

Summary

Governance of SOS Alarm – important for people's security (RiR 2015:11)



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Governance of SOS Alarm - important for people's security

The Swedish National Audit Office has audited whether the Government has created adequate conditions for the emergency alerting services, which are central to helping people in distress and saving property; whether the Government's governance of SOS Alarm is clear and explicit and whether SOS Alarm's work has been customer-oriented and long-term.

Audit background

Reasons for the audit

SOS Alarm is the state owned company responsible for the emergency number 112. Emergency alerting services include critical national infrastructure for which SOS Alarm is responsible through technical and administrative systems and through necessary essential contacts, such as with police, medical services and other emergency services.

National alerting services are facing several changes, for example as regards developments in prehospital care (care given by ambulance personnel before the patient arrives at the hospital) and a project to carry out priority assignment, alerting and direction of ambulances in parallel with SOS Alarm. Alerting services also have problems in meeting the demands made of them. There are also plans for another government inquiry on the organisation of alerting services apart from the one submitted to the Government in 2013.

Consequently, the Swedish NAO considers that it is important to supplement the already existing knowledge base and draw the Riksdag's attention to problems and challenges for public emergency alerting systems that should be taken into account regardless of how the future alerting service is to be organised.

The audit report uses the terms person seeking help and person in distress. By person seeking help is meant the person who calls 112 but is not necessarily the person needing a rescue measure. By person in distress is meant the person in need of a rescue measure.

Purpose of the audit

The purpose of the audit is to investigate whether there are adequate enabling conditions for the public alerting system and SOS Alarm and to audit whether SOS Alarm has appropriate governance of its operations. The audit is based on the following audit questions:



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1. Are there deficiencies in the conditions for conducting fast, safe and secure alerting services?
2. Have SOS Alarm's operations been customer oriented?
3. Has SOS Alarm worked from a long-term perspective?
4. Has the Government's governance of SOS Alarm been clear?
5. Has the Government's reporting to the Riksdag on SOS Alarm been fair and adequate?

Audit conclusions

Emergency alerting services include critical national infrastructure for which SOS Alarm is responsible. Alerting services are directly necessary for enabling public authorities to meet their responsibility for rescue operations.

There is continual technical development in alerting services, which makes demands of SOS Alarm's technical platform. It is central to the functioning of the alerting service. The audit shows that management of the company has not focused on the future technical platform. Average response times for 112 have been too high in recent years and lack of clarity in the central government alerting services agreement mean that it is uncertain whether alerting operations are conducted as intended by the Riksdag. There are unclear relations with the county councils, which is the group responsible for most rescue operations in the country and some county councils are dissatisfied with SOS Alarm's competence in prehospital care. There are a number of deficiencies in the enabling conditions for public alerting services and the Government has neither directed nor been clear in relation to the company, which has led to uncertainty for SOS Alarm.

There are deficiencies in the enabling conditions for public alerting services

The audit shows that there are deficiencies in the enabling conditions for public alerting services.

Deficiencies in positioning people in distress

A crucial task in an emergency situation or crisis is to position and localise the person in distress. At the major forest fire in Västmanland in 2014 the arrival of the emergency services at the scene of the fire was delayed by about 40 minutes due to deficiencies in positioning. Often the person calling 112 is in shock or dazed by the situation, so it is important to use technology to help localise the place where help is to be directed. Positioning of the person in distress is thus dependent on updated technical solutions, maps and address registers. Location addresses are an important tool in positioning. The addresses are determined by municipalities and are registered in the Lantmäteriet (Swedish mapping, cadastral and land registration authority) national register.



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SOS Alarm obtains its addresses via notifications from Lantmäteriet. It has happened that ambulances have not found people in distress because addresses in the register were missing.

The audit shows that about 21 per cent of Sweden's population live in a municipality where the location of buildings risks being approximate and about 9 per cent live in a municipality with insufficient coverage of addresses of buildings such as industries and preschools. In some cases this also applies to dwellings.

The register of location addresses is deficient, which has a negative impact on treatment of emergency alerts. Nor is there any legislation on the obligation of municipalities to register location addresses for buildings other than dwellings or central government supervisory responsibility for compliance with the Act on the Register of Dwellings (2006:378).

There are obstacles to sharing of information between SOS Alarm and other actors

SOS Alarm and other central government actors in the emergency alerting chain work with different technical systems for information, communication and management. This means that emergency calls for redirection from SOS Alarm to the police, sea rescue and air rescue services are transferred by SOS Alarm by calling a separate number.

The Riksdag has emphasised that the caller must come into direct contact with an SOS alarm centre and not need to present the same information to both the SOS alarm centre and the assisting service. However, in these cases it is not so.

If actors in the alerting chain are not able to share information electronically it may result in prolonged alert processing time, unnecessary additional work and a risk of information being lost on the way, particularly if the same information must be communicated in several steps. Consequently, it is important that the Government initiates work on this important matter, promotes the creation of consensus on the various needs that exist and the implementation of solutions.

New initiative with alarm centres run by county councils but there is no supervisory responsibility

On 1 June 2015 two county councils will be undertaking priority assignment, alerting and direction of ambulances by initiating their own alarm centres.

In 2011-2013 alerting services, priority assignment and direction of ambulances for four county councils were dealt with by another actor than SOS Alarm. Experiences from those years show that situations arose that threatened to delay the emergency response. For example, SOS Alarm was forced to wait for the call to be answered by the other alarm centre, which in turn created a queue to 112. Furthermore, by law SOS Alarm is prohibited from transferring information



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concerning the “A number” electronically. This led to the number of the person seeking help having to be read out and repeated by the call handler for subsequent positioning. Thus there was a risk of misunderstanding. The Swedish NAO considers that the situation where a person seeking help must repeat information is not in line with the Riksdag’s decision and this reduces the effectiveness of the alerting chain.

It is important that transfer of emergency calls is supervised, since it is possible that alarm centres may be working in parallel with SOS Alarm. It is a central priority that people seeking help receive fast and secure help.

The Swedish NAO notes that there is no central government agency with responsibility for supervising transfer of emergency calls.

Non-serious calls risk creating queues to 112

Under the alerting services agreement with central government the average response time for emergency calls must be a maximum of 8 seconds and no-one calling 112 should normally have to wait more than 30 seconds for a response. In the past four years SOS Alarm has not met the 8 second requirement (with the exception of in 2012). The average response time has never been as high as in 2014, when it took 15.3 seconds before an emergency call to 112 was answered.

A large number of emergency calls are false calls which delay the 112 call handlers' processing of genuine emergency calls. The most remarkable are the calls designated as malicious, that is when the purpose is non-serious.

In the past seven years SOS Alarm has spent an estimated 33 days, in other words more than one month per year, answering malicious calls, which is a great deal. The Emergency Services Inquiry in 2013 considered that malicious calls were a problem and that the Government should consider possible sanctions against deliberate misuse of the emergency number 112.

Measures to reduce the number of malicious calls have not yet been taken and this has a negative effect on the conditions under which SOS Alarm operates. As yet there is no legal basis for introducing measures against malicious calls and it is the Government that can initiate regulation.

Some county councils are dissatisfied with SOS Alarm

SOS Alarm’s contracts with county councils vary and the agreements reflect the various requirements the county councils have imposed on SOS Alarm.

In the mid-1990s the Riksdag stated that SOS Alarm’s operations should be managed by commercial negotiations in which customers would be given better opportunities to influence the level of service and content of SOS Alarm’s services. Thus one important objective was that the company should be customer-oriented.



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There has, however, been some dissatisfaction among county councils over SOS Alarm's operations. Overall, the county councils consider that SOS Alarm has adapted to their specific needs. However, half of the county councils consider that SOS Alarm has fairly limited competence in prehospital care. The Swedish NAO considers that SOS Alarm was customer-oriented but the audit shows that there is dissatisfaction among county councils. SOS Alarm should adapt its operations better to both the capability and needs of healthcare services.

Some of the contracts with county councils are constructed with conditional financial penalties. The most common is the requirement that SOS Alarm should have nurses employed at the SOS alarm centre, which the county councils considered important in their strategies for prehospital medical care. In the past five years SOS Alarm paid SEK 6.6 million to county councils. This is equivalent for example to the cost of 15 average employees at an alarm centre for one year. These are funds that could have been used in the operations instead.

The emergency number 112 requires stability and a long-term perspective

According to the alerting services agreement SOS Alarm should develop the SOS service in pace with external needs, societal changes and technical possibilities.

The audit shows that SOS Alarm has not worked with a sufficiently long-term perspective due to uncertainty about the company's future. The fact that the board has not worked with a sufficiently long-term perspective is demonstrated for example by it not having made a decision on the future technological platform, which is fundamental to the critical national infrastructure for which SOS Alarm is responsible. The system will be written off in 2016 and it may take 3-4 years to replace these components. The matter has been under discussion since 2010. The board has also stated that the owners should be clearer as to what they expect from SOS Alarm and what the company's future remit and role should be.

The Government's governance of SOS Alarm can be developed

The audit shows that the Government's governance of SOS Alarm has not been adequate and clear.

Lack of clarity in the alerting services agreement

The functional requirements in the alerting services agreement to which SOS Alarm must comply are the Security Protection Act and applicable rules for alarm centres. The agreement also presents requirements concerning 112 call handlers' competence and response times.

There are requirements in the alerting services agreement that are unclear. Some could usefully be clarified in the agreement, but an effective dialogue with the Government Offices on the undertakings is also important. Examples of lack of clarity are the time period to which the



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average response time applies, what is meant by being able to handle 112 calls of all categories in a reliable way and what a normal situation for the company is. An unclear alerting services agreement may result in different interpretations of the agreement by the parties and that alerting services are not conducted as the Riksdag intended. The Government must clarify the company's powers and concrete obligations on a current basis to the board.

SOS Alarm is paid annually for the 112 service through a government appropriation. In the period 2009–2011 the payment was designed to provide full cost coverage but there are no provisions on factors for calculating or remuneration principles from 2012 onwards.

In 2011 SOS Alarm applied to the Government Offices for decisions on a number of questions that affect the role and remit of SOS Alarm, including in relation to other central government agencies. This may affect the legal rights of the individual. For example it concerns problems of confidentiality within SOS Alarm's emergency number operations. Furthermore, SOS Alarm has stated that the Act on the operations of certain regional emergency centres must be adjusted and in 2009 the company described the problems associated with various regulations governing retention of audio files. Requirements differ depending on whether the documents were prepared by a nurse at the SOS alarm centre or by a 112 call handler.

The Government has not as yet given SOS Alarm any decision or guidance on these matters.

The overall assessment of the Swedish NAO is that the Government's governance of SOS Alarm has not been clear, which has resulted in uncertainty for the company, making sound management of public funds more difficult.

SOS Alarm – operating without supervision

SOS Alarm is covered by and impacted by a number of different regulations, partly as a limited liability company, partly as a central actor in emergency preparedness and as being solely responsible for responding to emergency calls to 112.

On request, SOS Alarm must allow the Government or other duly designated authority access to all facilities and supply such information and documents as may be needed for monitoring the 112 service. The Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency (MSB) is responsible for this and MSB's appropriation directions designate it as supervision.

However, MSB does not have supervisory responsibility established in law and consequently has no legal powers to influence operations and prevent deficiencies in performance. MSB's "supervision" is rather the verification by central government that SOS Alarm is performing its obligations under the alerting services agreement than supervision in the central government sense.

In the opinion of the Swedish NAO SOS Alarm's operations include management of critical national infrastructure and thus should be subject to central government supervision in the same



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way as agencies. The supervision could include annual reporting requirements, where necessary with reporting assignments for specific areas. In addition the Government could decide to audit various areas and activities. Moreover, the Government could determine that the operations should have an internal audit function, which SOS Alarm does not have.

SOS Alarm is responsible for critical national infrastructure and performs agency duties

Alerting services consist of a critical national infrastructure for which SOS Alarm is responsible through technical and administrative systems and through the necessary contacts that must exist with medical services, police and emergency services for example.

Alerting services are directly necessary for enabling public authorities to fulfil their responsibility for rescue operations. Alerting services thus include areas that are more far-reaching than purely commercial operations.

The choice of a state-owned company as the form for SOS Alarm's operations is justified in that it allows cooperation between responsible public sector authorities for rescue operations, such as central government, municipalities and county councils. Through their partnership municipalities and county councils are able to monitor and influence alerting services within the framework of their responsibility for rescue operations. When responsible authorities in competition with SOS Alarm consider and actually set up alarm centres in parallel with SOS Alarm the purpose of this authority may be missed.

However, the use of the limited liability corporate form entails consequences as regards the overall responsibility of public authorities for alerting services with critical national infrastructure.

The purpose of limited liability companies is to conduct commercial activities for profit and distribute dividends to the shareholders. A limited liability company is particularly appropriate when it is important that an activity is conducted commercially, effectively and when the owner/s want to limited personal responsibility. However, central government and other public authorities responsible for care and emergency services have full responsibility for rescue operations while the responsibility for the alerting services themselves is paradoxically restricted through the corporate form and its design.

The responsibility of central government is not comprehensive and the conditions for effective governance are not fulfilled, partly in that SOS Alarm is not subject to supervision despite the company owning critical national infrastructure and in this context performing agency-like duties.

The Swedish NAO considers that the choice of corporate form and its design needs to be investigated so that the remit and functionality of the operations are in focus.



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The Government's reporting to the Riksdag should be improved

In 2010 to 2014 the descriptions of SOS Alarm in Budget Bills were very similar in content. There is no information on circumstances in the company's environment or current statistics on the number of emergency calls. In the 2015 Budget Bill reporting is in some part changed and the Government highlights SOS Alarm's contribution to national capability in the area of protection against accidents and emergency preparedness. The text mentions that the company now has a broader responsibility than ensuring effective SOS services and calling on or connecting those in distress with the police, central or local government emergency services or ambulance services.

The Swedish NAO considers that important information has not been given to the Riksdag, for example when some county councils decided to procure another actor than SOS Alarm for assigning priority, alerting services and direction of ambulances.

The annual communication to the Riksdag on state-owned enterprises is based on the State being a partner in SOS Alarm, which means an emphasis on the company's financial position and achievement of economic targets. The communication does not highlight problems concerning national alerting services, which is not the purpose of the communication either. Any problems concerning national alerting services must thus be reported in another way.

Recommendations

The Swedish NAO recommends that the Government improves the enabling conditions for alerting services by

- Investigating the possibility of legislation or other measures to improve registration of location addresses.
- Clarifying who is responsible for supervision of compliance with the Act on the Register of Dwellings (2006:378).
- Initiating preparation of a technical solution that allows electronic sharing of information between the central government actors in the emergency alerting chain.
- Ensuring that functionality of the emergency alerting chain is kept together. When parallel actors in priority assignation, alerting services and direction of ambulances are in operation it is important that there is regulation and supervision on site for the purpose of minimising the risk to people in distress.
- Investigating and promptly introducing regulation to minimise the number of malicious calls.
- Considering overall responsibility for supervision of all alerting services.



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The Swedish NAO recommends that the Government improves governance and reporting of alerting services and SOS Alarm by

- Updating and clarifying the alerting services agreement in order to make it clear what it means to be able to handle 112 calls of all categories in a reliable way and what a normal situation is for the company.
- Clarifying the legal situation in the questions put by SOS Alarm.
- Ordering an inquiry to establish the most appropriate corporate form, based on the fact that alerting services include critical national infrastructure.
- Developing the description of SOS Alarm to the Riksdag with regard to the company's responsibility for critical national infrastructure, important events in the company's environment and conditions of importance for national alerting services.

The Swedish NAO recommends that SOS Alarm Sweden AB

- Continues working on relations to the county councils to strengthen conditions for effective alerting services.
- Also takes into account interoperability with other actors in the emergency alerting chain when preparing a new technology platform.
- Ensures that the company manages the risks that follow from existing contracts.

