

Address:
110 George Street
Edinburgh
EH2 4LH

Telephone:
0131 477 1234
Fax:
0131 477 4567

Website:
www.audit-scotland.gov.uk



Press release

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West Lothian Council shows what can be done

West Lothian Council has been praised for its ability to transform its ambitious vision for the local area into improving services for the people who live there, according to a report published by the Accounts Commission today (Thursday 30 June 2005). The Best Value Audit report says that West Lothian Council performs well, is fully committed to continuous improvement, and has responded effectively when faced with adverse demographic and economic factors.

Today's report is the sixth in a rolling programme affecting all 32 local authorities in Scotland and provides information to local people for the first time about how well the council is organised to deliver improvement.

The Deputy Chair of the Accounts Commission, Isabelle Low, said: "West Lothian Council has achieved a great deal and we are delighted to see it at the top end of the spectrum. This is easily the best report so far. West Lothian has had to contend with a number of problems, such as a fast growing population that is placing pressure on services and a decline in manufacturing. However this council has shown that, through strong leadership and a culture of improvement, it is possible to respond positively to change. "

In particular, the following aspects of West Lothian council were singled out for praise:

- Its clear and ambitious strategic vision for the local area and its ability to transmit this through effective planning into good services.
- Its consumer-facing culture that is strongly focussed on listening to and improving services for the people who use them.
- The value it places on the contribution made by its staff to improving services
- Its willingness to learn from good practice both within the council and beyond and its ability to apply lessons learned across the range of the council's activities.

West Lothian has undertaken to produce an improvement plan which will be submitted to the commission by 20 September 2005. The commission will monitor action taken, particularly looking for the development of the role councillors play in scrutinising service performance; better targets and performance information to underpin decision-making; and more balanced public reporting of performance highlighting areas for improvement as well as the council's successes.

Councils in Scotland are audited for Best Value, on average, once every three years but in view of this positive report, the commission does not intend to audit for best value at West Lothian Council for four years.

For further information contact:

Audit Scotland Beth Hocking, tel: 0131 624 9954 or Anne McCubbin, tel: 0131 624 9970

West Lothian Council: Evelyn Cargill, tel: 01506 777132

COSLA: David Kennedy, tel: 0131 474 9205

Notes to Editors

1. The Accounts Commission for Scotland was set up in 1975 and is independent of both central and local government. The Commission checks whether local authorities, fire and police boards spend £9 billion of public money properly and effectively.
2. Audits of Best Value were established as a result of the Local Government in Scotland Act 2003. A rolling programme of audits will affect each local authority in Scotland every three years. The audit assesses the extent to which each council is meeting its legal duty to improve service delivery, identifies where this is in doubt, and outlines any improvement action that is required.
3. The Audit of Best Value is undertaken by Audit Scotland on behalf of the Accounts Commission. It responds to the Local Government in Scotland Act 2003, which gave councils a new power to promote or improve the well-being of their area and the people living within it and new responsibilities including:
 - making arrangements which secure Best Value, defined as 'continuous improvement in the performance of the authority's functions, having regard to efficiency, effectiveness, economy and equal opportunities.
 - discharging their duties in a way which contributes to sustainable development
 - maintaining a community planning process
 - making arrangements for reporting to the public on their performance
4. The councils currently being audited in the rolling programme, which will ultimately affect every council in Scotland, are Dundee and East Renfrewshire and Glasgow. Those which have already been audited are Angus, North Ayrshire, Stirling and Shetland and Inverclyde.
5. Key Features of the Audit are:
 - The focus is on each council's performance over time rather than comparisons between councils. It takes account of differences in local priorities, constraints and opportunities and therefore league tables and scores are inappropriate.
 - It is expected that all councils in Scotland will be audited, on average, once every three years.
 - The council's local external auditor will monitor progress and report through an annual review. If the council has made insufficient progress, the Commission will be alerted and it may ask for further action to be taken.
 - Each audit results in a report to the Accounts Commission which will be published.
 - In most cases Key Findings from the Commission will be published at the same time as the Report. However, the Commission also has the power to do the following: Ask the Controller of Audit to carry out further investigations before reporting its findings; hold a hearing with council before reporting its findings; publish findings which include recommendations to the council and/or Scottish Ministers.