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## News release

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### Pressures are mounting on Scotland's sheriff court system

**Reducing budgets and more complex cases are putting pressure on Scotland's sheriff court system, Audit Scotland has reported.**

Around 88,000 people face prosecution in the sheriff court system every year. Thousands more experience the system as victims, witnesses, prosecutors, defence agents, court staff and the judiciary.

A new report, *Efficiency of prosecuting criminal cases through the sheriff court system*, has found fewer cases are concluding within the 26-week performance target, the average time for cases to conclude risen, and a greater proportion of cases are going to trial. This is, in part, due to a greater focus on more complex cases involving domestic abuse and historic sexual offences, and a subsequent rise in reporting of these types of crimes.

Since 2010/11, the budgets of the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service and the Scottish Court Service have experienced a more significant reduction than the overall Scottish Government budget.

The estimated annual cost of prosecuting sheriff courts cases is over £200 million. Almost half of court appearances did not proceed as planned in 2014/15, with an estimated £10 million spent on cases repeating stages unnecessarily.

The report notes that establishment of the Scottish Government's Justice Board has improved joint working between key national bodies and management of the system as a whole. This helped manage a 10 per cent increase in the number of cases in 2013/14. It's important that work is undertaken to replicate that progress at a local level.

Audit Scotland is also recommending that the bodies involved in the system take a fresh look at how they measure and report the performance of sheriff courts, and consider how to build upon the 26-week performance target to provide a broader public picture of the system's efficiency.

Caroline Gardner, Auditor General for Scotland, said: "Scotland's sheriff courts are an important part of our justice system, experienced by thousands of people, including victims and witnesses, every year.

"Like many parts of the public sector, the sheriff court system is facing falling budgets. Together with an increasing focus on cases which are more complex, this is putting pressure on the system as a whole. To deal with this, all the bodies involved in our sheriff court system must continue to develop how they work together, both nationally and locally."

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#### Notes to editors

1. Part 1 of the report explains how criminal cases are prosecuted through the sheriff courts. Part 2 outlines the performance and efficiency of the sheriff court since between 2010/11 to 2014/15. The

report also includes a range of case studies exploring work by individual sheriff courts and initiatives across Scotland.

2. Between 2010/11 and 2014/15, the Scottish Government's overall budget fell by seven per cent in real terms. Over the same period, the total budgets of the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service (COPFS) and the Scottish Court Service have fallen by 14 and 28 per cent respectively. Their revenue (operational) budgets fell by 12 and 17 per cent respectively. We estimate that Police Scotland, COPFS, the Scottish Court Service and the Scottish Legal Aid Board spent at least £203million prosecuting criminal cases through the sheriff courts in 2014/15. Exhibit 7 of the report explains this figure in more detail.

3. Audit Scotland commissioned Reid Howie Associates (RHA) to interview victims and witnesses and hold focus groups with offenders to ask for views following their experiences of the sheriff courts in Scotland. The report from RHA is available separately on our website.

4. On 1 April 2015, the Scottish Court Service (SCS) merged with the Scottish Tribunal Service to form the Scottish Courts and Tribunals Service (SCTS). In this report, we refer to the SCS as we are using financial and performance information for the period up to 31 March 2015. Our recommendations are directed, in part, to the SCTS.

5. This report does not consider the impact of recent court closures. These are part of an ongoing broader programme of reform of the justice system, and the Scottish Courts and Tribunals Service is currently assessing the impact of court closures.

6. Audit Scotland has prepared this report for the Auditor General for Scotland. All Audit Scotland reports published since 2000 are available at [www.audit-scotland.gov.uk](http://www.audit-scotland.gov.uk)

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