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Press release

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Councils doing better on financial performance

An Accounts Commission report, published today shows that Scottish councils improved in a number of key areas. Councils processed benefits claims quicker, paid more invoices on time than ever before and collected 91.7% of council tax.

Accounts Commission Chairman, Alastair MacNish says:

“Over the past twelve months, councils have improved in a number of key areas in line with the government’s efficiency agenda. The reduction in time taken for councils to process benefit claims and pay invoices, along with the increase in council tax collection levels for the fifth consecutive year, is encouraging.”

Benefits

Councils reported quicker overall times for processing benefits claims. The time to process new claims was down from 49 to 47 days, and the time to process changes of circumstances was down to 12 days, a 25% improvement since 2000/01.

Invoices

83% of invoices were paid on time – an improvement of 8% in the last 3 years and the highest level since this information has been collected. Aberdeen City, Dundee City, Perth & Kinross and West Lothian paid at least nine in every ten invoices on time. In 2002/03, English councils paid 89% of invoices on time.

Council tax

Councils collected 91.7% of council tax due in the year, an increase for the 5th consecutive year. Collection levels varied from 85.1% in Glasgow to 97.7% in Orkney Islands. Over £600 million of council tax remains outstanding.

Audit Scotland is also publishing performance information today relating to cultural and community services, including library and leisure centre usage.

See separate release for further information, or contact Anne Ryan, tel: 0131 624 9970 or Beth Hocking, tel: 0131 624 9954

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 2003/04 is the eleventh annual comparison of council performance. It provides important benchmarks against which performance will continue to be measured in future years.
4. The pamphlet published today relates to council benefits, corporate and financial management. It is the second 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 10 December 2004. A pamphlet relating to cultural & community services will also be published on 13 January. Housing and social work will follow on 27 January. Finally, information relating to environmental & regulatory services and education and children’s services will be published on 3 February.

Audit Scotland provides services to the Auditor General for Scotland and the Accounts Commission