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Press release

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Councils improve social work performance but housing services face challenges

An Accounts Commission report published today shows that there were encouraging signs of further improvement in key areas of social work services last year. There is evidence that home care services are being delivered more flexibly, the proportion of qualified staff in care homes for older people increased and criminal justice services also improved. However, housing services continued to face challenges. The proportion of houses re-let within four weeks has increased to 41% from 35% last year and this is encouraging. But tenants rent arrears rose to nearly £28 million (7.9%), the proportion of income lost as a result of houses lying empty improved marginally and the proportion of council houses sold within the target time of 26 weeks fell.

Accounts Commission Chairman, Alastair MacNish says:

"It is heartening to see improvements in standards of social work services in a number of important areas. The change in home care services and the continuing increase in the numbers of appropriately qualified care workers in homes for older people are encouraging, as is the improvement in councils' criminal justice services. However the Commission is looking for improvements in tackling rent arrears, empty homes and speed of council house sales."

Social Work

Just over 58,000 people aged 65 or over received home care services. Of these approximately 33,000 (57%) received personal care, 25% received care during the evening or over night and nearly half received services at the weekend. The proportion receiving personal care services varied widely from 32.6% in West Dunbartonshire to 88.5% in South Ayrshire.

Overall, 41% of staff in council homes for older people were appropriately qualified, an increase from 39% last year and a rise of over 14% since 1999/2000.

Over 86% of social enquiry reports requested were allocated to social work staff within the target time of two days, a slight increase on last year's figure. On average, 95% of reports were submitted to courts by the due date, the same as reported last year. Only Argyll and Bute (86%), East Lothian (86%) and South Ayrshire (82%) submitted fewer than 90% by the due date.

During 2003/04 3,835 community service orders were completed, an increase of over 400 (12%) compared to 2002/03. The average rate at which these orders were served was 3.6 hours per week, up from 3.4 hours per week in the previous year.

Housing

£28 million pounds of rent was in arrears from current council tenants at the end of 2003/04. This figure represents 7.9% of the total council rent due, an increase of 0.5% on last year. The amount of income councils lost as a result of houses lying empty was just under £22 million (2.7% of all council rent due), a slight improvement on the year before. Of the 31,000 homes re-let by those councils reporting reliable information, 59% took longer than four weeks to re-let compared with the Scottish average of 65% last year. West Lothian was the only council to re-let more than 90% of its houses within four weeks, compared with Aberdeen and West Dunbartonshire where 90% of council houses took over four weeks to re-let.

Only 56% of council house sales were completed within the national target time of 26 weeks, a fall of almost 5% since 2002/3 and an 11% fall since 2001/02. The proportion of sales completed within the target time ranged from just 3.5% in East Dunbartonshire to 94.9% in Angus.

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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 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 Housing and Social Work Services. It is the 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 10 December 2004. A pamphlet relating to cultural & community services and on corporate management was published on 13 January. Finally, information relating to environmental & regulatory services and education and children's services will be published on 3 February.