

Summary:

A good work environment for all – central government initiatives in the work environment area

Audit background

Work can promote health, provide stimulation and social affiliation. But it can also lead to negative consequences in the form of occupational injuries. Occupational injuries affect not only the individual but entail costs to society in the form of production loss, sickness and occupational injury insurance costs as well as costs of medical care and rehabilitation.

Seen over a longer period, there are fewer deaths and serious injuries at work, but in recent years there has been an increase in reported occupational diseases with social or organisational causes. The overall objective of work environment policy is that it should contribute to a work environment that guards against ill health and accidents, and prevents people being excluded from work, while taking account of people's different circumstances and promotes the development of both individuals and the organisation.

In the Swedish model for work environment, employers have the main responsibility for the work environment and for ensuring that efforts towards a good work environment are made in cooperation with employees. Safety representatives acting for the employees must report to the employer or ultimately to the Swedish Work Environment Authority if the employer does not fulfil its work environment responsibility.

The central government policy instruments in the work environment area are mainly legislation, information and supervision. The Swedish Work Environment Authority is the administrative authority in charge of work environment issues. The Work Environment Authority is an expert agency with great freedom to determine how the assignment should be fulfilled. After an appropriation decrease in 2007–2008, appropriations to the Work Environment Authority increased in recent years, and in February 2016 the Government launched a new work environment strategy. The strategy specifies three priority areas; zero tolerance for fatal accidents and prevention of

occupational accidents, a sustainable working life and psycho-social work environment. There is currently no agency charged with evaluating work environment policy and there are few analyses of central government initiatives to improve the work environment.

Purpose of the audit

The Swedish NAO has examined whether central government initiatives contribute effectively to achieving a good work environment. The audit is based on the following overall questions:

- Has the Government created appropriate conditions to enable the Swedish Work Environment Authority to conduct its activities effectively?
- Do work environment statistics and their analysis provide a reliable picture of the work environment and its development?
- Are the Work Environment Authority's regulations regularly adapted to changes in the work environment?
- Is the Work Environment Authority's information and communication on work environment work adapted to the needs of employers and employees?
- Can supervision by the Work Environment Authority be conducted more effectively?

Audit findings

Clearer Government ambitions but the Work Environment's development work risks displacement

In the work environment strategy determined by the Government in 2016 the Work Environment Authority was tasked with many assignments. Despite good intentions, there is a risk that the large number of detailed assignments will take resources from necessary development work at the Work Environment Authority. To achieve improvements in the three priority areas specified in the strategy it is necessary to continue development of work environment statistics, regulations, information and supervision. Currently there is no regular evaluation of work environment policy and its effects. The Swedish NAO is therefore positive to the ongoing inquiry into setting up a national centre for knowledge and evaluation of the work environment and work environment policy.

The Swedish National Audit Office recommends that the Government:

- Ensures that the Work Environment Authority's development work is not displaced and that it is in line with the priorities specified in the Government's work environment strategy.

Difficult to gain a good picture work environment development

To give decision-makers and the public a fair view of work environment development there must be access to relevant and comprehensive statistics in the area. At present occupational injury reports and responses to questionnaires on the work environment and work-related complaints are the main source of indicators of Swedish work environment development. An uncertain link between reported and actual occupational injuries and difficulties in measuring self-experienced work environment makes it difficult to know what the major work environment problems are, how they change over time and how many are affected. Due to the challenges associated with measurement of work environment development great caution is required in interpreting the statistics in the area. The Work Environment Authority is currently developing statistics to bring about new ways of describing work environment development. The audit shows that continued initiatives are necessary to improve the statistics.

The Swedish NAO recommends that the Swedish Work Environment Authority:

- develops work environment statistics to better fulfil the quality requirements concerning consistency between estimates and unknown values as well as comparability between groups and time periods that apply to official statistics.

Regular adaptation of the Swedish Work Environment Authority's regulations to changes in the labour market and a major review are under way

There are at present about eighty regulations that in various respects regulate the work environment in Swedish workplaces. From having been specific to different industries, the regulations have been developed to apply more generally across sectors. The regulations are also more focused on describing functions instead of specifying detailed requirements. This in turn makes higher demands on the Work Environment Authority's supplementary information to employers. The Work Environment Authority has developed the information to employers with guidelines and sector-specific information.

The Work Environment Authority works continually to renew the regulations and a major review of them is also under way. Work environment inspectors would like to see improved information when new regulations are introduced.

The Swedish National Audit Office recommends that the Swedish Work Environment Authority:

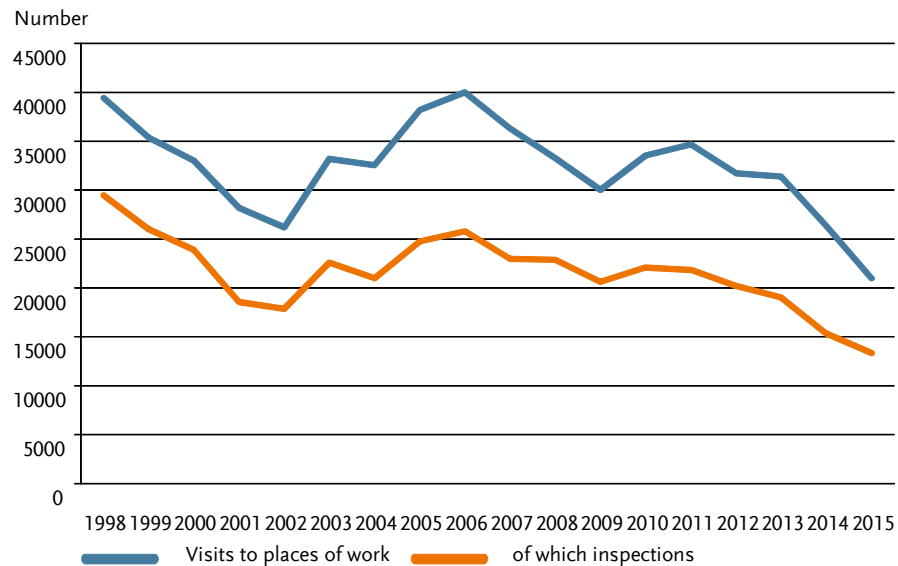
- improves information to the inspectors when introducing new and amended regulations.

Great potential in improved information to employers and employees

The Work Environment Authority has an important remit to inform employers and employees about the rules that apply to the work environment. Access to information and support is particularly important in small companies, which often do not have a dedicated personnel and work environment function. In recent years the Work Environment Authority has developed its information activities and set up a joint answerline service to handle incoming questions. However, the answerline service has had long response times and it takes on average six days to receive a reply to an email message. The Work Environment Authority will therefore recruit new employees for the answerline service in 2016.

Fewer inspections and time-consuming projects

Supervision is the Work Environment Authority's most resource-intensive activity and the Government gives it high priority. The work environment inspectors receive extensive internal training and many have very long experience of the profession. In recent years the Work Environment Authority has changed the focus of its supervision. National projects focusing on specific sectors or particular work environment problems have become an increasingly large element of supervisory activities. At the same time the number of visits to workplaces has decreased by a third since 2011. The decrease has several probable reasons; reorganisation of the Authority and recruitment, longer planning time for supervision and individual visits being more resource-intensive.

Figure 1 Number of visits and inspections

Source: Swedish Work Environment Authority, 2016

It is not possible to express an opinion on whether the effect of supervision has been impacted solely on the basis of reduced number of visits. The concentration on national projects may have had positive effects on the work environment in that focus on specific problems increases and experiences are spread to more than the workplaces inspected. The audit showed, however, that the national projects are sometimes deficient in their implementation and they have displaced the monitoring of tips and regionally initiated supervision. The Work Environment Authority intends to reduce the number of national projects and concentrate more on monitoring tips and unplanned events in the coming year.

The Work Environment Authority's system for selection of workplaces with work environment deficiencies is seldom used in practice by the inspectors and the Authority is therefore reviewing how the system can be improved. The tips and reports received by the Authority are not registered in a way that makes it possible to see whether a workplace has been the subject of several reports on deficient work environment over time. The audit also shows that during inspections the inspectors sometimes suspect violations or irregularities that affect other agencies' areas of supervision. At present there are no procedures for how the inspectors should contact the other agency when there are such suspicions but the Work Environment Authority is working on the matter.

The Swedish National Audit Office recommends that the Swedish Work Environment Authority:

- improve planning and implementation of the national projects to create conditions for carrying out more inspections.
- develop procedures to process the tips and reports received by the Authority so as to facilitate the setting of priorities between more or less serious cases and to be better able to use tips as a basis for selecting workplaces to inspect.
- develop procedures for how inspectors should act if they suspect irregularities affecting another agency's area of supervision.