



Summary

Date: 2022-11-14

Reference number: 3.1.1-2021-0819

RiR 2022:26

Harassment, threats and violence

– preventive measures and response at government agencies

Summary

Harassment, threats and violence against central government employees risk leading to democratic principles being undermined because employees avoid tasks or do not make fair decisions. Efforts to combat harassment, threats and violence against central government employees thus aim to both create a safe and secure work environment and ensure trust in central government activities by reducing the risk of affecting employees' performance of their duties.

The overall assessment of the Swedish National Audit Office (Swedish NAO) is that many aspects of the government agencies' and the Government's efforts to prevent and address harassment, threats and violence against central government employees are effective. Government agencies where employees run a high risk of being subjected to harassment, threats and violence, in general, have measures in place to prevent and to deal with incidents. This includes both agencies where it is a common occurrence and agencies that have experienced a rise in harassment and threats in connection with external changes or an altered agency remit. The Government has further identified harassment and threats against central government employees as a critical area and has also taken measures in the form of legislation and commissions of inquiry.

However, the Swedish NAO considers that better support is needed for agencies where harassment, threats and violence are more uncommon, but where such phenomena can occur in connection with external changes or changes to the government agencies' activities. Government agencies may lack the resources or internal competence to systematically address the risks.

Harassment, threats and violence against central government employees are unevenly distributed

More than half of the government agencies state that their employees have been subjected to harassment a few times a year or more. Some government agencies and authorities are significantly more at risk, such as the courts, higher education institutions, county administrative boards and agencies that investigate crime, exercise supervision or decide on permits, compensation or benefits. Harassment and threats are common, particularly perpetrated by people with querulous behaviour, people who are emotional or people who find themselves in a desperate situation. Some authorities experience more serious or more systematic harassment and threats, by both private individuals and persons with links to extremist groups or crime. This is less common, but may also be more difficult for government agencies to tackle.

Vulnerable government agencies have good working practices for prevention and management

The audit shows that government agencies where employees run a high risk of being subjected to harassment, threats and violence in general have taken measures to prevent and manage these phenomena. The Government has also identified harassment and threats against central government employees as a critical area and has also taken measures in the form of legislation and commissions of inquiry.

However, the audit also identifies shortcomings and difficulties. Preventive and follow-up measures may be less systematic at small government agencies. There are also challenges in ensuring that procedures are carried out and adhered to as intended. Furthermore, there are incidents that are not reported – mainly cases of harassment at major government agencies at risk. Police reports of incidents are often dismissed and there are few convictions.

A lack of knowledge and support for agencies with changing conditions

The available knowledge base and support, in the form of handbooks and digital training, focus primarily on government agencies with frequent citizen contacts. The audit shows that there is a lack of knowledge and support for government

agencies that experience a sudden increase in harassment and threats. This might include certain cases or matters that attract attention, when there are external changes, or when the agency's remit changes. Such a sudden surge puts a great strain on the government agency's employees and activities, since resources must then be set aside to tackle new, unexpected situations.

The Swedish NAO's recommendations

The audit shows that many government agencies have procedures in place to prevent and deal with commonplace incidents. This is particularly the case at agencies with frequent citizen and company contacts. Our recommendations aim to reinforce and supplement these efforts to strengthen the protection of public employees for all types of activities and incidents.

The Swedish NAO assesses that support is needed for agencies without sufficient resources to build a systematic preventive effort or to be able to manage various incidents that may occur. The support needs to be practical and specific, be directly accessible and weigh in all the important perspectives, such as work environment, safety, governance and control.

The Swedish NAO therefore recommends that the Government

- task an appropriate government agency with setting up a function with a mandate to support government agencies with practical advice and tools – primarily agencies that lack experience of and resources for dealing with harassment, threats and violence
- consider whether the function can also offer support to municipalities and regions
- task an appropriate government agency with establishing a knowledge base that documents experiences from and can provide support to small agencies and agencies with changing operational conditions
- consider amendments to the legislation that enable agencies to reduce the vulnerability of individual decision-makers or administrators as needed, but without jeopardising citizens' fundamental right to access information.