

Summary

The start of something new –
preparatory initiatives for the
establishment of asylum seekers
(RiR 2012:23)



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The Swedish National Audit Office (Swedish NAO) has audited the reception system for asylum seekers from an integration perspective. The audit has been carried out within the framework of the Swedish NAO's strategy for audits in the area of establishment and integration.

Audit background

People come to Sweden for many different reasons. Some come to work, study or be reunited with their families, while others are fleeing violence and persecution. For asylum seekers, who often face greater challenges than other immigrants, it is particularly important that central government initiatives are appropriate and effective. The Riksdag and the Government have stated that the focus of these initiatives shall be that asylum seekers who have been granted a residence permit are to find employment quickly and begin supporting themselves.

The Swedish NAO's audit relates to central government initiatives for the reception and introduction of asylum seekers from an integration perspective. The audit has focused on the function of the reception system for asylum seekers and on the function of the Government's control and follow-up of the system on the basis of its ambition to see early initiatives for integration. In addition to the Swedish Migration Board and the Government, the audit also covers the Swedish Public Employment Service, which has the task of assigning a person who has been granted a residence permit, and who is covered by the Government's establishment reform, to a municipality of residence.

The audit has proceeded from the overall audit question: *Are the initiatives of central government for the reception and introduction of asylum seekers effective in facilitating and speeding up their establishment and integration in Sweden?*

Audit results

The Migration Board shall receive a large and highly variable number of asylum seekers. This reception must be adapted so that it can take into account large variations with respect to the circumstances and needs of different refugee groups and individuals. The system is to be equivalent – all asylum seekers shall be treated in a legally secure and equivalent manner regardless of their background or where in the country they may go – and should at the same time allow a flexible adaptation to individual needs. The initiatives within the reception system are to equip asylum seekers both for a future establishment in Sweden and a possible return. New arrivals receiving a residence permit shall, through initiatives by the Public Employment Service, be given the opportunity to commence their establishment as early as possible.

For the system to be effective, the agencies must cooperate with each other in such a way that every new arrival that has received a residence permit is given the opportunity as soon as possible to take up residence in a municipality and continue his or her establishment. The Swedish NAO's overall assessment is that there are high demands on flexibility and cooperation between the two government agencies, which are the first to meet people coming to Sweden, so that reception and the period before and after being assigned to a municipality function in an effective manner that facilitates and speeds up the establishment and integration of each individual person.

Great challenges and increased pressure in the reception system

The number of people seeking asylum in Sweden varies from year to year. Between 2002 and 2011, the number of asylum seekers has averaged about 27,000 per year. Partly because of developments in the Middle East, the Migration Board's projection is that 44,000 persons will be seeking asylum in Sweden in 2012 and 54,000 in 2013. The increasing number of asylum seekers will pose a challenge and mean a risk of longer periods spent in the reception system, both for those awaiting a decision in their asylum case and for those awaiting reception in a municipality following a granted residence permit. The Migration Board also assesses that the number of persons with a residence permit that remain in the reception system while waiting for assignment to a municipality will increase from 4800 in 2012 to 9000 already in 2013.

Accommodation during and after the asylum period should promote the work-first principle

Asylum seekers who are not able to arrange their own accommodation may receive help from the Migration Board in the form of a place at an accommodation centre. With only a few exceptions, accommodation centres are not located in metropolitan areas, but mainly in small towns. Where in Sweden asylum seekers end up depends largely on where there happen to be vacancies at accommodation centres.

While the Swedish NAO is well aware of the great pressure on the reception system and the generally difficult housing situation, it is important, as far as is possible, to have a longer-term perspective, taking into account the local and regional labour market already when asylum seekers are offered accommodation by the Migration Board. Many asylum seekers who are later granted a residence permit choose to remain in the locality where they first came to live and where children have in many cases already begun preschool and school. An early focus on job opportunities facilitates the Public Employment Service's subsequent work for new arrivals to have the opportunity, when being assigned to a municipality, to take up residence in a place where they can find employment.

The work-first principle in the reception system needs to be strengthened

In its reporting to the Riksdag and in its appropriation directions to the Migration Board, the Government has emphasised the importance of asylum seekers coming in contact with the labour market already during the asylum period. However, from the Swedish NAO's audit, it emerges that relatively few asylum seekers have a registered job or an internship.

The audit demonstrates that the reception system offers few initiatives that promote work and self-support. Asylum seekers who are able to, or help to, prove their identity have the opportunity to work in Sweden during the asylum period without requiring a work permit. Asylum seekers who would like an internship have to arrange this themselves. In addition, the Public Employment Service's opportunities to offer initiatives for asylum seekers are limited. For more new arrivals to have the opportunity for employment or internship, coordination and information transfer between the Migration Board and the Public Employment Service need to be developed. This applies both to the appraisal of professional and educational background that all adult asylum seekers are to receive and to the coordination of local collaboration with businesses and organisations.

Early initiatives shall meet different needs

All asylum seekers need to receive certain basic information on how Swedish society works. Asylum

seekers who wait a long time for decisions from the Migration Board or the Migration Courts may also be in need of other initiatives to make their time in the reception system meaningful. Those who have received a residence permit and who are waiting to be received by a municipality need to get started with the establishment initiatives that will then continue in that municipality. There are thus different needs that the Migration Board and the Public Employment Service are to meet in order to give individuals in the reception system the opportunity to use their time in a meaningful way that serves to achieve an early establishment for those who will be staying in the country.

Introduction to the Swedish language

Under the Reception of Asylum Seekers and Others Act (1994:137), the Migration Board shall, to an appropriate extent, offer asylum seekers activities in the form of Swedish lessons, among other things.

Both the Riksdag and the Government have expressed that Swedish skills are important for effective integration. Since 1 January 2012, the Migration Board no longer procures Swedish lessons for asylum seekers within the reception system. The audit demonstrates that it is common for asylum seekers to request some form of simpler language introduction so as to function more easily in various everyday situations. It has also been expressed that knowledge of the Swedish language is important to the feasibility of employment or internship with those other than the asylum seeker's countrymen.

Language support offered by voluntary organisations is a valuable service. At the same time, it is important to emphasise that the Migration Board, until the time of decision on a residence permit, has a responsibility to ensure that all asylum seekers are offered the opportunity to receive language support based on their needs and the length of time in the reception system, regardless of where in the country they are registered and regardless of whether they live in their own accommodation or in an accommodation centre. Those who have been granted a residence permit are to be offered tuition in Swedish as part of their establishment. The fact that assignment to a municipality may take some time, for which reason individuals remain in the reception system, cannot according to the Swedish NAO imply any change in the initiatives that are to be offered to new arrivals within the framework of the establishment system.

Civic information and contacts

According to the Migration Board's guidelines, the objective is to offer all adult asylum seekers an introduction comprising civic information within one month of asylum application. The initiative consists of two blocks that are usually given on two half-days. Just over half of the asylum seekers take part in the initiative within 30 days, but for 20 per cent, it takes at least two months before the initiative begins. According to the Migration Board's annual report, only a little more than one in three adult asylum seekers completed their introduction in 2011. The audit also shows that there is some uncertainty at the Migration Board regarding the scope and content of the information. In the Swedish NAO's view, this means overall that asylum seekers are not receiving equivalent preconditions for acquiring knowledge about the rights, obligations and opportunities they have in Sweden.

An important way of finding out how Swedish society works is through contacts with people already living in Sweden. Even if newly arrived individuals take responsibility and are active in creating contacts, those who are new to Sweden and lack networks and skills in Swedish might need special initiatives in the early stages. The Migration Board should work together with municipalities and voluntary organisations to ensure that localities in which the Migration Board has reception units also have local meeting places to which asylum seekers may turn in order to establish contacts and in various ways have the opportunity to familiarise themselves with how Swedish society works.

The Swedish National Audit Office's recommendations

Recommendations to the Government

To create preconditions for a quicker labour market establishment for the asylum seekers who are granted a residence permit, the Government should:

- Follow up that the division of responsibility and the transfer of information between the Swedish Migration Board and the Swedish Public Employment Service function in an appropriate manner in order to facilitate and speed up the labour market establishment of those who have been granted a residence permit.
- Follow up that asylum seekers have equivalent access to information and that asylum seekers who do not have employment or an internship are given the opportunity to establish contacts and in other ways be introduced to society.
- Follow up that introduction to the Swedish language is offered and adapted to the needs of asylum seekers and their length of time in the reception system.

Recommendations to the Swedish Migration Board

- The Swedish Migration Board should work to strengthen the work-first principle in the reception system by making it easier for more asylum seekers who fulfil the conditions to undertake an internship or to work during their time in the reception system.
- The Swedish Migration Board should provide asylum seekers who do not have employment or an internship with language support and other initiatives based on the individual's circumstances and time in the reception system.
- The Swedish Migration Board should follow up to a greater extent that the initiatives provided within the reception system are equivalent and accessible for all asylum seekers regardless of language affiliation, place of residence, type of accommodation or the reception unit at which they are registered.
- The Swedish Migration Board should strengthen the social aspects of reception by working for the creation of more meeting places between asylum seekers and local people, the provision of more information about accommodation and the local community and by developing the possibilities of offering, to a greater extent, social conversations as a complement to the reception's investigation interviews.