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## Press release

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### Clearer focus required on long-term needs of children in residential care

Councils, the Scottish Government, NHS boards and other bodies should be managing residential child care services better to help children and young people achieve their full potential. An Accounts Commission and Auditor General report published today, *Getting it right for children in residential care*, also says councils need a better understanding of the costs involved, so they can consider how their services provide value for money and possible efficiencies.

Around 1,600 children and young people are living in residential care at any one time. They are some of the most vulnerable people in society and many have very complex and challenging needs. Some children thrive, but many have poor educational attainment and experience major problems as adults, such as unemployment, homelessness, spending time in prison and mental health problems. Councils are working on becoming better 'corporate parents', with support from the Scottish Government. However, there still needs to be a greater emphasis on the long-term outcomes and life chances of children in residential care. Many children's care plans lack clear action points and long-term goals.

John Baillie, Chair of the Accounts Commission, said: "Child care is one of the most difficult and demanding aspects of council duties. Residential care cannot be expected to fix all the difficulties faced by vulnerable children and their families, but there is a lot that councils and their partners could be doing to improve these services. They need to ensure they act as 'corporate parents', improve their understanding of what leads to the best outcomes and focus on the support they are providing for the long term needs of each child or young person, as any good parent would for their own child."

At least £250 million is spent on residential child care every year, with the total cost of care unknown as there are no full estimates of indirect costs. Expenditure increased by 68% between 2001/02 and 2008/09 and may rise further. Better understanding of what leads to the best outcomes would help public bodies target spending.

Each council makes its own arrangements for placements, using either in-house provision or one of over 100 residential units and schools in the private and voluntary sectors. Contractual arrangements between councils and independent providers are generally weak.

John Baillie continued: "Councils need to have clear strategies and plans in place, supported by good information about the effectiveness and costs of services, and to work more closely with other councils, residential providers and other organisations to improve how services are commissioned and organised."

Robert Black, Auditor General for Scotland, said: "Planning and managing services with a clearer focus on longer-term outcomes does not necessarily mean spending more money. Given the relatively small numbers of children looked after in residential care across Scotland and the very specialised nature of the services, there is considerable scope for a national strategic approach. It is encouraging that the Scottish Government has already set up a strategic implementation group involving councils, NHS boards, residential care providers and other partner organisations, but this must lead to urgent action."

#### Notes to editors

1. There are around 1,600 Scottish children and young people in residential care at any one time. This is around 10% of all children who are looked after by their local council. Most looked after children live at home, with friends or relatives, or with foster carers. Children in residential care live in either residential units (formerly known as children's homes), residential schools (for those who need specialist education and care), or secure accommodation (for children whose behaviour is a danger to themselves or others). These children often have the greatest and most complex needs. Many are there because they have experienced severe neglect, abuse or

trauma, have complex disabilities, or social, emotional or behavioural difficulties, including offending or substance misuse.

2. Children become looked after through a voluntary agreement, a children's hearing or through the courts. Councils have a legal duty to care for them (The Children (Scotland) Act 1995). Although the statutory duties do not include a specific responsibility to secure the best long-term outcomes for looked after children, the Scottish Government's National Outcomes and published guidance are clear about councils' responsibilities: Working with their community planning partners councils should act as 'corporate parents', not only providing or commissioning services to meet children's needs but accepting responsibility for them, making their needs a priority and seeking for them the same outcomes any good parent would want for their own children.
3. All Scottish residential child care providers, including councils, must adhere to the National Care Standards and be registered with the Care Commission. The Care Commission inspects every residential care provider twice a year. It examines and scores four areas of quality (care and support, environment, staffing and management and leadership) and has assessed most aspects of residential care as being good or very good. About one in ten residential units or schools (18) are classed as adequate or weak for the quality of care and support (none are classed as unsatisfactory in this aspect). These 18 units, which include both council and independent units, provide places for around 160 children, who may therefore not be receiving the quality of care and support that they need. Only one of the 168 residential units or schools is assessed as excellent across all four aspects, although nine per cent (15) are assessed as excellent for the quality of the care and support they provide.
4. All Audit Scotland reports published since 2000 can be found on Audit Scotland's website [www.audit-scotland.gov.uk](http://www.audit-scotland.gov.uk)
5. Audit Scotland is a statutory body set up in April 2000, under the Public Finance and Accountability (Scotland) Act, 2000. Audit Scotland has prepared this report for the Accounts Commission and the Auditor General for Scotland.
  - The Accounts Commission looks at whether local authorities, fire and police boards spend public money properly and effectively.
  - 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.