

Summary

The merging of Sandefjord, Andebu and Stokke municipalities were already in place on the first of January in 2017. The three municipalities are thus referred to as frontrunners in the recent Norwegian municipality reform. KS (the municipal sector's organization) has taken the initiative for a research and development project in order to learn from the experiences gained during this merging process, which again can have a learning effect for other municipalities in similar merging processes. The aim of the project has been to find out what has been successful about the process and what the municipalities would have done differently if they were to restart the merging process.

The methods used in this project are primarily based on document studies and interviews. The new municipality Sandefjord has its own website where one can find information about the merging process. Moreover, the new municipality Sandefjord has provided additional information to the researchers in this project. The research team also conducted two interview rounds with different stakeholders that were relevant to the merging process. The first interview round was carried out early in January 2017 and focused on the time from the beginning of the merging process until the merging date. The other interview round was carried out in the beginning of May 2017 and focused primarily on the experiences made during the first four months as a new municipality.

In this project, there has been an emphasis on documenting experiences in seven different stages of the merging process. The stages extend from general planning management of the merging process to the operation of the new municipality in the early stage. Additionally, there has been a focus on different subject areas which are known to provide certain challenges and/or possibilities in merging processes between municipalities. These subject areas are information and communication technology, inter-municipal cooperation, employer policy, cross-sectoral coordination, unemployment agency (NAV), culture and communication as well as local democracy.

The key feature for the merging process between Sandefjord, Andebu and Stokke is the impressive effort that has been put in place in order to complete the necessary processes and tasks before the merging date.

Although the work on the merging process started in 2015, most of the work was done in 2016. As the merger process was conducted during a short period of time, there was a need for prioritizing between tasks that had to be completed before the merging date and those that could wait until after the merging date. Thus, there have been a number of tasks related to the merging process, which have been ongoing after the new municipality was established. For municipalities that are about to engage in a merging process it will be advantageous if more tasks are completed before the merging date.

Many of the experiences drawn from the merging process between Sandefjord, Andebu and Stokke, will be very useful for other municipalities that are getting started with similar processes. In chapter 4 you will find a summary of the key experiences drawn from the merging process. This chapter can be read independently from the rest of the report. Chapter 3 contains an in-depth review of the experiences from different phases of the merging process and selected themes.

The following advice is considered the most relevant in order to implement the best possible merging process between municipalities:

- Perform an overall risk and vulnerability analysis as early as possible during the merging process. This will provide a better understanding of what a merging process entails and which challenges have to be faced in order to get a good transition to a new municipality.

Clarify what must be in place before the merging date, and what the new municipality can do.

- Avoid waiting periods. Clarify the role of the administrative top management in the merging process immediately after the decision to merge the municipalities has been made. Start the process with “harmless” mapping tasks until the project leader has been appointed and the project organization established.
- Establish a robust project organization team that will lead the work connected to the merging process. The project organization team should have sufficient capacity and competence to handle all processes, issues and decisions during the merging process. All key roles in the project organization team must be clarified in relation to the main organizations in the municipalities participating in the merging process. Moreover, all subprojects must have a clear mandate for its work. Clear milestones should be laid down for subprojects which are mutually dependent on each other or in any form facilitate each other.
- Consider the need for implementation of schemes for grassroots democracy. Preferably conduct a survey in order to address people’s concerns at grassroots level and to see how grassroots democracy evolves over time.
- Make sure that the merging process is open. Involve and inform both employees and residents. Arrange cultural initiatives and activities in order to promote a feeling of community across municipality borders.
- Lay down the framework for a good representation of elected representatives in different areas of the merging process, and make sure that they have enough time to work with the merging process. Establish a transition agreement as early as possible in the merging process, and make a good plan for taking care of both leaders and employees during all stages in the merging process.
- Align the organization of the new municipality based on the key objectives for the merger. Finish organizational and staffing processes no later than nine months before the merging date, as there are many subsequent processes depending on this being in place.
- Start working on aligning financing and budgeting as well as information and communication technologies as early as possible. Make an alternative budget the last year before the merging date as a supplement to the current municipalities’ financial plans.
- Create a plan for realization of profits without excessive expectations of increasing your winnings from day one. The first year of operation as a new municipality will be characterized by the fact that the municipality is in a start-up phase where different cultures have to be aligned and new routines and solutions implemented.
- Make sure that delegation regulations and political regulations are in place in good time before the new municipal council is constituted.
- Clarify the distribution of roles and responsibilities between the new municipality and the old municipalities in an early stage. In the last stage, the old municipalities should focus on closure and, as far as possible, avoid taking on new tasks.