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COUNCILS AND NHS MUST GEAR UP FOR CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS

A report published today by Audit Scotland and HMIE (HM Inspectorate of Education) provides the first assessment of the likely impact and cost of new education legislation. It estimates that between two and five thousand more pupils with special educational needs (SEN) could attend mainstream instead of special schools in the future. However Audit Scotland says that planning for this change is patchy in councils and minimal in NHS bodies.

The majority of the pupils concerned will have moderate learning difficulties and the most significant impact on mainstream schools is likely in some larger urban councils which tend to make greater use of special schools.

As part of the study, HMIE evaluated provision in primary and secondary schools which already have good practice in place for mainstreaming pupils with SEN. With the right support, mainstreaming of pupils with SEN benefited all pupils. However even the most successful schools had not been able to meet fully the particular needs of one or more pupils.

Chairman of the Accounts Commission Alastair MacNish says:

‘Mainstreaming has been proven to work well but only when pupils and teachers are properly supported. Councils and the NHS bodies need to gear up for this change by making sure school buildings are adapted, staff are trained and therapy services can cope.’

Audit Scotland estimates that the cost of mainstreaming will be between £38 million and £121 million depending on the number of SEN pupils enrolling in mainstream schools. The presumption of mainstreaming was introduced as an amendment to the Standards in Scotland’s Schools etc Act 2000 and at that time Parliament did not have information on what the costs might be.

Robert Black, the Auditor General says:

‘Because the financial implications were not fully considered when this legislation was amended no one knew the likely cost of mainstreaming. It is essential for effective democratic scrutiny that the financial consequences of all legislation, including amendments, are analysed and considered carefully by Parliament.’

Audit Scotland makes a number of recommendations to help councils, the NHS and others prepare properly for this change:

1. Councils and NHS bodies should work together to plan for the change.
2. Councils must ensure that the needs of pupils with SEN are considered when designing new schools or refurbishing existing ones.
3. Councils should ensure that senior teaching staff have enough time and resources to support the needs of pupils with SEN.
4. Teachers and special needs auxiliaries should be trained to meet the needs of SEN pupils.
5. The NHS should review its capacity to meet the increased demand for therapy services, child and adolescent mental health and school nursing services.
6. The Scottish Executive and councils should consider how best to reflect the achievements of pupils with SEN in published attainment information.

Audit Scotland and HMIE will be following up this report.

**For further information please contact Mandy Gallacher or Katie Fleming
on 0131 624 9974/0**

Notes for editors

1. Section 15 of the Standards in Scotland's Schools etc. Act 2000 introduces a 'presumption of mainstreaming' for children and young people with SEN except under certain circumstances. It will come into effect in August 2003.
 2. The term Special Educational Needs covers the very wide spectrum of conditions. These include hearing, visual and motor impairments, language or communication disorders, autistic spectrum disorders, social, emotional and behavioural difficulties and learning difficulties.
 3. Because there is a degree of uncertainty about the changes that may occur, costs have been calculated based on the upper and lower estimates of the number and category of SEN pupils that could be included in mainstream schools. Because of the lack of detailed information, a number of assumptions have had to be made regarding the cost of inclusion; these are based on information from case studies and from information supplied by councils.
 4. Once a Bill is introduced, it goes through a three-stage process during which (stages 2 and 3) MSPs can lodge amendments. However the financial memorandum which establishes the financial consequences of the Bill is formulated before these stages take place and there is no requirement for the financial memorandum to be revised to take account of how much amendments may cost to implement. Section 15 (mainstreaming presumption) of the Standards in Scotland's Schools etc Act 2000 was inserted into the Bill by amendment at Stage 2. The financial memorandum, which accompanied the Bill, was not subsequently updated to take account of the costs.
 5. This report was prepared by Audit Scotland on behalf of the Accounts Commission and the Auditor General in partnership with HMIE.
- 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.