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News release

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Threat facing councils' consumer protection services

The long-term viability of councils' trading standards services is under threat, potentially leaving consumers without important protection from rogue traders, scams and unsafe goods, says the Accounts Commission.

Protecting Consumers, a report published today, looks at trading standards and food safety services provided by Scotland's 32 councils to protect the public in areas ranging from food poisoning to doorstep cons and internet fraud. People depend on these services more in tough economic times – vulnerable groups such as older people and low-income families are particularly at risk.

Scottish consumers spend around £56 billion a year. Around 1.3 million Scots each year think they have reason to complain about the goods or services they have bought, but of these over 500,000 do nothing or do not take an unresolved complaint further.

Trading standards services educate and inspect businesses, help consumers with problems and enforce consumer law. In recent years, they have lost a higher proportion of jobs than other departments. This has left nearly half of councils with so few trading standards staff that they may not be able to provide an acceptable level of service. Food safety has not lost so many jobs, but both services are concerned about loss of expertise and lack of trainee posts.

Legislation on trading standards is a UK Government responsibility and, unlike food safety, there are no national priorities and standards. However, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA) is now taking the lead in looking at these issues.

Chair of the Accounts Commission, John Baillie, said: "We're currently living in a period of economic hardship – the very time consumers most need protection and help. The longer term threat to these vital services is worrying.

"I am pleased that councils through COSLA are considering the issues raised in this report. Councils are having to cope with severe financial pressures on all fronts and so they need to work together to find radical new ways of delivering these services and establish national standards. They should do this as a matter of urgency before it's too late and they can no longer prevent risks to consumers.

"The public are entitled to expect a consistent standard of advice and protection across the country. We last reported on these issues a decade ago and things now appear worse than they were then."

The report makes a series of recommendations to councils and COSLA on staffing, national co-ordination, and advice and support for the public.

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Notes to editors

1. The Accounts Commission for Scotland checks how well Scotland's councils, fire and police boards perform. It operates independently of local and central government.
2. Audit Scotland provides services to the Accounts Commission for Scotland and carries out work as directed by the Accounts Commission.