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Press release

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Some success at Dundee City Council, but further modernisation needed

A report published by Audit Scotland for the Accounts Commission today (Wednesday 5 October 2005) says that Dundee City council's services generally perform well for its community, but that more modernisation and better scrutiny by councillors will be required for the future. Today's Best Value audit report is the seventh in a rolling programme affecting all 32 local authorities in Scotland and provides information to local people about how well the council is organised to deliver improvement.

Deputy Chair of the Accounts Commission, Isabelle Low said:

"The overall picture in Dundee is one of contrasts. The council is showing reasonable improvement on many front-line services without relying on additional resources, but not across the board.

"There are big challenges ahead for the council: population changes are likely to result in increases in demand for services and it is likely to have more limited resources in the future. This means the council will face difficult decisions that will require strong leadership by elected members and senior management if it is to deliver for the people of Dundee.

"In particular, the Council needs to be prepared to look radically at how services are delivered in order to get maximum value for money; and at how Councillors go about their business of scrutiny and challenge.

"The council knows where it has to focus further work and we look forward to receiving its improvement plan by 31 October 2005. We will be monitoring progress against the council's improvement plan and would normally expect to report again on its performance in three year's time."

The report highlights the following achievements and areas of good practice:

- Strong commitment to social and economic regeneration
- Ambitious plans for the city
- Good community engagement and significant achievements in community planning and joint working
- Some services, such as housing repairs and community care assessments, have become more efficient as a result of improved business processes
- Council services generally performing well

The Accounts Commission identified the following issues which the council must address:

- A lack of effective scrutiny by councillors. All 29 members currently sit on all 13 committees which makes it difficult, if not impossible, for councillors to form an independent view
- The focus on policy-making within private sessions raises concerns about transparency
- The need to improve strategic management in a planned way in order to achieve appropriate structures, both at elected member and officer level, and not simply react opportunistically to personnel and political changes
- The need to systematically align council policies and priorities to the resources available

- The adoption of blanket policy commitments which, taken with pressures on resources, from a declining population/tax base and a growing demand for services, severely limit the achievement of Best value.
- Specific service performance issues, such as: staff absence, some aspects of social work including home care, council tax collection, educational attainment, delivery of new schools and roads maintenance

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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 Best value audit does not attempt a comprehensive review of all services, it aims to assess the extent to which the council is meeting its legal duty to improve service delivery, identify where this is in doubt and outline any remedial action that is required. 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 32 councils in Scotland will be audited on a rolling basis, on average, once every three years. The councils being audited in the current programme, are Moray, Glasgow, Highland, Argyll & Bute. The councils that have already been audited are Angus, North Ayrshire, Stirling, Shetland, Inverclyde and West Lothian and Dundee.
 - Each 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.