

RiR 2004:19

Who controls the electronic administration?

Summary

Direction and purpose of the audit

Riksrevisionen (the Swedish National Audit Office, SNAO) has audited the work done by the Government and public agencies in Sweden to introduce electronic administrative processes. Since the mid-1990s, the Government has in a number of government bills, action programmes and official communications to the Riksdag presented plans to renew the central government administration. This would be done primarily through the introduction of electronic administration, aimed at providing better service to citizens and businesses, more efficient departments and agencies, and a high degree of legal security. The Government describes this reform as follows: *“From the perspective of individual citizens and businesses, the public administration is now undergoing its most radical change in modern times”*.

The question the audit set out to answer was: How well is the Government’s control functioning to achieve the objectives of the electronic administration?

The audit is based on ten case studies, comprising both departments and public agencies. This selection of case studies has been made in order to throw light upon the Government’s control of various types of agencies. In all, more than half the Government Offices’ departmental groups are affected. Government control involved in implementing the reform has been analysed, as well as the interaction on these questions between the Riksdag and the Government. A consequence analysis of the 2003 amendments to the Public Administration Act, with respect to the agencies’ handling of e-mail, has also been carried out.

The conclusions of SNAO

SNAO’s audit shows that the reform has had limited success in all the departments and agencies audited. There are serious shortcomings in the basis for the introduction of electronic administration, which have adversely affected citizens and businesses as well as the agencies themselves.

Few advanced services offered

The majority of agencies have gone in for simple services such as posting information on their websites. Citizens and businesses have

not had access to the advanced services – with some exceptions – that would palpably improve the service of the central government administration. One important reason for this, in SNAO's view, is that the aim of providing better service to citizens was not the prime motive when the agencies were developing their electronic services. Instead, the agencies prioritised services aimed at making them more cost-effective. This means that e-services, where the agency bears the cost while others get the benefit, were not developed to a sufficient extent. Surveys also show that the range of electronic services provided by public agencies has stagnated.

Legal security problems associated with e-mail

SNAO considers that important legal security problems arise from the methods used by the agencies to handle electronic communication with citizens and businesses. Citizens and businesses cannot be sure that their e-mail messages get through to the agencies and are then handled satisfactorily and securely. The consequence may be a loss of legal rights for citizens and businesses. At the same time, SNAO notes that the agencies have found themselves having to deal with a considerably heavier workload in handling the large amounts of unsolicited e-mail advertising (spam) that they receive.

More effective control wanted

The Government has applied a very moderate degree of formal management by objectives and results to the individual agencies' introduction of electronic administration, thus giving the agencies the freedom of action to develop their e-administration themselves. The Government has instead adopted instruments of control that are chiefly of a supportive nature, inter alia with the help of the Swedish Agency for Public Management. The audit shows that this control has had limited success in the agencies concerned. Moreover, the Government has not done enough to establish the conditions necessary to enable the agencies to develop electronic services. There are no agency-specific objectives and reporting requirements, which is what the agencies would like to see. The work of removing legal impediments to the introduction of e-services has also progressed very slowly, in SNAO's opinion.

Limited information to the Riksdag

The Government has provided information to the Riksdag on its objectives for the e-administration and its plans of action and activities to realise those objectives. However, SNAO considers that the Riksdag has received very limited information from the Government with regard to the actual development of the e-administration. No information has been given on how well the reform's objectives are being met, what the potential is for better service and greater cost-effectiveness, what effects and results have been achieved to date, the costs of the reform, and an assessment of the most significant risks and how they should be dealt with.

The recommendations of SNAO

SNAO believes that there is a risk of considerable negative consequences for the development of the electronic administration unless action is taken to tackle the problems and impediments outlined above. Recently, the Government has taken a number of measures to develop its control of the electronic administration by, for example, setting up the Government Interoperability Board. In SNAO's opinion these measures are, notwithstanding, insufficient to solve the problems that threaten the reform and to realise the reform's potential. SNAO is therefore recommending that the Government consider taking the appropriate action to work more systematically on the introduction of the electronic administration. Accordingly, SNAO is making the following recommendations:

The Government should state what is expected of public agencies

In SNAO's opinion, joint action is required within the Government Offices to improve the government departments' dialogue on objectives and results with the individual agencies concerning development of the electronic administration. As a basis for such action the Government should make clearer its view as to which electronic services should be prioritised, having regard for society's needs and the potential for better service and greater cost-effectiveness. The objectives and timetables for action should be adapted to the differing assumptions of the agencies concerned and be established in the Government Offices' dialogue with the agencies, as well as requirements for the agencies' own development work. The purpose should be to facilitate the respective agencies' prioritisations and clarify what is expected of them, and to provide a basis for fully adequate reporting to the Riksdag.

Establish better legal prerequisites

Clear conditions should be established for the work done by the agencies to implement the electronic administration. This applies above all to the legal prerequisites and common guidelines for handling e-mail and digital archiving. Furthermore, the Government should hasten the work of removing as far as possible all existing legal impediments to the introduction of e-services. The Government should also take the initiative to develop the supplementary regulations needed to provide citizens and businesses with legally secure electronic communication with the administration. The possibilities of extending the agencies' service obligation under the Public Administration Act to answering enquiries by e-mail and receiving attachments in appropriate formats and sizes should also be studied.

Information to the Riksdag can be improved

The introduction of the electronic administration has brought with it fundamental changes in the relations between citizens and businesses on the one hand and the public administration on the other. The

relations between different parts of the administration have also been affected. There is in other words a radical change taking place in Swedish central government administration. SNAO considers therefore that there is cause for the Government to supplement the information given to the Riksdag on the direction and ambitions of the reform with clearer information as to how the reform work is developing and setting out the concrete results that have been achieved.