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Press release

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South Ayrshire Council must address its weaknesses and serious financial position

The Accounts Commission says that while leadership at South Ayrshire Council is showing improvement and some services perform well the council has weaknesses which pose significant risks and must be addressed.

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

The Commission notes improvements in leadership, as a result of recent senior appointments and more effective cross-party working amongst councillors. Joint working is producing some positive outcomes in disadvantaged neighbourhoods and some services, such as education and waste recycling, perform well. The council has also developed greater self-awareness of its weaknesses.

However, Chair of the Accounts Commission, John Baillie, said: "We are concerned to note South Ayrshire Council's position. It has made limited progress towards delivering best value and faces severe financial pressures. These are significant risks and will make it challenging for the council to make the improvements needed."

The Commission has a number of areas of concern, including:

- The council's serious financial situation, resulting from inadequate financial planning over a number of years.
- The council does not have the tools required to deliver best value and does not manage its resources, risks and performance effectively.
- Little effective scrutiny of performance by councillors.
- The lack of a culture of continuous improvement.
- The need to develop community planning and joint working with partners and neighbouring councils.
- The lack of clarity in the roles of councillors and officers. There is also a need for both councillors and senior officers to establish more effective corporate working and leadership.
- The lack of consistent, good quality customer care.

As is usual, the next step in the process is for the council to prepare an improvement plan. The Commission has also asked for a follow-up report to update it on progress at the council in a year's time.

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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.