

Address: 110 George Street
Edinburgh
EH2 4LH

Telephone: 0845 146 1010
Fax: 0845 146 1009

Website:
www.audit-scotland.gov.uk



Press release

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Planning for civil emergencies progressing well, although still room for improvement.

Key organisations are working well together to plan for dealing with major disruptions and events such as severe weather and the current flu pandemic. However there is still more they could do to improve their arrangements.

A new report by Audit Scotland, *Improving civil contingencies planning*, says that there is a long history of organisations working together in emergency situations.

The Auditor General for Scotland, Robert Black, said: "Recent events have ranged from a terrorist attack at Glasgow Airport, through to the risks to fuel supplies caused by industrial action, flooding as a result of severe weather, and most recently the swine flu pandemic. These have all highlighted the importance of having effective emergency planning and response systems in place. Public bodies in Scotland are working well together, but there is scope for further improvement."

There are eight Strategic Coordinating Groups (SCGs) across Scotland, which are the focal point for local multi-agency planning. They bring together local authorities, health boards and organisations such as utilities and telecommunications companies, and also provide for some involvement from the voluntary and private sectors.

Today's report says organisations generally work well within their groups and good progress has been made in developing joint emergency planning arrangements.

Mr Black added "The Scottish Government has been very active in supporting civil contingencies work and has ensured that progress has been made. More could be done to share the lessons learned from actual emergencies and to share good practice."

The Audit Scotland report says that the arrangements for dealing with incidents that cross organisational boundaries or borders are often untested and mutual aid agreements for sharing resources between different parts of Scotland during emergencies are often too informal. There needs to be a standard approach to the handling of sensitive information. Greater clarity is also needed on leadership, roles and responsibilities, accountability and priorities.

The report also says that communicating with local communities needs to improve so that the public are better informed.

Chair of the Accounts Commission, John Baillie, said: "Local authorities are at the frontline of service delivery to our communities and are working well with other organisations to plan for handling civil emergencies. They should now ensure continuity and recovery arrangements are in place and further consider how they can improve communication with local businesses, charities and vulnerable individuals.

"Councillors have an important role to play during and after emergencies in providing leadership and assurance to local communities and could be better supported in this role."

Other areas identified in the report as being in need of improvement include agreeing formal business continuity plans, having systems in place for monitoring performance, and better tracking of resources used and costs incurred.

For further information contact Anne McCubbin tel: 0131 625 1653 amccubbin@audit-scotland.gov.uk or Simon Ebbett on tel: 0131 625 1652 sebbett@audit-scotland.gov.uk

Notes to editors

1. The main fieldwork for this report was completed in 2008, before the current H1N1 Influenza outbreak.
2. The report does not look at how individual emergencies have been dealt with or attempt to make any judgements on the level of preparedness of any individual organisation, sector or Scotland as a whole. However it includes case studies on aspects of the April 2008 industrial dispute at Grangemouth oil refinery and the current H1N1 influenza outbreak as illustrations of the management of civil emergency scenarios .
3. The Civil Contingencies Act was passed in 2004. This established a new legislative framework for civil protection across the UK. The Act defines a civil emergency as an event or situation which threatens serious damage to human welfare, the environment or security of the UK.
4. The boundaries of the eight SCG areas in Scotland correspond with police force boundaries.
5. This report will be available at www.audit-scotland.gov.uk from 6 August.
6. The Auditor General is responsible for securing the audit of the Scottish Government and most other public bodies in Scotland, except local authorities. He investigates whether spending bodies achieve the best possible value for money and adhere to the highest standards of financial management. The Auditor General is independent and is not subject to the control of the Scottish Government or the Scottish Parliament.
7. The Accounts Commission for Scotland operates independently of central and local government. The Commission examines whether local authorities, fire and rescue and police boards spend £19 billion of public money properly and effectively. The Commission also has a leading role in streamlining external scrutiny of local government.
8. 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. Audit Scotland has prepared this report for the Auditor General and the Accounts Commission.
9. The Accounts Commission is sometimes mistakenly referred to as the "Audit Commission". The Audit Commission operates only in England.