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SUSTAINED PROGRAMME OF ACTION NEEDED TO DEAL WITH OFFENDING BY YOUNG PEOPLE

The results of the first comprehensive study to examine all of the services involved in dealing with offending by young people in Scotland are published today in a report by Audit Scotland. The report looks at how some £240 million is spent and makes 38 recommendations for action.

Auditor General for Scotland, Bob Black, said: “Improving the effectiveness with which young people’s offending is addressed is a difficult task. A sustained programme of action is required over a number of years to implement our recommendations. This needs to be led by the Scottish Executive and fully supported by all of the agencies that deal with children and young adults who offend.”

The report’s findings and *recommendations* include:

- the system for dealing with young offenders is slow, taking – on average – five and a half months for a child to reach a Children’s Hearing and around eight months to get a court decision on a young person.
There should be proper monitoring of time taken to deal with cases and the setting of time standards where they do not already exist.
- young people are dealt with unevenly across Scotland, eg the percentage of offence referrals sent to a Hearing by Reporters varies enormously, from 10 to 47%.
Agencies must ensure that decision making is in line with good practice.
- large numbers of young people – 2,300, or 16% of those convicted – are imprisoned, and 60% of those are reconvicted within two years of release. Hundreds more are taken into residential care at a relatively high cost to the taxpayer. There is evidence to suggest that community based programmes can be more effective in reducing offending and are cheaper.
More community based services need to be developed around ‘what works’ principles.
- more money (around 60% of total spending on youth justice) is spent on prosecuting and reaching decisions about young offenders than on services to tackle offending behaviour.
The Scottish Executive should review whether there can be some shift in the balance of resources.
- there is a chronic shortage of social workers in children’s services. Audit Scotland found 11.3% of posts for children’s services social workers were vacant – that’s nearly 200 social workers. This means children are not getting the supervision they need to help them stop offending.
Dealing with this shortage and better training and support for social workers should be a priority.
- information about offending and about the quality of services is inadequate.
There should be a single set of performance indicators used by all agencies and independent inspection of all services.

“We welcome the fact that many of these areas have been recognised by the Scottish Executive as areas requiring action and that a number of new initiatives are already underway,” said Mr Black. “Audit Scotland will continue to monitor these initiatives and report back in a couple of years time.”

Chairman of the Accounts Commission, Alastair MacNish, said: “Working with the Executive, councils have a key role to play in helping to develop community programmes that work and in addressing the severe shortages of social work staff.”

For further information or a copy of the full report please contact Katie Fleming or James Gillies on 0131 624 9970/9971

Notes for editors

1. The report, *Dealing with offending by young people*, includes:
 - An executive summary
 - A summary report
 - A main report
 - All three will be available on the Audit Scotland website from Thursday 5 December 2002
 - Advance copies are available under embargo on request.
2. The report was compiled by Audit Scotland for the Auditor General and the Accounts Commission
 - 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 and the Auditor General for Scotland.
 - The Auditor General is responsible for securing the audit of the Scottish Executive 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 Executive or the Scottish Parliament.
 - 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.
3. A baseline report, *Youth Justice in Scotland*, was published in June 2001. This presented the results of an initial review of what is known about children and young people who offend, their offences and how their behaviour is dealt with in Scotland.
4. In Scotland, there are two systems for dealing with young people who offend. Those under 16 are generally dealt with in the Children’s Hearings System (CHS), those over 16 in the Criminal Justice System (CJS):
 - The children’s system provides supervision to ensure the child’s welfare.
 - The adult system balances punishment and protecting the community with efforts to prevent further offending.