

Address:
110 George Street
Edinburgh
EH2 4LH

Telephone:
0845 146 1010
Fax:
0845 146 1009

Website:
www.audit-scotland.gov.uk



Press release

Embargoed until 00.01 hours, Tuesday 17 June 2008

Midlothian Council -- ambitious vision but some way to go to fully demonstrate Best Value

In its first report on Best Value at Midlothian Council the Accounts Commission for Scotland says the council demonstrates effective engagement with communities and generally sound financial management but needs to do more before it is in a position fully to demonstrate Best Value and continuous improvement.

Accounts Commission Chair John Baillie said: "Midlothian Council has an ambitious vision based on its understanding of local needs and issues. We recognise the work the council is doing in building affordable homes and improving the quality of the school estate. However, the council has some way to go before it is in a position fully to demonstrate Best Value and continuous improvement. While many of the necessary processes are in place they need to be more effectively implemented and there should be clearer priorities."

The Accounts Commission finds that the council needs to ensure initiatives are completed and to deal with the areas where there are significant service deficiencies. These include housing management and homelessness services and also its standards of customer care. The Commission would also like to see the council improve some aspects of its people management and make sure that its priorities can be delivered on time. It also needs to ensure that effective processes to support continuous improvement are in place and used across all areas.

The Commission feels particular attention should be given to:

- Elected members and senior officers providing clearer focus on Best Value and support for continuous improvement
- Scrutiny arrangements consistently providing members with timely information about service performance
- Ensuring the competitiveness of its services, with the use of options appraisals and benchmarking and, where appropriate, market testing
- Considering how best to build managerial and professional capacity within the council.

John Baillie continued: "We look forward to receiving an improvement plan from the council with measurable and achievable outcomes."

For further information contact Fiona Deans at Audit Scotland tel: 0131 625 1651 or Anne McCubbin tel: 0131 625 1653.

Notes to Editors:

1. The report *The Audit of Best Value and Community Planning: Midlothian Council* was carried out between April 2007 and October 2007 on either side of the 2007 council elections.
2. The Accounts Commission for Scotland was set up in 1975. The Commission checks whether local authorities, fire and police boards spend public money properly and effectively.
3. Best Value is the duty placed on local authorities to demonstrate their on-going commitment to providing better services to local people.
4. The Audit of Best Value is undertaken by Audit Scotland on behalf of the Accounts Commission. It responds to the Local Government in Scotland Act 2003, which gave councils a new power to promote or improve the well-being of their area and the people living within it and responsibilities including:

- making arrangements which secure Best Value, defined as 'continuous improvement in the performance of the authority's functions, having regard to efficiency, effectiveness, economy and equal opportunities.
- discharging their duties in a way which contributes to sustainable development
- maintaining a community planning process
- making arrangements for reporting to the public on their performance
- meeting new rules relating to trading.

5. Key Features of the Audit are:

- The focus is on each council's performance over time rather than comparisons between councils. It takes account of differences in local priorities, constraints and opportunities and therefore league tables and scores are inappropriate.
- All 32 councils in Scotland will be audited on a rolling programme.
- Each audit results in a report to the Accounts Commission.
- A report is published after each individual audit.
- In most cases Key Findings from the Commission are published at the same time as the Report. However, the Commission also has the power to: Ask the Controller of Audit to carry out further investigations before reporting its findings; hold a hearing with council before reporting its findings; publish findings which include recommendations to the council and/or Scottish Ministers.
- The council's external auditor will monitor progress and report through an annual review. If the council has made insufficient progress, the Commission will be alerted and it may ask for further action to be taken.

A full press briefing on the process and aims of Best Value is available on Audit Scotland's website:

www.audit-scotland.gov.uk/accounts/pdfs/BestValuebriefingnote.pdf