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## The Swedish Schools Inspectorate's follow-up of shortcomings in schools

– an important work that can be improved

### Background and reasons

The Swedish Schools Inspectorate works to ensure that all children, pupils and adult learners have access to an equivalent education, by way of scrutinizing education providers and schools. The Swedish Schools Inspectorate oversees a large number of education providers and schools each year, and in many cases the providers are imposed, with or without penalties, to address identified shortcomings within deadlines determined by the Schools Inspectorate.

The follow-up of supervisory decisions by the Swedish Schools Inspectorate is crucial for ensuring that the education providers take adequate remedial measures and, ultimately, that the authority's work actually leads to school improvement. If the follow-up is flawed, the supervision may not be effective.

In a review from 2013, the National Audit Office found that a large proportion of inspectors, principals and education providers considered that the follow-up of supervisory decisions by the Swedish Schools Inspectorate failed to ensure that deficiencies were rectified. In the same year, the Swedish Schools Inspectorate initiated an effort to develop its follow-up of supervisory decisions. Against this background, it is important, in the view of the National Audit Office, to examine how the Swedish Schools Inspectorate's follow-up of supervisory decisions has developed and operates today.

## Purpose

The overall aim of the National Audit Office's review is to assess whether the follow-up of supervisory decisions by the Swedish Schools Inspectorate is carried out effectively. As a basis for this assessment, the review answers the following questions:

1. Does the follow-up verify that the deficiencies have been remedied?
2. Is the follow-up conducted and reported in a transparent manner?
3. Is the follow-up done urgently?
4. Is the follow-up carried out in an equivalent manner?

## Results of the review

The overall conclusion of the National Audit Office is that there are shortcomings in the follow-up of supervisory decisions by the Swedish Schools Inspectorate. Appropriate follow-up should check that the identified shortcomings are rectified and eliminated before cases are closed. The follow-up should also be transparent, prompt and equivalent. In this context, transparent means that the grounds upon which decisions are made should be clear to an external reader; prompt means that the time between the supervisory decisions and the follow-up decisions should not be longer than necessary; and equivalent means that it should not matter to an education provider which department carries out the follow-up.

Although there are shortcomings in all audited aspects of the follow-up, it should also be noted that the National Audit Office has seen thorough and well-conducted follow-ups in relation to whether deficiencies have been remedied and to transparency and urgency in the processing.

The follow-up does not always check whether the deficiencies are remedied

The Swedish Schools Inspectorate closes many cases solely on the basis of a written report, even though it may be difficult to determine whether a deficiency has actually been remedied. The written reports of the education providers seldom account for the results of the measures taken, and the Swedish Schools Inspectorate rarely collect such information when follow-up visits are not carried out. One of the most common shortcomings identified by the Swedish Schools Inspectorate relates to conditions for learning and security. In more than half of these cases, the Swedish Schools Inspectorate does not make a follow-up visit, but closes the case on basis of the written report.

### There is often a lack of transparency when cases are closed

In many cases, the Swedish Schools Inspectorate does not justify the decision to close a follow-up matter, and it is often unclear how the assessment that the deficiencies have been remedied was made. Since it is also unusual for the education provider to report the results of the measures taken, it is often difficult for a third party to understand the grounds on which a case has been closed. Within the Swedish Schools Inspectorate there is no consensus regarding how explanatory statements shall be written in decisions to close matters.

### The follow-up is usually carried out promptly, but there are too many exceptions

According to the Swedish Schools Inspectorate's guidelines, follow-up decisions should not be taken based on information that is older than three months. However, this is still done in about one third of the cases where statistics are available. In some cases it takes a very long time from the time when a report is submitted until the Swedish Schools Inspectorate makes a decision. Initial inspections are scheduled at an early stage and are planned in the inspectors' calendars. However, few units have a systematic model to schedule the follow-up, instead they are carried out when time is available aside from everything else that the inspectors must handle.

### Unjustified variations between the Swedish Schools Inspectorate's departments

Regular supervision and follow-up of supervisory decisions are carried out by all regional departments of the Swedish Schools Inspectorate. The National Audit Office concludes that there is a lack of equivalence between departments. There are differences as to how ambitious the departments are in relation to planning and arranging their follow-ups, and how often the inspectors go on follow-up visits. Overall, these factors can affect the outcome of a follow-up. In addition, there are major differences in processing times and the extent to which decisions to close cases are explained.

## Recommendations

Based on its findings and conclusions, the Swedish National Audit Office makes the following recommendations:

- The Swedish Schools Inspectorate should make a greater effort to ensure that follow-up matters are not closed until deficiencies are remedied, by
  - reviewing the allocation of resources and priorities within the authority
  - achieving a consensus within the organisation on the types of cases that should always be followed up with visits
  - requiring information on the results achieved when follow-up visits are not carried out.
- The Swedish Schools Inspectorate should ensure transparency by making clear that all decisions must include explanatory statements.
- The Swedish Schools Inspectorate should ensure that follow-ups are implemented expeditiously by systematically scheduling them as a part of the supervisory activities.
- The Swedish Schools Inspectorate should ensure greater equivalence in the follow-up by
  - regularly comparing and analysing the follow-up of supervisory decisions by the departments
  - ensuring that the departments work more uniformly in important respects.