1. Introduction

The Swedish public administration consists of state, regional and local levels. Compared to other nations, Swedish local authorities such as municipalities and county councils have had the task of bringing people in specific areas to promote their common interests. These areas are as follows. The county councils mainly deal with social services such as health and medical services, while the municipalities focus on education and infrastructure. (www.state.gov and www.sweden.se)

The legal framework for local government activities is set up by the Parliament (the Riksdag) and the government in laws and regulations. At the same time, the central government is also represented at county level through the county administrative boards that contributes to ensuring national goals in different policy areas.

The terms of local authorities and local governments mean both municipalities and county councils. This implies that local government activities can be activities carried out by either municipalities or county councils. Furthermore, legislation places municipalities and county councils on an equal footing although county councils cover a larger geographical area than municipalities. In the Swedish local government system county councils do not function as superior authorities than municipalities due to its physical size. Therefore, it may be worth to note that the Swedish government system is a unique system even in the west. (See fig. 1) (Regeringskansliet, 2006)

Sweden has carried out its government reforms three times since the mid 19 century. The first reform took place in 1862 that fixed municipality boundaries as well as formed county councils. At that time there were 2,498 municipalities and 25 county councils. By the 1950s a modern industrial society had created new conditions for municipal boundaries. Industrialization and migration needed a second boundary reform that
carried out from 1962 to 1974. During the period the number of municipalities reduced from 1,037 to 278 drastically, while the number of county councils changed rarely. In the late 1990s Skåne County Council and Västra Götaland County Council amalgamated several county councils. In 2009 there are 290 municipalities and 20 county councils. Among the 20 council counties the above two county councils are regarded as regions. (See fig. 2) (Andren, 1957; www.skl.se; www.wikipedia.org)

Figure 1: Swedish government system

Source: Author’s own adaptation based on local government in Sweden