



RIKSREVISIONEN
The Swedish National Audit Office

How effective is the animal protection supervision system?

A summary of RiR 2003:1

Hur effektiv är djurskyddstillsynen?

Summary

The Swedish National Audit Office (SNAO) has examined whether the supervision of animal welfare in Sweden works in an effective manner.

Background

Under the Swedish Animal Welfare Act (SFS 1988:534), all animals kept in captivity must be treated well and must not be subjected to unnecessary suffering. They must also be given the opportunity to behave naturally. In addition, animals must not be neglected or maltreated.

There are approximately 10 million farm animals and 3 million pets in Sweden today.

Animal welfare has been receiving increasing attention. Reasons for this include media coverage, increased activity in various animal-rights organisations and major outbreaks of diseases such as mad-cow disease and foot-and-mouth disease. Another explanation is that, in recent years, the Riksdag (Swedish Parliament) and the Government have raised ambitions in the field of animal welfare by making a number of changes to legislation and by deciding to establish an animal-welfare agency.¹

The main part of the supervisory work is done by municipal animal-welfare inspectors. County veterinary officers at the county administrative boards are in charge of co-ordinating animal-welfare work in their respective counties. The Swedish Board of Agriculture is the central supervisory authority and the employer of approximately 300 district veterinary officers, who have a duty to report any shortcomings in animal welfare which they may discover. The Swedish National Food Administration employs approximately 70 veterinarians as veterinary meat-inspectors, who carry out their work at slaughterhouses. Besides inspecting meat, they also have a duty to take action if animals are maltreated at slaughterhouses. On 1 January 2004, the Swedish Animal Welfare Agency will take over central responsibility for ensuring compliance with the Animal Welfare Act. In order for the supervision of animals to work effectively, all of the actors just mentioned must assume their respective responsibilities and co-operate.

¹ Government Bill 2001/02:189, Committee Report 2002/03:MJU5, Riksdag Written Communication 2002/03:98.

Overall assessment of the SNAO

The overall assessment of the SNAO is that animal-welfare work has been strengthened and enhanced since the early 1990s. Legislative changes have led to stricter demands being placed on animal owners. The total resources allocated to local supervision have increased, and the number of inspections carried out has risen slightly. However, there remain shortcomings in the workings of the supervision of animal welfare. Better planning and more frequent performance of supervisory activities would greatly help to improve work on animal welfare.

The shortcomings identified by the audit largely concern the extent and design of the support provided and monitoring performed by the Swedish Board of Agriculture in relation to regional and local animal-welfare work. There is great variation among municipalities in the frequency of supervisory activities, which means that there are large differences in quality among municipalities and that animal owners are not treated equally. Despite this, however, the action taken by the Swedish Board of Agriculture in relation to many issues of supervision has been timid.

Further, there is room for development of co-operation among the actors involved in the system, which is a prerequisite for the legislator's intentions to be translated into reality. The creation of a new central animal-welfare agency adds yet another actor to the animal-welfare system. This will entail an even stronger requirement to bring about co-ordination and co-operation among all actors concerned.

The SNAO's assessment is that the new Swedish Animal Welfare Agency has the potential to improve the support provided to supervision and the monitoring of supervision in Sweden. However, the new agency will not be able to remedy all existing shortcomings on its own. Other measures that must be taken include making more efficient use of resources and allocating more resources at the local level.

The direction exercised by the Swedish Board of Agriculture in the field of animal welfare has been inadequate

The SNAO's assessment of the Swedish Board of Agriculture in its capacity as the agency in charge of animal welfare is that the Board has failed to be sufficiently active. It has failed to exercise adequate direction over animal-welfare work in Sweden and to monitor such work in an adequate manner. This has forced individual inspectors and veterinarians to act on their own initiative, with inadequate support from their employers and from central-government agencies.

The Board failed for a long time to present clear requirements as to what characterises good supervisory work. For instance, it took the Board twelve years to produce General Advice for municipalities on how they should conduct their supervisory work. The Board has also failed adequately to monitor the functioning of activities at the municipal level. Moreover, it has failed to provide county veterinary officers with information enabling them to give satisfactory feedback to individual municipalities. As a consequence, it is not possible to explain to individual municipalities what requirements their supervision should meet.

Despite being the employer of the district veterinary officers, the Board has failed to give them training and to make substantial use of them as a resource in work on animal welfare.

The Board delegates a great deal of its central animal-welfare work and responsibility for it to county veterinary officers. Even though the Board is aware that the county veterinary officers have inadequate resources, they are still expected to carry out a large number of duties. According to the SNAO's assessment, the responsibilities and duties of the county veterinary officers have not always been proportional to the resources allocated to them in their respective counties.

The role of the Swedish National Food Administration remains weak

The Swedish Board of Agriculture issues regulations relating to animal-welfare work, while the Swedish National Food Administration is the employer of the veterinary meat-inspectors, whose responsibilities include food inspections at slaughterhouses.

As a consequence of this division of central responsibility between two government agencies, veterinary meat-inspectors have received inadequate support in their work relating to the supervision of animal welfare at slaughterhouses. Before 2002, when veterinary meat-inspectors were given a duty to report the maltreatment of animals, each of them had to decide on his or her own what requirements should be placed on animal welfare at a slaughterhouse. According to just over half of them, their new duty to report has made them more likely to devote more work to animal welfare at slaughterhouses.

The SNAO notes that the unclear situation which used to prevail in relation to responsibility for the supervision of animal welfare at slaughterhouses has improved. Through a change to the Animal Welfare Ordinance (SFS 1988:539), the veterinary meat-inspectors of the Swedish National Food Administration have been given, from 1 July 2003, the authority to prohibit slaughter or take other measures. As the central government agency respon-

sible, the Swedish Board of Agriculture has also been given the right to issue additional regulations relating to the duties of veterinary meat-inspectors from the point of view of animal welfare.

Municipalities have become better at keeping records and planning supervisory activities

Municipalities have become better both at keeping records and at planning supervisory activities. Today, nine out of ten municipalities have supervision records. This represents an increase on 1991, when seven out of ten did so. There has also been an increase in the number of municipalities stating that they carry out planned supervisory activities. In 1991, six out of ten municipalities stated that they carried out planned supervisory activities, whereas nine out of ten carried out planned supervisory activities in 2002. This means that approximately 30 municipalities still do not carry out any planned supervision.

However, the Swedish Board of Agriculture does not at present have any overall knowledge which could be used to monitor animal welfare, for instance about the total number of supervised entities in Sweden.

According to the Government's proposal, the Swedish Animal Welfare Agency will establish central records for all of Sweden. In order for such records to be kept up to date, efforts will also have to be undertaken by municipal inspectors, since it is probably municipalities which have the most reliable data on the number of supervised entities.

Resources allocated to regional and local animal-welfare work vary across Sweden

The resources allocated to animal-welfare supervision in municipalities vary. The number of supervised entities – that is, the number of livestock buildings to be inspected by the municipality – does not determine the resources allocated to animal-welfare work by individual municipalities. Overall, the resources devoted to such work, in particular at the local level, have increased in recent years. However, all actors involved in animal welfare consider that there is still a need for greater resources at the local level.

The SNAO also notes that the resources of county veterinary officers have hardly been on a level with the duties that the Government and the Swedish Board of Agriculture have given them.

However, the resources available at the central-government level will increase through the establishment of the Swedish Animal Welfare Agency. The number of person-years to be worked at the new Agency has been estimated at 30, compared with the approximately 15 person-years which are at present devoted to the relevant tasks at the Swedish Board of Agriculture. Since most of the actors involved in the system are of the opinion that resources allocated to animal welfare are needed the most in municipalities and at county administrative boards, the SNAO considers it important for the new Agency to ensure that operations in support of county administrative boards and municipalities are strengthened.

Supervisory fees vary among municipalities

The development of supervision requires an increase in resources, particularly at the local level. Under the Animal Welfare Ordinance, municipalities are entitled to charge animal owners a fee for supervisory visits. Four per cent of municipalities state that their supervisory activities are entirely financed by such fees. However, more than half of municipalities state that half or less of the cost of their supervisory activities is covered by such fees. It follows from this that more municipalities could finance a larger part of their supervisory activities by income from fees, thus creating room for an increase in supervisory resources.

Varying frequency of supervision

The number of inspections performed per supervised entity varies greatly among municipalities. The average number for all Swedish municipalities, however, has long been at more or less the same level. Even though the resources allocated to the supervision of animal welfare at the municipal level have increased since 1998, the number of inspections performed has not increased appreciably. This could be interpreted to mean that the resources added have been used for purposes other than inspections. The weak rise in the number of supervised entities visited which was observed in 2002 can be seen either as a temporary rise or as an indication that increases in resources are beginning to have an impact in terms of planned supervision.

The SNAO's assessment is that development towards regular and recurrent supervision has been slow and that the objectives stated in the General Advice published by the Swedish Board of Agriculture are still far from being met.

The introduction of the duty to report must be followed up by information and training

Until 2002, district veterinary officers were the only group of veterinarians who had a duty to report the maltreatment of animals. Three out of four district veterinary officers make formal complaints against animal owners at least once a month. This adds up to an annual total of between 3,000 and 5,000 formal complaints. If an animal owner fails to address a formal complaint, a report is to be filed with the municipal inspector. In 2002, district veterinary officers filed approximately 400 such reports. The fact that these reports are so few in relation to the frequency with which formal complaints are made against animal owners shows that reports are rarely used by district veterinary officers.

Veterinary meat-inspectors did not have a duty to report the maltreatment of animals before 2002. Moreover, individual veterinary meat-inspectors have had no support in the form of regulations or other guidance either from the Swedish Board of Agriculture or from the Swedish National Food Administration. As a consequence, the assessments of animal welfare made at slaughterhouses have varied depending on the individual veterinary meat-inspector. However, it is reasonable to assume that conditions have improved through the introduction of the duty to report maltreatment in 2002 and the authority to close slaughterhouses for reasons of animal welfare from 1 July 2003.

The SNAO's assessment is that veterinarians' duty to report maltreatment must be supported by information and by training in how and when this duty should be exercised. In fact, most district veterinary officers and veterinary meat-inspectors express a wish for further training in how they should act in matters of animal welfare. It is reasonable to assume that inadequate knowledge among district veterinary officers and veterinary meat-inspectors has made them less likely to report animal owners who have violated the provisions of the Animal Welfare Act.

Increasing knowledge among municipal inspectors

In 1996, 35 per cent of municipalities were of the opinion that their inspectors had sufficient knowledge to perform their task well. In 2002, 60 per cent of municipal inspectors thought that they had sufficient knowledge. In other words, there is still a fair amount of room to raise the level of knowledge among municipal inspectors. As regards training, 54 per cent of municipal inspectors have taken courses at the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences at Skara while 8 per cent have never participated in any further training.

The SNAO notes that municipal inspectors have better skills than they used to, even though there is still room to raise the overall skills-level of the group.

Inadequate skills and accessibility at the central level

There is a great deal of experience within the central organisation of the Swedish Board of Agriculture when it comes to supporting the assessment by county administrative boards of plans for livestock buildings. However, the Board is felt to be weaker when it comes to providing advice and support to county veterinary officers and municipal inspectors. The criticism which has been levelled at the Board relates both to skills and to accessibility. It is reasonable to assume that this support has been affected by the high turnover of staff and by the fact that qualified officials have worked on other matters as well, not least ones related to the European Union. Indeed, following the criticism it has received, the Board has reviewed its support functions.

The SNAO finds that the future Swedish Animal Welfare Agency should consider, already from the start of its operations, how it may achieve good accessibility and what mix of veterinary knowledge and animal-welfare training will be required in its supportive work.

Room for improvement of co-operation and support

The Animal Welfare Act is a framework law, and its enforcement is to be ensured by public authorities at the local, regional and central levels. For activities in the field of animal welfare to work in line with the legislator's intentions, there is a need for co-operation among the various actors involved. It is not enough for one of the links of the chain to function in a satisfactory manner – all of the actors are necessary for animal-welfare work to be adequate.

The county administrative boards have had an intermediate position with a great deal of responsibility and small resources for a large number of duties, at the same time as county veterinary officers have been given inadequate support and unclear directives for their work.

According to the inspectors and veterinarians, county administrative boards have high credibility in regional and local co-operation. Municipal inspectors in particular, but district veterinary officers as well, emphasise the importance of county administrative boards for work on animal welfare. The Swedish Board of Agriculture is not considered to be as important.

The SNAO also considers it vital to develop co-operation between municipal inspectors and the two groups of veterinarians – district veterinary officers and veterinary meat-inspectors – who can provide municipal inspectors with important information about where problems in animal welfare are to be found. In fact, both groups of veterinarians consider that municipal inspectors have an important role to play in work on animal welfare.

The support provided by county administrative boards to municipal inspectors has mainly taken the form of advice and training – direct visits to municipalities in order to influence them have taken place only to a minor extent. Activities to support, co-ordinate, train and supervise veterinarians have been carried out to a limited extent.

The county veterinary officers and building consultants of the county administrative boards have a great deal of experience and knowledge in their respective fields. Because of this, they demand qualified support from the Swedish Board of Agriculture. However, they consider themselves to have received that only to a limited extent.

Difficult situations

Animal-welfare inspectors often encounter difficult situations in their work. Just over eight out of ten inspectors emphasise this aspect. Common problems include aggressive animal owners, animal owners with social problems and the taking in charge of severely maltreated animals. In other words, there may be other problems behind those relating to animal welfare, such as personal problems in the lives of the animal owners responsible. In this respect, inspectors have a problem of occupational safety and health which they share with similar groups such as police officers and social workers.

The recommendations of SNAO

The SNAO makes a number of recommendations, addressed to the Swedish Board of Agriculture and other bodies. The Board, in its capacity as the employer of the district veterinary officers, should give them more explicit support in tasks relating to animal welfare. A series of recommendations are also addressed to the new Swedish Animal Welfare Agency relating to the potential for development of the support provided for the supervisory activities carried out by municipalities and county administrative boards.