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Press release

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Findings announced following latest Best Value audit and social work follow-up inspection of Aberdeen City Council

Both the Accounts Commission and SWIA commend the progress made by Aberdeen City Council since the publication of largely critical reports in 2008. There is still much to do, but the council now has a very promising base for further improvement.

The Commission's latest findings are based on the Controller of Audit's first progress report on Best Value and Community Planning at Aberdeen City, looking at progress made at this council since May 2008.

The Social Work Inspection Agency (SWIA) has also today published a follow up report on the progress made by the council since an inspection report published in June 2008.

Chair of the Accounts Commission, John Baillie, said: "The council has made a good start in addressing our findings on the initial Best Value audit report and we commend the progress made across a range of activity. We are encouraged by the prompt and decisive action taken by the council and consider that it now has a very promising base for further improvement."

The Commission particularly welcomes the steps taken to establish new management structures and a new senior management team, the early signs of changes in organisational culture and the progress in implementing a corporate performance management process. It is also pleased to note that the council has started to improve its budget setting.

Today's Commission findings also say that the council now needs to build on the improvements made. It needs to establish robust and sustainable financial management and monitoring, which will be vital in addressing the financial position it continues to face. This is a key issue in any circumstances and will be the more challenging for the council given the recession and the financial pressures facing local government.

Social work inspectors found there had been considerable activity since the appointment of an Interim Programme Director for social work, and as a result there was a clearer sense of purpose and improved staff morale. There was evidence of commitment to realistic budget savings, with efforts to modernise aspects of the service. Those who used social work services and their carers had mixed views, with some unhappy about changes which had meant a reduction in access to services.

Although there was evidence of progress, inspectors acknowledged it was still early days and some more strategic aspects remained aspirational. There was significant improvement in practice relating to criminal justice social work services, however management were aware that staff morale was low in some parts of this service and this was being addressed.

Going forward, a key priority for the social work service is the development of a written commissioning strategy.

Alexis Jay, Chief Social Work Inspector, said: "We found strong evidence of the impact of the new leadership at political, corporate and social work levels, and were encouraged by the progress made in addressing the recommendations of our initial inspection. We expect this improvement to be sustained, and have set out clear priorities for the Council to achieve better outcomes for those in the city who rely on its social work services."

John Baillie continued: "We see encouraging initial progress although, inevitably, there is still much to do. The council needs to ensure that the progress is sustained and supported throughout the whole organisation. It is currently dependant on a small number of councillors and officers to do this and it is important that it tries to minimise the risks involved in this. The council also needs to maintain a broad consensus to support the overall direction and pace of change."

Following the publication of the Crerar report in September 2007, the Accounts Commission was given a lead role in streamlining and coordinating scrutiny activity within local authorities. Scrutiny bodies are now working closely together. Audit Scotland is working with other scrutiny bodies including Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education (HMIE), the Social Work Inspection Agency (SWIA), the Care Commission, and the Scottish Housing Regulator to deliver a shared risk assessment of councils. Today's Accounts Commission findings, the Controller of Audit's report and SWIA's findings will feature in the next risk assessment of Aberdeen City Council. This risk assessment will then inform the nature and timing of future external scrutiny.

As usual, the Accounts Commission and Audit Scotland will continue to monitor the council's circumstances through the Council's external auditors. SWIA and other bodies will also continue to monitor progress through their follow-up procedures.

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Notes to Editors

1. The Controller of Audit's report and today's Accounts Commission findings will be available on Audit Scotland's website www.audit-scotland.gov.uk from Thursday 30 July.

2. The Accounts Commission for Scotland was set up in 1975 and operates independently of central and local government. The Commission checks whether local authorities, fire and police boards spend public money properly and effectively.

Audit Scotland is an independent statutory body set up in April 2000, under the Public Finance and Accountability (Scotland) Act, 2000. It provides services to the Auditor General for Scotland and the Accounts Commission.

The Accounts Commission is sometimes mistakenly referred to as the Audit Commission. The Audit Commission is a completely separate organisation that operates only in England.

3. The Social Work Inspection Agency is carrying out performance inspections of all local authority social work services in Scotland. SWIA, which operates independently and impartially, reports publicly to the Parliament on the quality of these services, locally and nationally. For further information on inspections and the timetable for 2009, log on to www.swia.gov.uk.

4. Best Value is the statutory duty placed on local authorities to demonstrate their on-going commitment to providing better services to local people. Aberdeen City Council was the 21st council to undergo a Best Value audit, as part of the rolling programme affecting all local authorities in Scotland.

5. 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 new 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.

6. 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 are audited
- Each audit results in a report to the Accounts Commission for Scotland
- A report is published after each individual audit.

7. Following the publication of the Crerar report in September 2007, the Scottish Government's response stated its aim of establishing a simplified and coherent approach to delivering local government scrutiny. A key aspect of this agenda is to better coordinate and streamline scrutiny and achieve greater effectiveness, whilst at the same time protecting the independence of scrutiny bodies. In February 2008, the Accounts Commission was asked to take on the transitional gatekeeping role in respect of the scrutiny of local government.