



## Summary:

# Access to Statistics Sweden's register data – A matter of priorities

## Summary and recommendations

The main task of Statistics Sweden is to develop, compile and disseminate national statistics. Statistics Sweden is to undertake assignments for other agencies and applicants, to the extent resources allow, and in that context give priority to assignments concerning official statistics. One of these assignments is to make register data available for research and statistical purposes. Good access to Statistics Sweden's register data is a requirement to enable researchers and agencies to describe and analyse social changes over time and in different groups.

Statistics Sweden plays a double role in making register data accessible. On the one hand the agency, via its contract activities, must contribute to the benefit that can be achieved through effective utilisation of register data, on the other it must protect the interests of individuals and secure future collection of data.

Statistics Sweden has been criticised for inadequate accessibility to its register data, both by government inquiries and by those applying for access to register data. In recent years Statistics Sweden has taken measures to improve accessibility.

## Purpose of the audit, questions and implementation

The purpose of the audit is to provide an up-to-date picture of accessibility to Statistics Sweden's register data and to investigate what the Government and Statistics Sweden can do to ensure good accessibility while retaining protection of individuals' privacy.

The following questions guided the audit:

- To what extent are there problems in accessibility to Statistics Sweden's register data?
- Can Statistics Sweden organise the release process in a way that improves accessibility to its register data?

- Can the Government, by means of changing its governance, give Statistics Sweden better conditions for creating good accessibility to its register data?

Several different methods were used to answer the audit questions. To obtain an up-to-date and representative picture of the applicants' perception of accessibility to Statistics Sweden's register data a questionnaire was sent out in autumn 2016. The audit also builds on an analysis of interviews with persons applying for access to register data, officials at Statistics Sweden, members of the Statistics Sweden management, and officials at the Swedish Research Council, who work with the agency's register research assignments. Officials at the Government Offices replied to written questions. Appropriation directions, budget bills, government inquiries, Statistics Sweden's internal studies, etc. were also analysed as part of the audit.

## Audit findings

The audit shows that there are deficiencies in accessibility to Statistics Sweden's register data. If the present situation is to be changed, Statistics Sweden needs to give priority to improving the effectiveness of processing register data orders. To enable the agency to make necessary changes, the Government must give Statistics Sweden better prerequisites.

### *There are deficiencies in accessibility to Statistics Sweden's register data*

In the opinion of the NAO, good accessibility means that register data is accessible to applicants within a reasonable period, at a reasonable cost and that the data obtained must be possible to use for own processing. The questionnaire to applicants shows that there are problems with accessibility to register data. Delivery times are perceived to be the greatest accessibility problem. Applicants are generally satisfied with the case officers, who they perceive to be professional and service-minded.

### *Long delivery times*

About half of all applicants consider that the delivery time for ordered register data is unreasonably long, and half of them do not understand why it takes so long. The long delivery times also entail constraints on the applicants in implementing their planned analyses. Many applicants would like to see a more transparent release process where they can receive information on an ongoing basis about what is happening and when they can expect a particular stage in the process to be completed.

### *Unclear pricing*

As regards Statistics Sweden's pricing, the major problem is that it is difficult to understand the pricing system. Eight out of ten applicants do not fully understand Statistics Sweden's pricing. Sometimes the tenders only include the total cost, which is neither specified nor explained. Consequently, it is difficult for the applicants to know what they are paying for. The results of the questionnaire also show that the applicants' understanding of Statistics Sweden's pricing is important to how they view the order price.

### *Modified original orders*

Four out of ten applicants have had their orders modified and many consider that the consequence of this is that the work and analysis suffer. Modifying an order means that it is changed by one or more variables being removed or grouped at a more general level than first requested by the applicant. Modifications are made if for example the order contains sensitive information that cannot be released for reasons of privacy. The audit shows that the applicants find it difficult to understand Statistics Sweden's secrecy clearance process and the modifications made to the orders before delivery.

## **Increased support to the case officers could improve accessibility to Statistics Sweden's register data**

The Swedish NAO's examination of Statistics Sweden's release process shows that modernisation of administrative support and increased legal support to the case officers could make the processing of register data cases more effective. With a more effective release process the processing times could be cut and accessibility to Statistics Sweden's register data improved.

### *Need for administrative and legal support*

The case officers currently have no coherent administrative system to support the release process. Such a system has long been requested by the case officers, but for various reasons has never been implemented. A coherent administrative support system would be necessary to reconcile the various elements of preparation, make it possible to follow the case through the entire process and reduce the administrative burden on the case officers. At present there are separate systems for registration, case management and secrecy clearance.

The case officers believe that the agency cannot achieve increased accessibility to Statistics Sweden's register data unless access to legal support is improved. The legal questions in release cases are often complex and it is necessary to be able to cross check consequential damages issues on an ongoing basis with the agency's lawyers. The case officers are generally satisfied with the quality of responses from the Legal Secretariat, but consider that they take far too long. In addition, the case officers do not know when the lawyers will look at the case. Since the case officers are thus then not able to state how long the waiting period is expected to be, this may lead to strained relations with the applicants.

## **Clearer governance could increase accessibility to Statistics Sweden's register data**

The Swedish NAO's analysis shows that the financial target for Statistics Sweden's register contract activities, the agency's instructions as well as current legislation limits accessibility to the agency's register data. There is no simple solution to the problems, but through increased and long-term financing by the Government, Statistics Sweden would be given the conditions necessary for creating better accessibility to its register data.

### *Complex regulations*

The regulatory framework surrounding register data is complex and contributes to the extended release process and may be perceived as arbitrary. The Government has not proposed any overall changes to legislation for the Riksdag to consider. One reason is that there are several different laws that regulate how sensitive personal data may be processed for purposes of research and statistics. The uncertainty around the new EU General Data Protection Regulation may also have contributed to the difficulty in making any proposals that could solve some of the lack of clarity in the current regulations.

### *The knowledge perspective becomes subordinate*

Assisting researchers and others with register data does not have priority under Statistics Sweden's instructions. The fact that questions concerning register data take second place at Statistics Sweden limits accessibility. The Government has instructed the Swedish Research Council to improve accessibility and facilitate the use of register data in research. The initiatives developed by the Research Council as part of its remit need to be further developed and administered long-term to achieve their full potential.

### *A price worth paying*

It is more expensive to order register data from Statistics Sweden compared with ordering data from other agencies responsible for statistics. In addition, Statistics Sweden finds it difficult to manage pricing and its contract activities have generated systematic surpluses in recent years. This has been pointed out repeatedly, both in various internal reviews and in external reports and inquiries. The Swedish National Financial Management Authority has also investigated the possibilities of amending Statistics Sweden's economic targets in a background report to the 2012 Inquiry on Official Statistics.

## Recommendations

### The Government

In the latest research policy bills the Government has highlighted the importance of increasing register based research and the use of the Swedish registers. With a view to achieving this objective, the Swedish NAO suggests that the Government should consider the following measures:

- The Government should review the principle of full cost coverage for register data fees. The fees should be based on just covering direct costs of administration and processing of the orders. Such a measure has already been investigated by the Swedish National Financial Management Authority and would mean that Statistics Sweden would have similar conditions as other statistical agencies as regards pricing. The Government should therefore compensate Statistics Sweden through an increased appropriation, which would also make it possible to give higher priority to register data assignments.
- The Government should consider how to develop and administer the results of the Swedish Research Council's work to improve accessibility to register data for research purposes in the long term. In the context of this government assignment the Swedish Research Council has developed a metadata tool with information as to the type of data that can be found in the different registers. Increased use of this tool could mean considerable efficiency gains both for the research community and the agencies maintaining registers.

### Statistics Sweden

- Statistics Sweden should give priority to improving processing of orders of register data and ensuring transparency in the charging of fees.