

Strategy

Update 2015



Who are we?

The Accounts Commission for Scotland is the public's watchdog for local government. We are an independent public body appointed by ministers. We hold local government to account, and we use our work to help local government to improve.

We assure the public about the performance of councils, and ensure that councils in turn provide the right information for their citizens to assess their performance, both over time and in comparison with similar councils. We also use our work to help promote good practice and innovation. We are not an improvement agency but we use our work to promote and support improvement.

More information on the Commission is in the Appendix.

Our context

The context in which we operate has four challenging characteristics for councils:

- Reduced resources – public spending will decline in real terms for the foreseeable future.
- Demographic change – Scotland's population is ageing which puts more pressure on services and resources.
- Increasing flexibility in how our public services are delivered.
- Ever increasing public expectations about the content, quality and delivery of public services, and how the public is involved in designing those services.

This context underlines the responsibility of councils to show how they are making best use of their resources and continuously improving in order to meet their statutory duty of Best Value. By doing so, councils can help improve outcomes for service users and their communities. Our previous work reports differing performance and rates of improvement across councils: the challenge is for all councils to demonstrate better performance.

For our part, we continuously ensure that our work is responsive to the current environment in which councils operate.

Our key themes...

for the next three years

In the next three years, we want to ensure that our work:

- Helps provide assurance to the public on the performance of each Scottish council.
- Reflects councils' responsibilities to deliver high quality services to the public, and in doing so, demonstrate good governance, use rigorous self-evaluation and effectively manage their resources.
- Gives greater prominence to the experience of the citizen and service user.
- Focuses on the effective sharing by councils of good practice, expertise, resources and innovation.
- Promotes increased pace of improvement, evidenced in the reporting by councils of better outcomes for service users and communities.

Our strategic priorities...

for the next three years

To do this, we shall:

- **Update our approach** to the financial audit and auditing Best Value and ensure that Best Value expectations of councils are clear.
- Ensure our work is effective in **overseeing councils' use of all public money**, such as in the commissioning of services, through arms' length organisations or in partnership with other bodies.
- Continue to develop how **we oversee the changing public service landscape**, including:
 - Develop and put in place, in conjunction with our scrutiny partners, an approach to audit joint health and social care boards
 - In conjunction with the Auditor General, to oversee the progress of community planning
 - Ensuring that our programme of performance audits appropriately covers the key areas of public policy and is encouraging improvement in those areas.
 - In conjunction with our scrutiny partners, continuing to improve the effectiveness of scrutiny, audit and inspection in Scotland.
- **Promote good practice and innovation** by making more effective use of data, benchmarking, and information and analysis contained in our reports.

In taking forward these priorities, we will engage effectively and regularly on issues of mutual interest with our stakeholders including the Scottish Government, councils, professional associations, trade unions and organisations representing the user, service and local government interests. Our *Engagement plan* sets out how we will do this.

We will also ensure that we continuously improve our own work by reviewing our working practices and the quality of our reports.

A detailed workplan sets out what we will do over the next 12 months to take forward these priorities. We will report progress at the end of that period.

Our action plan...

for the next year

To take forward our strategic priorities, over the next year we shall:

Update the audit by:

- In conjunction with the Auditor General, agreeing a new Code of Audit Practice reflecting our changing approach to audit (by September 2015).
- Using this new Code as the basis for a new round of auditor appointments (by the end of 2015).
- Ensuring that our annual overview report, to be published in early 2016, reflects our key themes.
- Putting in place a new approach to the audit of Best Value which is better integrated with other audit work and will provide more regular assurance about the performance of all councils (by April 2016).
- As part of this, working with other stakeholders to review and update the characteristics of Best Value, including ensuring that it reflects our key themes set out above (by April 2016).
- Reporting on how our new approach better reflects the experience of the citizen and service user (by April 2016).

Follow public money by:

- Reviewing and updating our expectations of councils on following the public pound (by September 2015).
- Ensuring audit activity reflects and holds councils to account against such expectations (from April 2016).

Scrutinise the changing public service landscape by:

- Considering how our audit activity reflects the Community Empowerment Act.
- Reporting, in conjunction with the Auditor General, on the progress made since our 2014 report *Community planning: Turning ambition into action* (by February 2016).
- Reporting and implementing, in partnership with the Care Inspectorate and Healthcare Improvement Scotland, a model of audit for joint health and social care integration boards in relation to Best Value, governance and finance (by April 2016).

Continued...Our action plan for the next year

- Publishing performance audits, by April 2016, on:
 - Major capital investment in councils
 - Health and social care integration
 - Roads maintenance
 - Understanding pressures in the health and social care system
 - Social work services.
- Continuing to work with our strategic scrutiny partners in co-ordinating and refining our approaches to scrutiny, audit and inspection.

Promote good practice and innovation by:

- Publishing, by the end of 2015, our annual direction on performance information with a view to:
 - supporting and encouraging the Local Government Benchmarking Framework as a basis of improving the performance information available to the public.
 - helping councils develop good practice in reporting performance information to their citizens.
- Publishing a *How councils work* report on roles and responsibilities in councils (by April 2016).
- Ensuring that every performance audit:
 - contains practical advice for elected members and officers
 - makes background data available for use by councils and citizens.

Background:

the Accounts Commission

The Accounts Commission was established in 1975 “to secure the audit of all councils in Scotland and to undertake and promote comparative studies to improve the economy, efficiency and effectiveness in how councils provide services”.


We act independently from the Scottish government and from local government. We consist of twelve members and use our powers to hold local government to account and assure the public about the performance of their council. We also ensure that councils provide the right information for the citizens to enable them to assess their council's performance both over time and in comparison with similar councils.

Since then, our remit has been extended by the Scottish Government:-

- In 2003, we were given the responsibility to audit councils' duty of Best Value and community planning.
- In 2008, we were asked to take on a coordinating role to support the delivery – in conjunction with our scrutiny partners - of better aligned and more proportionate and risk based scrutiny of local government.
- In 2012, we were asked to develop an audit framework designed to strengthen the accountability of community planning partnerships and supporting their improved performance.
- In 2013, we were given the responsibility to audit the new health and social care integration joint boards (including the duty of Best Value).

The Controller of Audit reports to the Commission on the audit of local government. The post is independent and is established by statute.

The Commission delivers public audit in Scotland along with the Auditor General who audits the remainder of the public sector in Scotland. Audit Scotland was created in 2000 to provide services to the Commission and to the Auditor General.

We have jointly published with the Auditor General and Audit Scotland [Public Audit in Scotland \[PDF\]](#)  which sets out the principles and themes of public audit and how it fits with and responds to the public policy environment in Scotland in which we operate.


Strategy

Update 2015

This report is available in PDF and RTF formats, along with a podcast summary at:

www.audit-scotland.gov.uk 

If you require this publication in an alternative format and/or language, please contact us to discuss your needs: 0131 625 1500

or info@audit-scotland.gov.uk 

For the latest news, reports and updates, follow us on Twitter or subscribe to our email delivery service:

 [@AuditScotland](https://twitter.com/AuditScotland)

 [Subscribe to updates](#)

 pinterest.com/AuditScotland



Audit Scotland, 110 George Street, Edinburgh EH2 4LH

T: 0131 625 1500 E: info@audit-scotland.gov.uk 

www.audit-scotland.gov.uk 

ISBN 978 1 909705 73 9

This publication is printed on 100% recycled, uncoated paper