

The work of the Swedish Social Insurance Agency to prevent sick leave

– an unclear remit

Summary and recommendations

The Swedish National Audit Office (Swedish NAO) has audited whether the Swedish Insurance Agency works efficiently and consistently to prevent sick leave. The audit has a special focus on preventive sickness benefit and workplace-oriented rehabilitation support. The Swedish NAO's overall conclusion is that there are shortcomings in the Social Insurance Agency's work to prevent sick leave in terms of both efficiency and consistency. The Swedish NAO notes that the Government has not given the Social Insurance Agency a clear remit to prevent sick leave. Therefore, the Social Insurance Agency is less equipped to fulfil its remit than would have been possible with a clear and long-term remit from the Government.

Audit findings

There are regional differences in the use of preventive sickness benefit

The audit shows that the use of preventive sickness benefit differs across the country. Regional differences cannot always be explained by differences in demographic composition, employment and sickness benefit rates. Counties with high rates of use are characterised by a high number of days of preventive sickness benefit per recipient, indicating long unbroken treatments or the same individuals returning with new applications. The case officers therefore take on fewer individuals, which means that they need to understand fewer people's individual problems. This may mean that the Social Insurance Agency's processing has become more standardised here. This may lead to easier processing, but also to individuals who are not already "in the system" missing out on benefit.

The benefits are rarely used preventively, even though the regulations allow this.

The Swedish NAO notes that the benefits are mainly used for purposes of rehabilitation. At the same time, the regulatory framework enables benefit to be used for purely preventive purposes, i.e. before work incapacity and the need for sick leave are a reality. The audit shows that a large proportion of those who have received preventive sickness benefit and workplace-oriented support have previously been on sick leave with sickness benefit. Preventive sickness benefit is also used to a greater extent in counties with a large amount of sick leave. In other words, preventive sickness benefit is used to a greater extent where the need to use benefit for rehabilitation is great. The Swedish NAO therefore assesses that individuals' opportunities to gain access to preventive measures may vary throughout the country.

It is not easy to apply for benefit

There are circumstances that allow certain individuals access to preventive benefit to a greater extent than others. The Swedish NAO's interviews with the Social Insurance Agency's case officers indicate that primary care's knowledge of preventive sickness benefit is worse compared to parts of specialist care. This may pose a risk of inconsistency if the type of care provider is important for the individual's ability to receive treatment with preventive sickness benefit. The audit also indicates that it is primarily large employers that regularly turn to providers and seek help with interventions. There are some indications that employers refrain from applying for the support because an application requires a large amount of work for a relatively small amount. The audit also indicates that access to occupational health services is important for the use of preventive benefit.

There are shortcomings in the work on benefit

The audit shows that interviewed case officers have a consistent understanding of what evidence bases in connection with preventive sickness benefit mean. They agree that there are treatments that usually cannot be approved. At the same time, the audit shows that the case officers for preventive benefit work separately from other activities and that internal control of the work mainly dealing with preventive sickness benefit is not particularly extensive. The Swedish NAO considers that the lack of systematised support for case officers entails a risk that insured individuals can receive different assessments of treatment and benefits, depending on where in the country the application for preventive sickness benefit is processed.

The Social Insurance Agency could work more efficiently within the framework of its collaboration remit

The objective of the Social Insurance Agency's structural collaboration is to act to ensure that employers and health care services take responsibility for the work of prevention and rehabilitation. The audit shows, however, that the work of preventing sick leave has been given relatively small scope within the collaboration remit. The Swedish NAO considers that an obstacle to the Social Insurance Agency's ability to work effectively on preventing sick leave is that there are different opinions among different actors about the role of the Social Insurance Agency. The challenge is associated with the collaboration remit, where the Social Insurance Agency has defined its role in prevention of sick leave. The audit also shows that the collaboration work that focuses on preventing sick leave varies in intensity in different parts of the country and that the Social Insurance Agency could work more effectively within the framework of its collaboration remit.

The Social Insurance Agency's case officers and local officers responsible for collaboration consider that preventive benefit is not particularly known among insured individuals, primary care or employers in general. The Swedish NAO therefore assesses that there are deficiencies in the Social Insurance Office's information to relevant actors about the preventive purpose of the benefit.

Opportunities for evaluating the benefits need to be improved

The Swedish NAO notes that preventive measures are difficult to evaluate and that the state of knowledge is partly unclear. The audit shows that there are insufficient opportunities to evaluate the effect of preventive measures that can be provided while receiving benefits from the Social Insurance Agency. This is partly because the Social Insurance Agency does not register information about these measures. It is therefore difficult to express the importance of compensation as an effective instrument for preventing sick leave.

The remit to prevent sick leave is not clear

The Social Insurance Agency's remit to prevent sick leave is not clear. The Swedish NAO notes that the remit has not been explicitly stated in the Government's appropriation directions since 2013.¹ Nor has the Social Insurance Agency's guidance consistently included clear formulations as to whether the preventive work can or should be included in the collaboration remit. Nevertheless, the Social Insurance Agency can use preventive benefit for measures provided for purely preventive purposes, i.e. before incapacity for work and the need for sick leave is a reality. The Social Insurance Agency has had the scope to both expand and limit its role in preventive work, both over time and at

¹ The Government recently issued amended appropriation directions for the Social Insurance Agency with clear formulations about preventive measures. Government Decision S2021/03352.

local level. The Swedish NAO assesses that the Government's unclear formulation of the remit can lead to variation across the country in the ability of insured individuals to receive benefit for preventive measures.

The amounts paid for both benefits has increased, but are small in relation to sickness benefit and rehabilitation benefit. The audit shows that the work on these benefits has low priority internally within the Social Insurance Agency. The Swedish NAO therefore considers that, given its current application of the remit, the Social Insurance Agency's ability to influence the sickness benefit rate and sickness rate using these benefits is limited.

Recommendations

The Swedish NAO makes the following recommendations to the Government:

- Clarify the Social Insurance Agency's responsibilities and remit as regards preventing sickness absence, incapacity for work and sick leave.
- Ensure that the effects of preventive measures given with the benefits are evaluated.

The Swedish NAO makes the following recommendations to the Swedish Social Insurance Agency.

- Ensure that the necessary information on measures is collected so that the benefits can be evaluated.
- Ensure that all relevant actors receive the necessary information about the benefits and their preventive purpose and increase the information about the role of the Social Insurance Agency in the preventive work against sick leave.
- Develop the possibility of exchange of experience between case officers dealing with preventive sickness benefit and ensure that there is sufficient support in the processing. This in order to reduce the risk of differences in assessments.
- Develop internal contacts between case officers dealing with sickness benefits and case officers dealing with preventive benefits in order to more easily identify individuals in need of preventive measures.
- Consider simplifying the application process for rehabilitation support to create better conditions for small employers to access benefits.