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Tools for change

– The treatment activities of the Swedish Prison and Probation Service

Summary

Crime causes considerable costs to society, both in financial terms and in terms of victims' suffering. The cost to central government finances of the Swedish Prison and Probation Service are also considerable. In 2023, appropriations for the Swedish Prison and Probation Service amounted to just over SEK 14 billion – an increase of 63 per cent since 2018. The Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention states that the estimated long-term cost to society of an individual who repeatedly ends up in prison is in excess of SEK 9 million.

One of the most important tasks of the Swedish Prison and Probation Service is to prevent correctional clients from repeat offending. One measure to reduce the risk of repeat offending is to offer treatment to clients who are deemed to be in need of it. However, few clients get to attend a treatment programme. The Swedish National Audit Office ("the Swedish NAO") has examined whether the Swedish Prison and Probation Service has designed its treatment activities effectively.

Audit findings

The Swedish NAO's overall conclusion is that the treatment activities of the Swedish Prison and Probation Service are not conducted fully effectively. The main reason is that the activities are undersized due to a lack of both staff who can run treatment programmes, and premises in which to hold them. The ambition of the Swedish Prison and Probation Service is for as many clients as possible, who are deemed to be

at medium or high risk of repeat offending, to undergo at least one treatment programme while serving their sentence. In 2023, however, only 22 per cent of correctional clients serving a custodial sentence, and 13 per cent serving a non-custodial sentence, completed a treatment programme.

Availability of staff and programme premises limits the share of correctional clients the Swedish Prison and Probation Service can reach. The Swedish Prison and Probation Service manages treatment activities from the national level through the allocation of earmarked funds. However, resource allocation is not dimensioned to enable reaching all clients in need of treatment programmes. The Swedish NAO therefore sees that the Swedish Prison and Probation Service needs to continue its work on expanding its treatment activities. It also needs to improve possibilities for remote participation in programmes.

Planning clients' time to be served within the Swedish Prison and Probation Service is based on an assessment of their risk, needs and responsiveness, and is fundamental in enabling offering appropriate treatment programmes to them. The audit shows that the Swedish Prison and Probation Service has a functioning process for this, but that the work is at risk of being down-prioritised when the operations are under pressure, while at the same time the Swedish Prison and Probation Service has no possibility of following up on the extent to which needs are being met by adequate interventions. For clients, the consequence can be that sentence planning is not completed in time which, in turn, can affect the possibility of participating in treatment programmes.

The Swedish Prison and Probation Service's treatment programmes are based on there being a supportive environment surrounding the client, also between the treatment sessions. Such an environment can affect clients' responsiveness in the treatment programmes. The audit shows that, as things stand at correctional facilities, where more and more individuals are sharing common spaces intended for fewer people, and where there is also a staff shortage, it is increasingly difficult to provide a supportive environment.

The Swedish NAO considers that, during the audited period, the Swedish Prison and Probation Service has developed its treatment activities in many ways and has worked actively to identify the measures needed to reach more clients with treatment programmes. However, the Swedish NAO notes that there is a need for continued development and adaptations of the programmes. By mapping out the correctional client population, the Swedish Prison and Probation Service can identify needs that can be fulfilled in the treatment programmes. However, the Swedish Prison and Probation Service has not been able to conduct comprehensive correctional client mapping throughout the entire audited period, due to legal obstacles associated with collecting register data. The legal obstacles have also prevented the Swedish Prison and Probation Service from conducting impact evaluations of the treatment programmes. This issue was partly resolved by the Swedish Prison and Probation

Service having research included in its instructions from 2024, although some obstacles still persist, which the Swedish Prison and Probation Service should promptly remove.

Recommendations

The Swedish NAO makes the following recommendations to the Swedish Prison and Probation Service:

- Prioritise treatment activities through appropriate resource allocation so that a sufficient number of programme managers and programme premises can be provided in relation to objectives.
- Prioritise work on sentence planning and ensure that follow-up is performed on the extent to which needs are being met by adequate initiatives, to enable enhancing sentence planning efforts.
- Ensure that a supportive environment and a competent client-centric approach pervade the entire organisation, in order to make treatment programmes and the work on preventing repeat offending fully effective.
- Develop possibilities to conduct programmes remotely to avoid disruption when clients move and to enable meeting clients' individual needs to a greater extent than currently.
- Regularly examine the needs of the correctional client population and design the offering of treatment programmes based on findings.
- Conduct impact evaluations of treatment programmes to ensure that the treatment programmes offered have the intended effect.