Case description

The public sector is currently trying to figure out how to digitalize its service provision and build a sustainable digital infrastructure to meet future demands. Yet, there are a multitude of challenges in doing so, when the possibilities of digital technologies meet silo-structured bureaucracy.

The case you will work with for the assignment this semester belongs within this debate. It comes from a real project that is trying to address a problem situation that is shared between the state, municipalities, and both public and private actors. You will see how roles, responsibilities, interests, etc. are scattered across multiple people, agencies, and governmental levels, and how this creates complexity in attempting to find solutions. The problem situation is addressed through the development of a new public service that empowers citizens, but also enhances the work and service delivery of the actors involved in the funeral process.

1 The Problem: Fragmented and Paper-Based Funeral Information Processes

In Norway, when a person dies, the bereaved (the close relatives of the person who died) must make several important decisions, including stating who is responsible for the funeral, whether there will be a cremation or burial, and which cemetery or crematorium to use. A responsible must be assigned to a funeral by law. Se: https://lovdata.no/lov/1996-06-07-32/§9 eller Hvem som sørger for gravferden - skriftlig erklæring og rettighetsrekkefølge | Gravplassveileder.no

These decisions must be formally registered through a document called the *gravferdsmelding* (funeral notification form). Until recently, this was a paper-based process involving handwritten forms, fax, and physical delivery between citizens, funeral agencies and local cemetery authorities. See the paper form here (there is a link to the word doc on the right side): Statlige blanketter

The suboptimal coordination between sectors and outdated workflows resulted in problems such as errors, delays, and inadequate data privacy and security (e.g., the inclusion of social security numbers on paper forms). It was recognized that the process needed to be digitalized and standardized to improve the efficiency between stakeholders managing the service and processing the information, the security and privacy of sensitive data, and the citizen experience.

2 The project

In response to this problem, a project was established 2023. This project was initiated by an individual who worked in the industry for decades and advocated for getting public funding to address the issue. As a result, a project was eventually established and organized as a collaboration between Statsforvalteren in Vestfold and Telemark (the County Governor's Office) and the Norwegian directorate of Digitalization (DigDir). The project got funding from the Medfinansieringsordningen, which is a state-provided funding scheme that supports innovation projects in the public sector. The funds are used to pay the salaries of the people working in the project.

2.1 Background

DigDir, who shares responsibility for the project, is simultaneously responsible for several other developments related to building digital infrastructure for the public sector. A large part of the efforts goes into developing Altinn, a digital technology that enables interaction between public agencies, private businesses, and citizens. Due to the perceived relevance, the project team set out to explore the usefulness of Altinn as the technological basis for developing a self-service interface for citizens when dealing with burial processes. Also, as funding was scarce, Altinn is both free to use and open source. To this end, the funding was and is used to hire:

- One project manager from Statsforvalteren
- One project manager from Digdir
- One front-end developer, one back-end developer, and one full-stack developer.
- One UX-designer
- One lawyer to oversee the legal aspects of potential changes

These individuals constituted the project team.

2.2 General information about Altinn

Altinn is a digital technology that enables interaction between public agencies, private businesses, and citizens. It is considered "critical public infrastructure" (in Norwegian: "en samfunnskritisk løsning"), which means that it plays a critical role in the functioning of the Norwegian society. Almost every citizen and private business has an Altinn account.

Initially, it was developed as a system to handle digital tax reporting between private businesses and public enterprises such as the National Tax Administration (Skatteetaten). Since then, it has evolved into an advanced and modern technology offering a wide range of features and public services. Read a blog post explaining Altinn here: Hva er Altinn, sånn egentlig? | Digdir

In recent years, Altinn has "opened up" its platform for public enterprises ("offentlige etater") to develop applications that run on the Altinn infrastructure and can interact with the existing applications/modules. Altinn has also become open source to enable a broader range of stakeholders to use and contribute to its development (which brings with it new opportunities, but also new challenges). These changes are represented as a transition from "Altinn 2" to "Altinn 3". Read more about the "modernizing" of Altinn here: Ny og moderne plattform | Samarbeidsportalen and Om Altinn 3 – Altinn

Today, it is operated/developed/maintained by the Directorate of Digitalization (Digdir), which is subordinate to the Ministry of Digitalisation and Public Governance, and the Norwegian government and its political priorities in general.

In many ways, Altinn plays a massive role in enabling digital services in Norway, not only DGM. Altinn is used for everything from submitting tax reports to applying for liquor licenses to receiving traffic tickets from the traffic police. Altinn is also an essential instrument for the implementation of political strategies, such as digitalizing interconnected

services affiliated with life events (The DGM project is a part of the life event called “Death and inheritance”).

2.3 Technical aspects

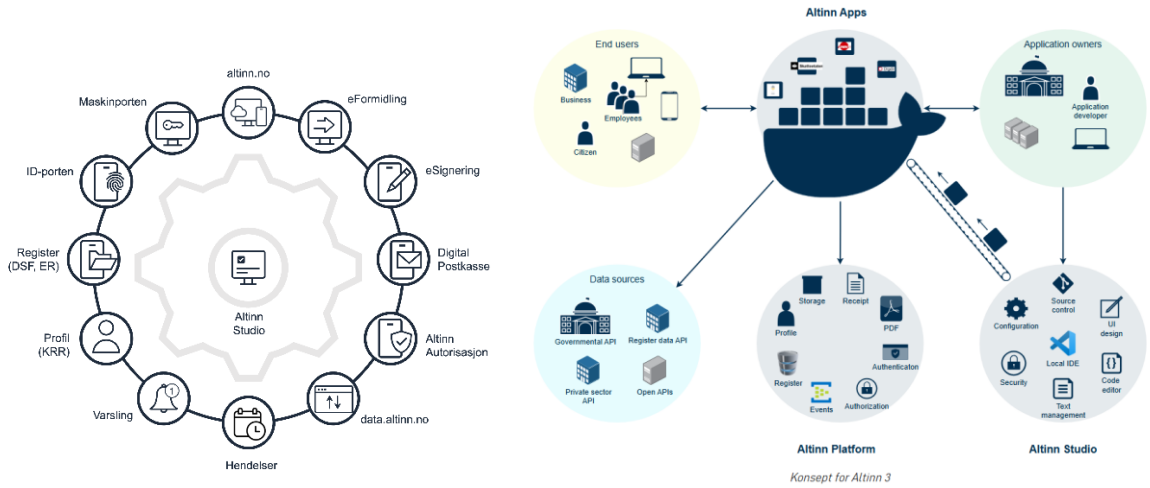


Figure 1 Om Altinn Studio – Altinn and https://docs.altinn.studio/nb/community/about/

Altinn functions as a space and facilitator for digital innovation across the public sector, providing standardized components such as authentication, messaging systems, and forms, as well as full-fledged developer tools and APIs. Any public agency can develop services on top of Altinn. Specifically, Altinn is now providing a tool called Altinn Studio, which is essentially a configuration tool for setting up new services easily and flexibly by reusing existing components. See link to Altinn Studio below.

Altinn is also open-source, allowing anyone to make direct contributions to the core software, submit requests, or download software for local use. See more info about the developer tools here: Altinn Studio, Altinn tjenesteutviklingsløsning | Digdir and PowerPoint-presentasjon. Les mer om Altinn som open source software her: Altinn and open source – Altinn

Finn all info du trenger om Altinn her: docs.altinn.studio, Altinn - Om Altinn eller søk på internett for øvrig.

2.3 Key challenges

The project team has explored various aspects related to the digitalization of funeral administration and has identified clear potential benefits, such as secure data exchange between stakeholders, improved privacy, better data quality, and empowerment of the citizen. However, the project has also encountered multiple tensions and challenges, such as:

- **Coordination Across Sectors**: The system had to bridge health, municipal, religious, and private actors—all with different roles and priorities.
- **Data Governance**: The question of who owns and controls sensitive data is central. Without a single central authority, decisions about access and responsibilities must be negotiated in practice.

- **Standardization vs. Local Needs**: The team aims for a national standard, but funeral practices and administrative structures vary locally, requiring flexibility.
- **Perceptions of Value**: Some stakeholders emphasize cost savings and efficiency (especially decision-makers), while others emphasize dignity, user experience, and process improvement (especially frontline staff).

3 General info and Resources

DGM, the name of solution concept that has resulted from the project, aims to be a national digital solution built on the Altinn platform to replace the paper-based funeral notification form. The system will allow the bereaved to log in securely and declare responsibility for the funeral in a dedicated digital form. They select a burial, cremation, or spread of ashes option, and send the information digitally to the local funeral authority and funeral agency (if they wish to use an agency).

3.1 Digital gravferdsmelding (DGM)

Read more here (For English speakers: Use ChatGPT to translate):

Digital gravferdsmelding - for fagfolk

Unikt samarbeid om digital gravferdsmelding | Digdir

Digital gravferdsmelding | Statsforvalteren i Vestfold og Telemark

Forskrift om Digital gravferdsmelding - Lovdata

Dødsfall og arv | Digdir

Statsforvalteren i Vestfold og Telemark: Digital Gravferdsmelding (DGM) | Digdir

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3.2 Example of Digital Gravferdsmelding (DGM) potential flow

Here is a representation of a potential flow that the project is exploring:

1. A person dies.
2. A doctor must declare the person as dead. § 36. Melding om dødsfall - Helsedirektoratet
3. Doctor sends in an electronic notice that declares the person as dead through as system called “Dødsmelding” Dødsfall og dødsårsak - Norsk helsenett
4. This updates a database called the “Dødsårsaksregisteret” and Folkeregisteret.
5. When Folkregisteret is updated, this triggers the beginning of DGM.
6. DGM creates an event that enables the closest relatives to go into Altinn and start a process of registering the DGM form. The closest relatives is decided based on juridical definition of a close relative. See e.g., Ta ansvar for gravferden | Gravferd
7. A close relative enters DGM, and makes all decisions. Sends in the form.
8. Depending on the choices, the information is directed to the relevant stakeholders. For example, if you choose cremation, the data is sent to the crematorium affiliated with the municipality of the deceased (not if you choose a regular casket-based funeral).

9. The stakeholders have their own IT systems for handling their private operations. Which IT they use depend on their role (funeral agency, authority, crematorium, etc) and which one they buy. No stakeholders develop their own IT. This is bought from the private market. The information from DGM is shared through APIs to the different IT systems (which means that DGM must be interoperable with a wide range of IT systems from the private market).
10. The stakeholders may change the information in the DGM instance if they need to. If they do, the citizen must sign the form again to confirm the changes.

Try for yourself here! Digital Gravferdsmelding skisser - Skisser fra før oktober 2024

3.3 Relevant stakeholders

Public authorities & government bodies

- Statsforvalteren i Vestfold og Telemark (SFVT). Project initiator and owner. Responsible for coordinating and leading the DGM project. Is also the regional cemetery authority (see Gravplassmyndighet | Statsforvalteren i Vestfold og Telemark).
- Digitaliseringsdirektoratet (Digdir). Responsible for the Altinn platform infrastructure. Co-owner of the DGM project. Provides developers and designers to the project, as well as a project manager.
- Municipal Cemetery Authorities (Gravplassmyndigheter). Local authorities responsible for burial/cremation permissions; implement and use DGM. Can be municipalities or religious organizations (such as Kirkelig Fellesråd).
- Municipalities – Broader administrative context, including political leaders and IT departments.

Health sector actors

- Doctors / Medical Professionals – Responsible for registering the death; their input feeds into the administrative chain.
- Hospitals / Health Institutions – Where death is registered and documents may originate.

Funeral industry

- Funeral agencies. Key users of DGM on behalf of bereaved families; submit information and interact with municipalities. Provides paid funeral services.
- Funeral associations/industry representatives. Provided input during user testing and project feedback. Often have a role in governing the practices related to funerals and cemetery management.

Citizens & end users

- Bereaved citizens/family of the deceased. End-users who interact with the system directly (if not using a funeral agent). In principle, this can be anyone in the whole population.

Regulatory / Legal Framework

- Law and Policy Context (E.g., Gravplassloven). It shapes the legal requirements that the system must comply with.
- National Digitalization Strategy – Provides overall policy direction for reusing platforms and creating user-centered digital services.