

Address:
110 George Street
Edinburgh
EH2 4LH

Telephone:
0845 146 1010

Website:
www.audit-scotland.gov.uk



News release

Embargoed until 00:01 hours, Thursday 8 March 2012

Serious concerns over Highlands and Islands Fire and Rescue service

There is an urgent need for Highlands and Islands Fire and Rescue to establish an effective and sustainable service model which reflects the needs of the area.

In its findings published today, the Accounts Commission says it is seriously concerned that Highlands and Islands Fire and Rescue does not demonstrate Best Value. While the area has a low number of casualties and the Commission recognises the challenge of providing an effective service in such an expansive area, the service is unable to demonstrate that its approach - particularly in how it matches resources to community risk -- is sustainable.

The Commission notes with concern that the service's approach to deployment of stations and fire fighters is not based on a strategic use of Integrated Risk Management Planning. There are some serious weaknesses in how the service manages its workforce, for example in relation to training and health and safety issues.

The Commission notes that over a number of years there has been poor leadership and governance of the service by both the Joint Board and the senior management team. But it is encouraging that steps have been taken recently to improve officer leadership. There have also been improvements to the quality of performance information reported to the Board.

Chair of the Accounts Commission, John Baillie, said: "The Board now needs urgently to demonstrate better leadership and show that it can fulfil its statutory responsibilities in providing a sustainable fire and rescue service for its communities.

"To achieve this, the constituent councils need to ensure that Board members have the skills and support required to scrutinise and challenge the service in order that they can make the difficult decisions needed to demonstrate best use of resources. This is especially important at this critical time for the Board as it faces local government elections followed by a period of transition in the run up to the development of a national fire and rescue service."

While noting developments nationally in relation to a proposed national fire and rescue service, the Commission has asked the Controller of Audit to monitor the progress of the service in responding to its findings and to his report.

Media contact: Chris Holme, Tel: 0131 625 1653 cholme@audit-scotland.gov.uk

Notes to editors

1. The Accounts Commission's findings comment on the Best Value report prepared by the Controller of Audit at Audit Scotland. The report can be viewed as a pdf [here](#).
2. This is the fifth Best Value audit of fire & rescue services. The Accounts Commission will review its findings from this audit alongside those of the audits of all other fire and rescue services in Scotland. Later in 2012 it will produce a national overview commenting on the overall messages from these audits. This audit work will form a useful information resource ahead of the creation of a single fire service. The Bill is currently being considered by the Scottish Parliament. Best Value

is the duty placed on local authorities to demonstrate their on-going commitment to providing better services to local people. 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. Local authorities in Scotland, including fire and rescue, have a statutory duty to deliver best value in their services. This requires them to establish management arrangements, aimed at securing continuous improvements in their performance while maintaining an appropriate balance between quality and cost. Since 2004, Audit Scotland has carried out audits of Best Value in each of the 32 councils in Scotland and in most police authorities. These audits have helped to improve performance and accountability in local government and have brought unsatisfactory performance to the public's attention through the public reporting process.

3. The responsibilities of fire and rescue services have changed significantly over the past decade. In 2003, all Scottish services were required to produce Integrated Risk Management Plans (IRMP), identifying the level of local risks and determining the appropriate allocation of resources. The Fire (Scotland) Act 2005 introduced further changes, placing a strong emphasis on prevention rather than simply emergency response.
4. The Accounts Commission for Scotland checks how well Scotland's councils, fire and police boards perform. It operates independently of local and central government. For more information about the Accounts Commission see <http://www.audit-scotland.gov.uk/about/ac/>
5. Audit Scotland provides services to the Accounts Commission for Scotland and carries out work as directed by the Accounts Commission. Its reports are available at www.audit-scotland.gov.uk