



Summary

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Central government efforts to secure protective equipment

– crisis management at considerable cost

Summary

The Swedish National Audit Office (NAO) has audited central government efforts to secure personal protective equipment supplies during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Swedish NAO's overall conclusion is that the Government and the agencies did not secure supplies effectively.

Audit findings

The Government and the government agencies did not make sufficient preparations before the pandemic to effectively be able to secure availability to protective equipment in the event of a crisis. Regions and municipalities are responsible for protecting staff from contagion and therefore need to have emergency reserves of protective equipment. The requirements on emergency reserves of personal protective equipment in regions and municipalities are not sufficiently clear. The Government and the agencies responsible have not guided the regions and municipalities in building suitable emergency reserves of personal protective equipment.

In the initial phase of the pandemic, the Government decided on resource enhancement to cover an acute shortage, increased availability of authorised protective equipment, and government grants. These measures helped to increase access to protective equipment, but due to a slow start the National Board of Health and Welfare could not meet all the principals' critical needs

simultaneously, when the shortage was at its peak. The Swedish Work Environment Authority's fast track increased availability to approved protective equipment, but it got off to a late start. The National Board of Health and Welfare could therefore not use the fast track for its purchases at a stage when the needs were greatest. Prices for protective equipment rose sharply in spring 2020 and crisis management therefore became very costly for the State.

The audit shows that some government agencies also did not have sufficient preparedness to organise effective cooperation during the pandemic. This highlights limitations in respect to the national emergency preparedness as well as limitations in the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency's mandate to promote cooperation between authorities.

Central government lacks information to provide support in a crisis

There was no system for obtaining information and thus no national compilation of the regions' and municipalities' access to protective equipment before and in the early stages of the pandemic. The information collected between February and April 2020 was based on overall assessments of the emergency reserves. To avoid an acute shortage, authorities need to have access to information about the regions' and municipalities' stocks of various products. This will allow public authorities to assess the level of preparedness and the need for central government measures.

Unclear when the State should contribute resources in a crisis

When the principals are unable to resolve a shortage situation on their own, national efforts may become necessary. However, it is unclear in which situation the State should contribute additional resources to regions and municipalities. As a result, central government efforts were delayed during the pandemic. The National Board of Health and Welfare has not had a mandate to assist with resource reinforcement in a crisis; the Swedish NAO considers that with such a remit, the National Board of Health and Welfare would have had a better opportunity to act at an early stage.

Central government measures took a long time when they were most urgently needed

Central government support to ensure the availability of protective equipment to regions and municipalities consisted mainly of purchase and distribution of protective equipment, authorisation of non-CE-labelled protective equipment and financial support. All in all, the measures have increased the availability of protective equipment. However, the contribution was limited when the needs were

at the highest level. The government agencies were not prepared and needed to organise during the ongoing crisis to carry out the new Government assignments. The National Board of Health and Welfare could not meet all the needs at once through purchases of protective equipment in spring 2020, since there was not sufficient protective equipment on the market. The county administrative boards' distribution to the municipalities may have been inefficient, since the county administrative boards did not follow the same distribution principles. The Swedish Work Environment Authority's 'fast track' increased access to protective equipment, but not when the needs were greatest.

Lack of proactive measures reduced the effectiveness of public authorities' efforts

All public authorities have a responsibility to support each other in a crisis and to work together to deal with the situation. The National Board of Health and Welfare requested support from the county administrative boards, in matters such as information gathering from the municipalities. However, uncertainty arose among the county administrative boards on whether the task was compatible with their mandate. The uncertainty among county administrative boards led to a time delay and later a request to the Government for an authorisation to assist the National Board of Health and Welfare in its assignment. The Swedish NAO considers that the hesitation of the county administrative boards was unfounded and reduced the effectiveness of central government support to the municipalities.

Despite extensive communication between the Swedish Work Environment Authority and the Public Health Agency of Sweden, it did not lead to a coherent message concerning the use of protective equipment in 2020.

Recommendations

The Swedish NAO makes the following recommendations to the Government and the National Board of Health and Welfare:

To the Government

- Clarify expectations on public authorities' capacity to act proactively in connection with national emergency preparedness and in a crisis. This should be done by supplementing the fundamental principles on emergency preparedness with a principle on action.
- Give the Swedish Work Environment Authority and the Public Health Agency of Sweden the task of jointly reviewing their mandates with the aim of creating conditions for effective cooperation in the event of a crisis.

- Ensure that the National Board of Health and Welfare is given the mandate to access information on the regions' and municipalities' emergency reserves of medical supplies.
- Clarify in which situations the National Board of Health and Welfare must assist regions and municipalities with resources. This should be done through a planning process that aims to increase preparedness for decisions on central government efforts in the event of a disruption to society.
- Consider tasking the National Board of Health and Welfare with creating a function, together with the Defence Materiel Administration, for national purchases of medical products, such as protective equipment, that can step in and safeguard the needs of the health and medical care and social services for such products in the event of global shortages or crises.

To the National Board of Health and Welfare

- Strengthen support to municipal health and medical care and social services preparedness. This should be done through a long-term cooperation with the county administrative boards for the purpose of achieving effective preparedness and crisis management in the municipalities.