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COUNCILS URGED TO JOIN UP THEIR TRADING STANDARDS SERVICES

The Accounts Commission for Scotland is today (3 October) encouraging Scottish councils to join up their trading standards services. The Accounts Commission has found that the level and quality of service varies depending on where you live and that councils with larger trading standards services tend to provide a better quality and range of service than their smaller counterparts. The Commission says that more collaborative working would enable the joined up services to provide a better quality and range of services to the public and businesses, for the same money.

All 32 Scottish councils have their own trading standards service costing a total of £19 million a year and employing around 500 staff. There is considerable variation in the size of trading standards services with staff numbers ranging from only three to over 50.

Accounts Commission Chairman Alastair MacNish says:

“Trading standards is an important service that helps to protect the public and local businesses from rogue traders and from dodgy goods and services. We found considerable variation in the range and quality of services being provided from one council to the next. A lot of work is needed to bring more consistency to the services provided to the public and businesses across Scotland.

“Although some smaller services are doing a good job with the resources they have, there is no doubt that they could do better by joining forces with neighbouring councils.”

Key findings from the report include:

1. Small trading standards services (those with fewer than eight staff) perform worse overall than their larger counterparts and there is a risk that they do not have the capacity to improve.
2. Councils with larger trading standards services generally provide a fuller range of services. They employ specialist staff to deal with consumer enquiries and complaints, and debt counselling services.
3. Some councils spend twice as much on trading standards services as others of a similar size with spend ranging from about £2 to £4 per head of population. A higher spend per head of population generally results in better services.
4. Consumer advice and debt counselling are the most fully developed services whereas consumer education and information are most poorly developed.

5. Most trading standards services fall well short of meeting their targets for inspecting business premises. On average, only 76% of planned visits to high-risk premises were achieved.

Councils are also being encouraged to review the staffing resources they need to deliver the DTI's National Performance Framework.

Until now there have been no nationally agreed standards for this service but as a result of collaborative work with SCOTSS and other trading standards officers in the United Kingdom there is now a set of service performance guides, that are supported by the DTI's Modernisation Fund, which are already being used by half of all UK trading standards services.

External auditors conducted their independent assessments for the purposes of this report in spring 2002, and will be monitoring council improvement actions.

The report *'Made to measure? An overview of trading standards services in Scotland'* will be available from the Audit Scotland web site www.audit-scotland.gov.uk from Thursday 3 October.

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Notes for editors

1. The Accounts Commission for Scotland was set up in 1975 and is independent of both central and local government. The Commission ensures that local authorities, fire and police boards spend £9 billion of public money properly and wisely.
2. Audit Scotland is a statutory body set up in April 2000. It provides services to the Accounts Commission and the Auditor General for Scotland. Together they ensure that the Scottish Executive and public sector bodies in Scotland are held to account for the proper, efficient and effective use of around £17 billion of public funds.
3. The Society of Chief Officers of Trading Standards in Scotland (SCOTSS) is an association of professional officers representing Scottish local authority trading standards services.
4. Councils have a statutory duty to enforce trade and consumer legislation. Trading standards services do this through a range of integrated service activities, including inspecting traders' premises, investigating alleged offences, providing services to businesses, and, in a number of councils, animal health and welfare services. Although not required by statute, all trading standards services in Scotland provide additional services to consumers and businesses, including advice, information and education, and in some cases debt-counselling.
5. All 32 councils in Scotland have their own trading standards service. The number of services trebled as a result of local government reorganization in 1996, fragmenting the former nine regional trading standards services into units of significantly differing sizes. Staff numbers range from three to over 50.
6. Most trading standards duties are reserved matters under the Westminster Parliament and the Government aims to achieve a seamless trading standards service that provides consistent, high-quality services across the United Kingdom ...
 - expectations were set out in the Department of Trade and Industry's (DTI) National Performance Framework (NPF), launched in April 2002. Its objectives are to have informed confident consumers, informed successful businesses, effective enforcement of a fair and safe trading environment, and improving trading standards services

- the Department of Trade and Industry has made £30m available over a three-year period to trading standards authorities and other organisations in Britain to support more effective enforcement, better information and advice to consumers, improved staff skills and improved consumer safety
 - the NPF will be developed over the next few years to include meaningful outcome performance measures for the service.
6. The study involved working with trading standards professionals in Scotland, England and Wales to develop national service standards to assess the level and quality of service against three levels of performance – minimum standard, good, and better practice. The minimum standard reflects the level of service that professionals agree should be being provided by all councils. Good and better practice standards are already being achieved and represent targets which improving services should be aspiring to and working towards.

For this review, Scottish councils agreed to pilot the use of seven service standards guides: Animal health and welfare services; Business services, advice and information; Investigation of offences; Programmed inspections; Consumer advice; Debt counselling; Consumer education and information. These guides are now being used by over 100 trading standards services across the UK – an important step in encouraging all councils to achieve national performance standards.