

Improving the Schools Estate

Summary impact report

The report findings and recommendations

1. The joint Accounts Commission / Auditor General for Scotland study report 'Improving the schools estate', was published in March 2008.
2. The study examined the performance of the Scottish Government and councils in improving school buildings within the context of the 2003 School Estate Strategy. It found that investment worth £3.9bn has so far been committed by Scottish Government and councils to improve school buildings and we estimated this figure would rise to over £5.2bn by April 2008. This has resulted in over 200 new schools and many school building improvements.
3. However, it was difficult to assess exactly what had been achieved and what still needs to be done because there is not yet consistent data available for Scotland as a whole. The report showed that school design could be better and that many pupils and staff find their new buildings overheat and do not have enough daylight and natural ventilation. In addition, environmental sustainability was not a key factor in the design of these schools.
4. The report recommended that the government and councils review the strategy and set specific, meaningful and measurable targets for further renewal of the schools estate, and that the Scottish Government should identify a financial strategy for achieving these.
5. The report also made recommendations to the government and councils to share good practice and improve school design so that pupils and staff have comfortable environmental conditions, and that in future school buildings should be designed with more consideration for environmental sustainability. Councils should be planning in the long term for their school estates, including estimating pupil numbers for at least 10 years ahead.
6. The Appendix to this report summarises impact within each element of the Audit Scotland impact framework

Immediate impact

7. The report generated considerable media interest, including front page coverage in the Scotsman and features in the Herald and Sunday Mail, headline coverage on BBC 'Reporting Scotland' and 'Newsnight Scotland', STV 'Scotland Today', BBC Radio Scotland 'Good Morning Scotland' and a number of local radio stations, an article in the Times Educational Supplement (TESS) and local press articles.

8. In the six week period from publication (up to end April 2008), nearly 700 copies of the report were downloaded from the Audit Scotland website, over 100 copies of the key messages and 90 copies of the podcast. The report and key messages were still among the top 20 downloads in May, but were less in demand after that.
9. The report was considered by the Scottish Parliament Audit Committee on 26th March 2008. The Committee then invited the Scottish Government Accountable Officer, Philip Rycroft, to tell them how the recommendations will be taken forward. A response was received on 17th September 2008, and is reported below.
10. The report was also considered by the Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee on 16th and 23rd April 2008 along with evidence from council representatives, Architecture and Design Scotland, EIS and other organisations. This was within the Committee's normal programme of evidence and information and not linked to any inquiry, so no formal actions or reports resulted.

Impact on Scottish Government policy and activities

11. The study's impact on the Scottish Government and councils began some time before publication of the report. Communications with stakeholders in 2006, suggested that our audit interest had prompted the Scottish Government to accelerate its programme for improving the quality of data, increasing opportunities for sharing good practice, and developing guidance and support for good school design.
12. These activities continued throughout the study, including an announcement on 25th February 2008, pre-empting our published report by three weeks, that the Scottish Government was funding Architecture & Design Scotland (£500,000) to provide specialist advice to councils on school design over the next 3 years. As part of that arrangement, Paul Stallan, Design Director of RMJM, became a Schools Design Champion.
13. Following publication of the report, and the Audit Committee's request for a response to our recommendations, the Scottish Government issued a press release on 11th September 2008 announcing that all the report's recommendations were accepted by the Scottish Government and COSLA, and that a joint Scottish Government and COSLA working group would be established to develop a new Schools Estate Strategy by Spring 2009. This would be the vehicle for taking forward the report's recommendations.

14. The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning, Fiona Hyslop said:
- "The report made a number of recommendations, all of which the Scottish Government and COSLA have accepted. Discussions regarding future school estate policy, funding and delivery have already commenced, with the intention of publishing a new School Estate Strategy for the longer-term by Spring 2009."*
15. The Government made a commitment in the press release that 100,000 more school pupils will be benefiting from new / improved school buildings during the life of this parliament.
16. The new joint working group includes representatives from SOLACE and the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland (ADES). The study team gave a presentation at the first meeting of the group in August 2008.
17. On 9th September 2008, a Scottish Government press release announced the establishment of the Scottish Futures Trust. While this relates to a general approach to funding infrastructure development, the announcements included the comments that:
- "SFT ... will develop the expertise and investment models for a range of public infrastructure projects including new schools,for Scotland..." and*
- "Mr Swinney set out the original project focus of SFT would be on securing public service hub developments and taking forward a new schools investment programme."*

Impact on councils' school estate management

18. Council officers involved in school estate management received copies of the report and feedback suggests that they concur with most of our findings. However, despite the Scottish Government's recent commitments to continue the school improvement programme, financial constraints are causing concern. Council representatives told the Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee that the study report's estimate of another 20 years to complete the programme of school renewal was an under-estimate and that it could be nearer 30 years due to financial constraints.
- "Projects are so big that we feel that we cannot progress them unless we get significant funding." (City of Edinburgh)*
- "Without a definitive announcement on what comes next [in terms of funding] the delay will be significantly longer than 20 years." (North Lanarkshire)*
19. It remains to be seen to what extent the Scottish Futures Trust arrangements will address the issues raised in our report.

20. The Association of Directors of Education in Scotland (ADES) responded to the recommendation to councils to estimate school pupil rolls for at least 10 years in advance, by running a seminar in July 2008 on this topic. However, the impact of this will only be seen if councils now refresh pupil roll projections on a regular basis (at least annually).
21. We have some early evidence that the report's recommendations are being recognised in recently-revised School Estate Management Plans (SEMPs). We are also aware of four councils where the study report was brought to the attention of Education / Children's Services Committees. In two of these, the Committee received a report showing the relevant recommendations for the council and actions being taken to address them.

Continuing impact

22. In the longer-term, we expect the Joint Working Group established by the SG to develop a new School Estate Strategy during 2009. At that point, it will be clearer how all the recommendations of the report are being taken forward to implementation.
23. The work on improving school roll projections should be evident in the next 6-12 months, but the true impact in terms of a better planned and managed school estate will take longer and be more difficult to assess.
24. The Scottish Government initiatives on school design and sharing good practice are likely, if successful, to begin to have an impact from 2010 in the shape of better-designed schools. This is an expensive thing to assess independently. However, if councils implement our recommendation to undertake post-occupancy evaluations, this could provide a proxy measure of the success of some aspects of school design.
25. The impact of the Scottish Futures Trust on councils' ability to fund their school building improvements may emerge over the next 6-12 months or longer.

Appendix 1 – Summary of report impact, against Audit Scotland’s framework for measuring impact

HOLDING TO ACCOUNT AND HELPING TO IMPROVE			
Assurance and accountability	Planning and management	Economy and efficiency	Quality and effectiveness
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Considerable media interest generated by report publication • Action taken by the Scottish Parliament Audit Committee • Parliamentary questions prompted by report and session at Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee • Scottish Government press release (11 Sep 08) accepting all the report’s recommendations (by Government and COSLA) • Scottish Government and COSLA setting up joint working group to develop new Strategy and take forward recommendations • Councils’ School Estate Management Plans recognising the report’s recommendations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scottish Government and COSLA setting up joint working group to develop new Strategy and take forward recommendations • ADES running a seminar for councils on projecting school rolls • Study Team presentation to the Joint Working Group 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ADES running a seminar for councils on projecting school rolls • Improvements being developed in data management by SG and councils. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scottish Government support for school design through Architecture and Design Scotland • Scottish Government and COSLA setting up joint working group to develop new Strategy and take forward recommendations • Study Team presentation to the Joint Working Group