

Summary

An overview of local government in Scotland 2016



ACCOUNTS COMMISSION 

Prepared by Audit Scotland
March 2016


The Accounts Commission

The Accounts Commission is the public spending watchdog for local government. We hold councils in Scotland to account and help them improve. We operate impartially and independently of councils and of the Scottish Government, and we meet and report in public.

We expect councils to achieve the highest standards of governance and financial stewardship, and value for money in how they use their resources and provide their services.

Our work includes:

- securing and acting upon the external audit of Scotland's councils and various joint boards and committees
- assessing the performance of councils in relation to Best Value and community planning
- carrying out national performance audits to help councils improve their services
- requiring councils to publish information to help the public assess their performance.

You can find out more about the work of the Accounts Commission on our website: www.audit-scotland.gov.uk/about/ac 

Audit Scotland is a statutory body set up in April 2000 under the Public Finance and Accountability (Scotland) Act 2000. We help the Auditor General for Scotland and the Accounts Commission check that organisations spending public money use it properly, efficiently and effectively.

Summary



Key messages

- 1** Councils' revenue funding from the Scottish Government will reduce by five per cent in 2016/17, bringing the real terms reduction in revenue funding since 2010/11 to 11 per cent. At the same time, they face additional financial pressures and greater demands on services. Councils have been effective in balancing their annual budgets until now but councillors face increasingly difficult decisions about how best to spend their reducing budgets. This requires clear priorities and better long-term planning.
 - 2** Councils' responses to budget reductions have mainly focused on incremental savings to existing services. In the face of further funding reductions, councils should be evaluating options for more significant changes to delivering key services, beyond health and social care integration.
 - 3** Despite reducing their spending, performance measures show that councils improved in areas such as educational attainment, the quality of council housing and waste recycling, in 2014/15. However, customer satisfaction with some services declined and there are more significant funding reductions to come in 2016/17 and beyond.
 - 4** Most councils have reduced their workforces to save money, and many are planning further staff reductions. In doing so, they need to ensure they have people with the knowledge, skills and time to design, develop and deliver effective services in the future.
 - 5** Councils and their partners also need to respond to the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015, by involving local people more in making decisions about services, and empowering local communities to deliver services that are sustainable and meet local needs.
 - 6** Councillors need to keep updating their skills and knowledge to fulfil their complex and demanding role. In particular, it is increasingly important that they are able to challenge and scrutinise decisions and performance, and fully assess options for new and different ways of delivering services within their reducing budgets.
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Recommendations

Councillors are now leading complex organisations in increasingly challenging circumstances. There are a range of sources to help them understand and manage their council's financial and service performance, for example the Improvement Service. Our recommendations are intended to complement other sources of support and help councillors in carrying out their role effectively.

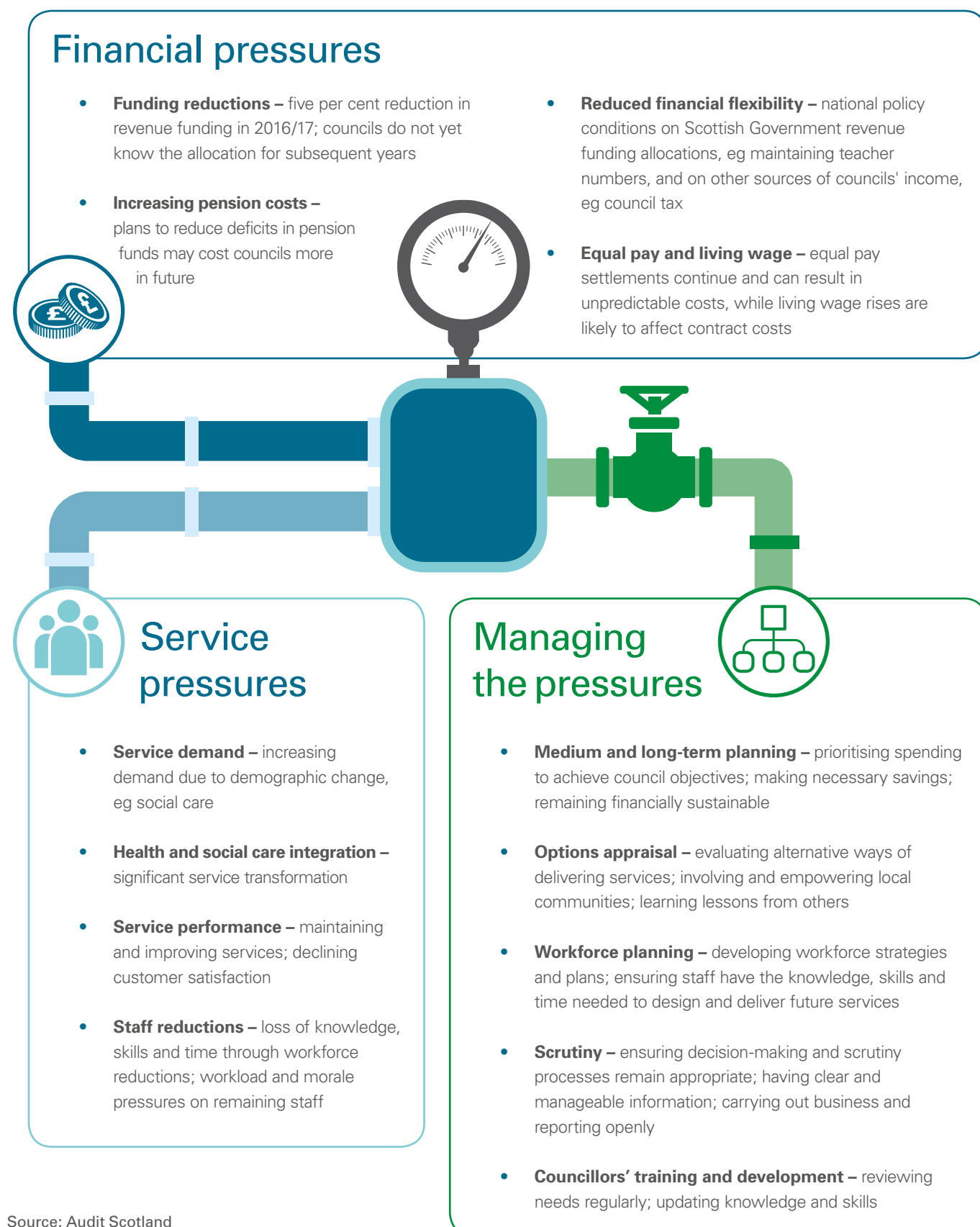
Councillors should:

- satisfy themselves that their council has a longer-term financial strategy (five or more years) supported by an effective medium-term financial plan (three to five years). These should show how the council will prioritise spending to achieve its objectives, make any necessary savings and remain financially sustainable
 - appraise all practical options for how to deliver the services their communities need within the resources available. This includes examining opportunities to work with and empower communities to deliver services in different ways, and learning lessons from others and from wider public service reform. They should ensure they get all necessary information and support from officers to help them fully assess the benefits and risks of each option
 - ensure their council continues to develop workforce strategies and plans that clarify the numbers and skills of staff needed in future. In assessing their council's workforce, councillors should consider whether they have people with the knowledge, skills and time to support them effectively in making the difficult decisions that lie ahead, and to design and implement new ways of delivering services
 - make sure that decision-making processes and scrutiny arrangements remain appropriate for different ways of delivering services. This includes:
 - having clearly written and manageable information to help them make decisions and scrutinise performance
 - carrying out business openly and improving public reporting
 - regularly review their personal training and development needs. They should work with council staff and others to create opportunities to update their knowledge and skills in increasingly important areas, such as financial planning and management, options appraisal, commissioning services, partnership working and scrutiny. These opportunities should also be available to any new members after the local elections in 2017
 - use the questions in this report and the separate self-assessment tool to help them assess their council's position.
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Exhibit 1

Local government pressures


In the face of financial and service pressures, councils should be planning for the longer term and evaluating options for more significant service redesign.



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This report is available in PDF and RTF formats, along with a podcast summary at:
www.audit-scotland.gov.uk 

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