of county councils. Councils may increase the number of representatives and most do so. Councils elect their chairman and an executive of at least 5 councillors from their number. The executive proposes a four-year economic plan, fiscal budget and taxes. Councils can form committees and delegate powers to them. All meetings are normally open to the public.

The country is currently divided into 5 regions and 19 counties (fylker): in north Norway: Finnmark, Troms, Nordland; in middle Norway: Nord-Trøndelag, Sør-Trøndelag; in Vestlandet: More og Romsdal, Sogn og Fjordane, Hordaland, Rogaland; in Østlandet: Telemark, Buskerud, Oppland, Hedmark, Vestfold, Oslo (which is both a county and a municipality), Akershus, Østfold; in Sørlandet: Vest-Agder, Aust-Agder. Svalbard is administered by a Governor; Jan Mayen Island (which is inhabited only by personnel at weather and navigational radio stations) is administered from Bodø. The number and size of the counties is due for revision in 2010. Counties levy income tax with education, roads and transport taking up 86% of expenditure. The county authorities' responsibilities include:

- Upper secondary schools
- Regional planning and development
- County roads and public transport
- Business development
- Culture (museums, libraries, sports)

There are 430 municipalities (*kommuner*) (747 in 1930), mostly based on a city or town with its surrounding area. Some rural authorities have no towns and over half the municipalities have less than 5 000 inhabitants. Only eight have more than 50 000. Care of the elderly and education account for 63% of expenditure. Municipalities levy individual and corporate income tax and optionally a property tax. The municipalities' responsibilities include:

- Nurseries/kindergartens
- Primary and lower secondary schools
- Medical care, care for the elderly and disabled, social services
- Local planning (land use), agricultural issues, environmental issues, local roads, harbours
- Water supply and sewers, sanitation
- Culture and business development

Education: Cathedral schools to educate priests date from the late 12th century and all market towns had a school by the late 16th century. Universal schooling was introduced in 1739. From 1889, seven years of compulsory education were provided; in 1969 this was increased to nine years and in 1997 to 10 years. Nearly all schools are co-educational. Over 900 000 children are currently in full-time education with another 1 million adults (over 20% of the population) on education courses. Literacy rate is 100% of the total population, 68% of those aged over 16 have education beyond compulsory school and 56% have upper secondary education. Primary schools registration is 98% of the age group, secondary schools is 113% (this includes adults) and tertiary education is 78% (2006). The Directorate for Education & Training develops curricula and supervises examinations and standards at primary and all secondary levels. <<http://www.utdanningsdirektoratet.no/>>

93% of children aged 3 - 5 attend a full- or part-time fee-paying kindergartens (*barnehager*) while parents work or study. 55% are privately run. They provide activity, play and learning for children's development with input from a parents' council.

Public schools at compulsory education levels (*grunnskoler*) comprise primary schools (*barneskoler*) for ages 6 to 12 (grades 1 - 7, average class size 13.5) and lower secondary schools (*ungdomsskoler*) for ages 13 to 15 (grades 8 - 10, average class size 15.1); tuition and textbooks are provided free. Pupils are not graded at all at primary level. School hours are usually 08.00 to 14.00; schools do not provide a meal service. Because of the scattered population, 35% of the 3100 primary and lower secondary schools have less than 100 pupils and children of different ages are taught in the same classroom. Primary and lower secondary levels are often combined in the same school. The curriculum (revised in 2006) has clear competence objectives including basic skills in oral and written expression, reading, numeracy and the use of digital tools and includes Norwegian, Mathematics, Social Science, Christianity, Religion & Ethics, Arts & Crafts, Natural Sciences, English, Food & Health, Music, Physical Education, Student Council work, Foreign Language or In-depth Study of Norwegian, Sami or English (at lower secondary level) and an optional subject; language options include Sami, Swedish, Finnish, French, German or Spanish. Parents meet with teachers twice per year.

There is a special curriculum for deaf pupils including sign language and also for Sami children to develop Sami language, culture and identity, equipping them to take an active part in the community. The University of Tromsø has responsibility for Sami language and Sami studies and textbook development in the Sami language is state funded. The Sami College trains Sami teachers.

Day-care facilities are available for children both before and after school where both parents are at work during the day. These provide facilities for play and participation in cultural and recreational activities appropriate to age, physical ability and interests, including those with physical disabilities. Fees, although subsidised, are expensive; municipalities are legally obliged to provide day-care for children attending the first four school years.

About 4.7% of compulsory schools are private with 85% government subsidy and parents paying fees for the balance; they are attended by about 4% of secondary and 1.5% of primary pupils; most are based on religious beliefs or alternative education methods.

Everyone between 16 and 19 has a right to 3 years' further education and training in one of over 450 upper secondary schools (*videregående skoler*); most are county-funded but 16% are private. They lead to basic skills or vocational qualifications or admission to higher education with students graded from 6 down to 1. Over 90% choose to continue their education: tuition is free but students pay for their own books. About 30% of men and 20% of women drop out before completing vocational courses. Curricula were revised in 2006. There are nine 3- or 4-year flexible vocational study programmes including 2 or 3 year apprenticeships leading to a specialist certificate exam: technical and industrial production; electrical and electronic engineering trades; building and construction trades; catering and food processing trades; health and social care; media and communication; service and transport; agriculture, fishing and forestry; design, arts and crafts. The academic 3-year study course leads to a general study competence qualification as the prerequisite for

higher education admission and is followed by about 48% of students; there are 6 study programmes: languages; natural sciences and mathematics; social sciences and economics; arts, crafts and design; sports; music, dance and drama. Special needs students (including those instructed in sign language or in Braille) have a right to an additional 2 years at upper secondary level to achieve their educational objectives.

Nearly 80 folk high schools are one-year boarding schools for students of any age or education level, normally taken between upper secondary school and higher education; most students are 19 and 20 year olds. They offer subjects such as outdoor life, theatre, music, media and others with the aim of giving a broader horizon, social insights and more self-confidence. There are no formal examinations but students receive a diploma detailing their achievements. The folk high school movement in Norway started in 1864.

Daytime or evening adult education is available in *videregående skoler* or as distance learning via post, phone and Internet. *Vox*, the national adult education institute, provides courses, gives advice and is responsible for adult immigrant education. Those over 30 years who never took a further education course have a right to free education and 8% of the *videregående skole* intake are adults. Following upper secondary education (or equivalent informal competence), tertiary vocational education is an alternative to higher education with courses from 6 months to two years. There are traditional schools of technical management and maritime subjects financed by county authorities, but most are privately run and accredited by the Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education (NOKUT). The vocational system involves cooperation of employers and unions with a national council and vocational training boards in each county (*Yrkesopplæringsnemnda/Fagopplæringskontoret*) which approve public and private enterprises for apprentice training. Loans and grants are available for adult students.

Recognition of foreign secondary/upper secondary education is validated by the National Education Board office (*Statens utdanningskontor*) in each county. To obtain a place on a course, contact the actual school. Generally, any accreditation obtained in one EU/EEA country is recognised by other member states with no additional assessment required.

**Health & Social Services:** Municipalities are responsible for providing reasonable high-quality health care and social services to everyone, regardless of age or diagnosis. These include the general practitioner scheme, emergency clinics, midwife services, mother and child clinics, a free school health service, dental care services (free for children but adults pay in full), physiotherapy services, care of the elderly, addiction and psychiatric health. There is a shift from care for the elderly in institutions (14%) to care services at home (37%).

**Libraries:** 54% of people use public libraries which provide internet access, newspapers and magazines, music, audio and video cassette/CD loans, foreign language books, reference books and books for loan. Annual book loans total 17 million, cassette/CD loans 7 million.

**Housing:** Approximately 25% of households in cities and 18% in rural areas are rented, the remainder are owner-occupied. 13% of people live in flats, mostly in cities and large towns; flats in rural areas are rare. Rented dwellings are used primarily by young people (one-third of those under 30, and increasing) and by some of the elderly who have life-long tenancy. Most rented dwellings have private landlords (usually one unit, often attached to the owner's dwelling), a few are provided by private or public sector employers (mostly hospitals and armed forces) for their employees, some are municipal subsidised social housing and very few are multiple units owned by professional/commercial landlords. Tenancy agreements are usually valid for an initial year and for subsequent periods of five years with a mutual right to terminate. Termination notice is normally three months and tenants are usually required to pay a deposit of two or three months' rent. The amount of rent, length of tenancy and periods of notice are governed by a Rent Act.

House purchase prices are high and rising (especially in cities and for flats) owing to the demand for a high standard of construction, full insulation and heating required by the cold climate; some simpler, inexpensive housing may be found in rural areas. Purchase is

arranged through an estate agent (*eiendomsmegling*), bank or solicitor. Norwegian banks provide mortgages, holding the house/flat as collateral. Mortgage interest is relatively low compared to the UK. There is a tax advantage for owner-occupiers as mortgage interest is fully deductible; for an attached rental unit that is less than 50% of the dwelling the landlord lives in, no local tax is payable.