



RIKSREVISIONEN
The Swedish National Audit Office

RiR 2009:23 Summary

Country plans for regional transport infrastructure

Summary

Riksrevisionen (the Swedish National Audit Office, SNAO) examined the draft county transport plans submitted to the Swedish Government in November 2009. Those plans are part of the ongoing planning process to allocate central-government infrastructure funds during the 2010–2021 period. In its planning directives, the Government entrusted 21 county planners with the task of allocating funds to measures of particular regional and local importance. For this purpose, the Government has made available a preliminary financial framework amounting to SEK 33 billion in all.

Purpose of the audit

During the previous planning round, the SNAO examined the draft county plans submitted to the Government in August 2003. At that time, the SNAO found that the counties had failed in certain important respects to comply with the requirements laid down in the Government's directives. The purpose of the present audit is to follow up the principal observations made in that previous audit by reviewing the various counties' draft plans to assess whether they managed to meet the requirements of the Government's directives during the present planning round. The audit also follows up the measures taken by the Government.

The SNAO's conclusion

The audit shows that the counties failed in a few important respects to comply with the requirements laid down in the Government's directives. The draft plans are not sufficiently transparent and explicit to enable assessment of the extent to which the measures chosen are the most efficient and effective ones as well as the most socially, economically and ecologically sustainable ones in the long term. The audit findings show that the problems described in the SNAO's 2004 audit remain in large part.

The counties did not meet the requirements laid down in the directives as regards explicit prioritisation and overall impact assessments

The Government's directives require that reasons should be given for prioritisations and that the relative order of priority should be clear. It must also be clear what other measures were considered at earlier stages but were not included in the draft plan submitted to the Government. Impact

assessments must be included in the draft plan. An impact assessment should give a true and fair view of the ramifications of a measure or a package of measures, enabling objective comparison of options.

The SNAO's audit shows that the starting points for prioritisation described in the draft plans are rarely so specific that they can be deemed to constitute a true selection mechanism. In general, there is no explicit link between the overall grounds for prioritisation and the measures chosen. Combined with the fact that few counties describe their actual considerations, this makes it difficult to form an opinion of how or why a particular ranking of measures was arrived at. What is more, few counties present measures that were excluded as a result of their low priority.

In several cases, the planning documents either lack impact descriptions or contain only very simplified such descriptions. What is more, only a few counties address all of the impacts that an impact assessment must cover. In several cases, the impact assessment presented is not an overall assessment of the draft plan as a whole. What is often described is in fact how individual measures will affect compliance rather than how the overall draft plan will affect compliance with national and regional objectives. It is difficult to see whether – and, if so, how – the impact assessments have influenced the assignment of priority to individual measures or the division of funds among categories of measures. The draft plans only exceptionally describe negative impacts and conflicts between objectives.

Hence it is difficult to tell whether the choice of measures is the most efficient and effective one

One consequence of the shortcomings of the planning documents is that it is difficult to tell whether the choice of measures is the most efficient and effective one as well as the most socially, economically and ecologically sustainable one in the long term. Inadequate reasons for prioritisation and insufficient impact assessments make it more difficult to carry out objective comparisons of different new options. These shortcomings may also hinder the future re-examination of options as conditions in society change. This, in turn, may entail that decisions are made on the basis of outdated views as regards what problems are to be solved and what potential can be realised through investment in infrastructure.

Unclear planning conditions are one reason for the shortcomings

After the previous planning round, the Government toned down the criticism levelled at the county plans and their shortcomings. The Government has not changed the fundamental conditions for the counties' planning: it imposes more or less the same requirements in its directives this time. The findings from the SNAO's audit of county plans in this planning round indicate that most of the problems and shortcomings highlighted in 2004 remain.

The Government's direction has aimed to ensure both increased regional influence over the planning process and viability of investments at the national level. In some cases, this has entailed a lack of clarity when it comes to the conduct of the actual planning, and sometimes also uncertainty about

the actual division of responsibility between the counties and the central-government traffic agencies. Increased regional influence leads to increased politicisation of the process. What is viable from the point of view of a regional economy and desirable from the point of view of regional policy is not always the most viable option at the national level. There is thus a conflict between strict direction using directives to harmonise the content and quality of draft plans across Sweden, on the one hand, and the desire to increase regional influence, on the other. The Government has largely forced the counties and the traffic agencies to wrestle on their own with the issue of how this will influence practical work.

Recommendations

The SNAO recommends that the Government should ensure that the planning and prioritisation of infrastructure measures is based on transparent and complete impact assessments for individual projects and for overall draft plans. The SNAO further recommends that the Government should emphasise, ahead of future planning efforts, how important it is for planners to account for their prioritisations and explicitly describe such conflicts between objectives that may arise when national and regional objectives are weighed against each other.