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Press release

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Best Value has helped improve Scottish local government

The Accounts Commission has now published Best Value audit findings for all 32 councils and held public hearings into two councils. For the first time the public has an overall picture of how well their councils are performing. The Commission says the audits have helped councils change and improve how they are led and managed.

A report published today *Making an impact: an overview of the audits of Best Value and Community Planning 2004 – 09*, looks at progress since 2004, when this new type of audit was introduced to assess how well councils meet their Best Value duties to deliver improving services to local people.

John Baillie, Chair of the Accounts Commission, said: “Over the past five years we have seen many important changes. Councils have responded well to their Best Value duties and, while there is still a long way to go, they have made improvements to try to ensure they are better placed to deliver good quality services to local people.”

“The public now have an overall picture of council performance, including insight into activity that used to be largely free of detailed scrutiny.”

The audits have also helped hold councils to account. There were public hearings at two councils where there was significant public interest and concern about performance.

Councils have taken a much closer look at their performance and the audits have highlighted important issues such as the need for improved performance management and public reporting and better challenge and scrutiny. The audits also identify common characteristics of better performing councils, such as effective leadership by councillors and senior managers.

Caroline Gardner, Controller of Audit, Audit Scotland, said: “We welcome the progress made so far. There is now a much clearer understanding of important issues and how to drive improvement. But, as most councils realise, they still have much to do to ensure they are operating as effectively and efficiently as possible.”

After extensive consultation, the Accounts Commission and Audit Scotland are starting on the second phase of these audits. These will be more proportionate and risk-based, focusing on specific issues within each council. They will look more closely at what happens as a result of councils’ actions and will give clear judgements on whether or not councils are improving and how well they are placed for delivering future improvement.

John Baillie explained: “Now we have an overall picture of the position across Scotland we can take a more tailored approach. We want to see greater challenge of how services are delivered, more effective working with partners, and more focus on where efficiencies can be made and how best to use resources. This work is even more critical because of the pressure on finances.”

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Notes to Editors

1. The Accounts Commission for Scotland was set up in 1975 and operates independently of central and local government. The Commission checks whether local authorities, fire and police boards spend public money properly and effectively. For more information on the Accounts Commission for Scotland go to <http://www.audit-scotland.gov.uk/accounts/index.htm>
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 Auditor General for Scotland and the Accounts Commission.
The Accounts Commission is sometimes mistakenly referred to as the Audit Commission. The Audit Commission is a completely separate organisation that operates only in England.

2. Best Value is the statutory duty placed on local authorities to demonstrate their on-going commitment to providing better services to local people.

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 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
- meeting new rules relating to trading.