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Press release

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Inconsistencies in treatment of young offenders

A report published today by Audit Scotland shows that while most young offenders are being supported, up to a quarter (500) under council supervision are not getting the services needed to help prevent them from reoffending. The report identifies a number of ways in which the system is failing some children who offend and calls for urgent action by councils, police and the Scottish Executive.

Audit Scotland's review of council records revealed that 15% of children were not getting the services Children's Hearings said they should receive. For another 10% it was impossible to tell what service, if any, they were receiving due to inadequate record keeping. The types of services involved in the supervision of children include social work and specialist support programmes provided by statutory and voluntary organisations.

The report notes that police and social workers are not getting referrals or social background reports to Children's Reporters quickly enough and are not meeting nationally agreed time standards. Tayside Police is the only force which meets the standard.

Alastair MacNish, Chairman of the Accounts Commission said:

"It is imperative that councils, the police and the Scottish Executive act now to prevent further problems with children who offend.

"We are pleased that most councils are giving children the help they need but our report shows that up to 500 children are not being properly supported.

"Youngsters who offend are put on supervision because Children's Hearings say that they need help and support. If they don't get that help there is clearly a higher risk that they will offend again."

There are four main problems for councils highlighted in the report:

1. The report says there are particular difficulties in **seven councils** which are failing to provide enough contact and support to more than half of the offenders under supervision in their area. The named councils are: Dumfries and Galloway, East Ayrshire, Glasgow, Midlothian, North Ayrshire, South Ayrshire and South Lanarkshire.
2. **28 councils** are failing in their statutory duty to ensure that all children under supervision have a care plan stating the needs of the child and the support they should receive. The evidence suggests that about one-third (37%) do not have a care plan. Only four councils had care plans for all the children under supervision.
3. 50% of all young offenders on supervision are seen less than once a month by **social work services**. There is no minimum requirement for social work contact with children on supervision. However there is a national standard for *young adults* in the criminal justice system which prescribes once a month as the minimum. Half of the children under supervision are receiving less than this.
4. The report also highlights the fact that the number of vacancies for qualified social workers in children's services is high and has been getting worse – vacancies are up from 6.6% in 2000 to 14.5% in 2002 – equivalent to 247 posts. Audit Scotland says there is no doubt that the shortage of social workers

Dunbartonshire councils are managing to maintain reasonable service levels despite high numbers of vacancies.

In carrying out this study Audit Scotland found a lack of reliable information about the scale of the problem and that information about the quality of services is inadequate.

The Auditor General, Robert Black, recommends that:

“The Scottish Executive should review whether current monitoring arrangements provide sufficient information about the quality and quantity of services for children on supervision; in particular the extent to which councils are meeting statutory requirements and providing the services prescribed by Children’s Hearings”.

For further information or to arrange interviews contact: Mandy Gallacher tel 0131 624 9974 or Katie Fleming on 0131 624 9970

Notes for editors

1. The report *Dealing with offending by young people – a follow up 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.
2. This study was based on examination of case records held by councils about children and young adults on supervision for offending behaviour. It did not assess the quality of services.
3. In December 2002 Audit Scotland published *Dealing with offending by young people*. It examined how young offenders, up to the age of 21, are dealt with in Scotland through the Children’s Hearings System and the adult Criminal Justice System. The report made 38 recommendations for action by the Scottish Executive, councils, police forces, the Children’s Reporters Administration and the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service.
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.