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News release

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Existing police forces have key strengths but new force faces challenges moving to single structure

Scotland's new single police force will inherit many positive features but it can learn lessons from the current system, particularly in relation to improving the scrutiny of police services.

A report published today by the Accounts Commission and Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary for Scotland (HMICS) draws out wider lessons from Best Value audits and inspections carried out across the eight forces since 2009.

It highlights key issues facing the new service including the effective integration of local and national plans and clarity about the roles of police commanders, councillors, and communities in setting local policing priorities and plans.

The crime rate in Scotland has been declining and for many crimes is lower per head of population than England and Wales, although violent crime is higher in Scotland. Confidence in the police remains high. Complaints against the police have decreased in recent years, but did rise in 2011/12.

Police forces have a good understanding of local needs and have strengthened this by developing community policing models and working closely with partner organisations such as councils and health boards. They have coped with reduced budgets by making significant savings, particularly in reducing civilian support staff numbers. Given these reductions, care must be taken to ensure efficient and sustainable use of resources in the longer term.

Forces have made organisational improvements and are generally well managed but need to more clearly identify costs and value for money. Reports produced for police authorities often do not include enough detail or context to enable local councillors to challenge effectively.

Her Majesty's Inspector of Constabulary for Scotland Andrew Laing said: "The police service in Scotland is undergoing the most significant organisational change in its history. I am confident that it will retain its considerable strengths such as community policing but close attention is now needed to ensure effective accountability, scrutiny and inspection are maintained."

Police authorities, which are made up of councillors, are currently responsible for around £942 million spent on policing across Scotland's eight forces. The report says that while councillors actively engage with their communities they have had insufficient training and support to carry out their scrutiny roles. The report says the effectiveness of leadership and scrutiny by councillors was poor and in many cases they took on a passive role approving budgets rather than providing robust governance and challenging scrutiny.

Chair of the Accounts Commission John Baillie said: "Looking forward to the new policing structure, it is clear that important lessons can be learned from what we have at present. It is critical that the respective roles of the Scottish Police Authority, the Police Service of Scotland, local authorities and their partners are clearly understood and that policing services are managed in accordance with well-established principles of good governance and accountability."

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Notes to Editors

1. The Scottish Police Authority and Police Service of Scotland will take over the functions of the existing eight forces and police authorities from April next year.
2. The Accounts Commission checks whether local authorities, fire and police boards spend public money properly and effectively.
3. HMICS operates independently of police forces, police authorities and the Scottish Government and exists to monitor and improve the police service in Scotland.