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Press release

Embargoed until 00.01 hours, Friday 27 March 2009

Accounts Commission calls for urgent action to tackle serious weaknesses at Dumfries & Galloway Council

The Commission acknowledges positive aspects of performance but also highlights areas of concern and says it is essential that these are now addressed.

Today's findings follow the Accounts Commission's consideration of the audit report compiled by Audit Scotland. This is the first time this council has had a Best Value and Community Planning audit.

The Commission comments that the council provides a good lead in community planning and has a clear vision for the area, with a new focus being provided by the Single Outcome Agreement. Local area committees work well, a number of major projects have been delivered, and the council has sound traditional financial controls.

However, Chairman of the Accounts Commission, John Baillie, said:

"There are serious weaknesses at Dumfries and Galloway Council which would be of concern in any circumstances. They are even more concerning given the significant challenges facing the council. These make it essential that action is taken as a matter of urgency to move the council forward."

The Commission says it is particularly concerned by:

- Weakness in both political and managerial leadership. Political leadership over a number of years has not provided clear strategic direction. Senior managers have not provided clarity or co-ordination in the delivery of strategic objectives. Strategic planning and management is largely ineffective in practice.
- Service performance. This is mixed and overall the rate of service improvement is well below the Scottish average.
- Performance management. The council does not have effective performance management or a culture of continuous improvement.
- The lack of clarity about councillors' responsibilities for scrutinising performance, with little political leadership in performance management.
- Corporate arrangements for the effective and efficient management of the council's staff. These are not properly developed.

John Baillie continued:

"While the council has been aware for some time of its corporate weaknesses, little has been done to remedy them. At the end of 2008 the council announced planned retirements of senior staff. We urge the council to now focus on addressing the weaknesses identified and improving leadership and direction."

As is usual, the next step in the process is for the council to prepare an improvement plan. The Commission says that particular attention should be paid to -

- Improving the education and development of councillors to provide them with the tools to carry out their corporate and strategic responsibilities
- Making performance management effective and establishing a culture of continuous improvement
- Improving councillors' scrutiny of performance
- Increasing the pace of change in services and making them more efficient

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Notes to Editors:

1. 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.
2. Best Value is the duty placed on local authorities to demonstrate their on-going commitment to providing better services to local people.
3. 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.
4. 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.
 - All 32 councils in Scotland are audited.
 - 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 monitors progress and reports through an annual review. If the council has made insufficient progress, the Commission is 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