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Press release

Embargoed until 0001hrs on Thursday 22 January 2004

Councils' home care services improve

Performance information published today by the Accounts Commission shows that in 2002/03 Scotland's councils continued to improve their delivery of home care services. Over the last two years councils have been providing home care services such as domestic help much more flexibly in the evenings, overnight and at weekends.

Since 2000/01 the number of people receiving home care at the weekend has risen to over 29,000, an increase of 7,700, and the number of people receiving evening or overnight services has risen by 3,600 to over 13,600. The number of people receiving personal care services in Scotland rose to 34,300 in 2002/03, an increase of 4,000.

Accounts Commission Chairman, Alastair MacNish says:

“Councils are increasingly providing home care services when people need them rather than just within normal office hours and this will make a real difference to the lives of those in need of help. Thousands of people are benefiting from this change and councils should be applauded for radically changing the way these services are delivered.”

Housing rent arrears

Councils are still struggling to cut council tenants' rent arrears. At the end of 2002/03 tenants owed councils £28.5 million (7.4%) of unpaid rent. Only 15 councils managed to reduce tenants' rent arrears compared to the previous year.

Other performance information also published today covers children's services.

School occupancy levels

Councils are still struggling to match the number of school places with declining pupil numbers. One-third of primary schools and one in nine secondary schools are seriously under-occupied. In these schools, only 60% or less of the places were needed in 2002/03.

Special Educational Needs Assessments

In 2002/03, Scottish councils assessed the special educational needs of nearly 1,800 children. There was a considerable reduction in the time taken to complete an assessment. This went down from 28 to 25 weeks.

Looked after children

In 2002/03, 561 young people left council care. Of these young people, 204 (36.4%) achieved standard grade in both English and Maths, a slight drop on the 37.5% in the previous year.

Accounts Commission Chairman, Alastair MacNish says:

“ We are concerned about the low levels of school occupancy in several areas across Scotland. However we acknowledge that some councils are actively attempting to resolve this problem and we look forward to seeing steady improvement in future years.

“It is good that it is generally taking councils less time to carry out assessments for children with special educational needs. But councils still face challenges in meeting the educational needs of young people in their care, most of whom leave care without basic qualifications.”

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Notes to Editors

1. The Accounts Commission is responsible for securing the audit of 32 Scottish councils and 34 joint boards, including police and fire services. The Commission investigates whether spending bodies achieve the best possible value for money and adhere to the highest standards of financial management. The Accounts Commission is independent and is not subject to the control of the Scottish Executive or the Scottish Parliament.
2. 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.
3. Since 1993/94 councils have been required by law to provide information on how well they are carrying out their activities. Under the Local Government Act 1992 the Accounts Commission has to decide what information councils provide. The information for 2002/2003 is the tenth annual comparison of council performance. It provides important benchmarks against which performance will continue to be measured in future years.
4. The pamphlets published today relate to councils' housing, social work and children's services. They are the third and fourth in a series of six pamphlets comparing the performance, over a range of services, achieved by all 32 Scottish councils, eight fire brigades and eight police forces.
5. Information considered by an authority's appointed auditor to be unreliable has been excluded from the Scotland figures.
6. Information relating to Police and Fire services was published on 19 December 2003. Two further pamphlets covering children's services, housing and social work are published today. Finally, information relating to cultural & community services, and environmental & regulatory services will be published on 5 February. This information can also be found on the Commission's web site on www.audit-scotland.gov.uk
7. In June 2000, the Accounts Commission published the report 'Managing rent arrears – getting the balance right', which provided a snapshot of the extent to which councils, and a sample of registered social landlords (RSLs), were implementing good practice in managing rent arrears. The report recommended actions that should be taken by councils and RSLs to improve their management of rent arrears and identifies achievable rent arrears targets for councils:
 - 3% of net rent, for those in semi-urban and rural areas
 - 7% of net rent, for those in city and urban areas.