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Press release

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Councils can do more to target physical recreation services at those least active

An Audit Scotland report published today, Physical recreation services in local government, says that while regular physical exercise is important for improving people's health, the outlook for public spending will make it difficult for councils to invest in facilities and sustain services over the longer-term. Councils need more information about local people who are not using their services so they can ensure maximum benefit and encourage those not taking enough exercise to be more active.

Councils provide a wide range of indoor and outdoor facilities, such as gym halls, swimming pools and golf courses, and organise activities such as exercise classes. They also work with the NHS to promote fitness, encourage participation and improve health. Most people have access to sports facilities within 20 minutes of their home and there are high satisfaction rates for those using these services. However, while attendance figures are increasing, only two out of five adults do enough exercise and levels of obesity and heart disease in Scotland are amongst the highest in Western Europe, particularly in poorer communities.

John Baillie, Chair of the Accounts Commission, said: "Councils provide a wide range of physical recreation services, which many people use and are satisfied with. But little is known about people who do not use them or the reasons why. This information gap needs to be addressed so councils can explore what more can be done to encourage people to exercise."

Physical recreation services are provided by councils directly and through a variety of arms-length and external organisations. They spend around £656 million a year. But while capital spending increased by 54% over the past three years, around a quarter of council facilities remain in poor condition and with finances tight it will be difficult to maintain recent levels of investment.

John Baillie continued: "Councils are very aware that they need to make best use of their resources. Many are already looking at their physical recreation services and facilities to consider how sustainable they are. By taking a closer look at the way services are managed and the difference they make to the number of people taking enough exercise, councils will be best placed to weigh up their options and make the best decisions on service provision. There may also be further opportunities for partnerships with the voluntary and private sectors, which could help councils by making additional facilities available and getting more people involved in physical activity."

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Notes to editors

1. Physical recreation is defined as physical activity that people take for leisure or recreational purposes and includes activities such as walking, swimming, or cycling, as well as competitive sport.
2. Across all councils, average expenditure per resident is £125 per year. Councils are required to ensure adequate provision of facilities for sport and recreation. They are responsible for 6,675 of Scotland's 11,528 sport and recreation facilities.
3. Audit Scotland has prepared this report for the Accounts Commission for Scotland. All Audit Scotland reports published since 2000 are available at www.audit-scotland.gov.uk
4. The Accounts Commission for Scotland checks whether local authorities, fire and police boards spend public money properly and effectively.
5. Audit Scotland is a statutory body set up in April 2000, under the Public Finance and Accountability (Scotland) Act, 2000. It provides services to the Accounts Commission for Scotland.