

Engagement strategy and plan 2019–24




Who we are

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, 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 our role, powers and meetings on the Accounts Commission [web pages](#) .

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Introduction

The Accounts Commission and its partners

The Accounts Commission is the public spending watchdog for local government in Scotland. We safeguard public money and assure the public over the services they receive.

We work together with the Auditor General for Scotland to deliver the public audit for all of the Scottish public sector. Audit Scotland and the audit firms we employ carry out our programme of audits on our behalf. Our joint publication [Public audit in Scotland](#) sets out how we provide public audit.

The purpose and scope of this engagement strategy

The Commission reports independently on how local services perform and how public money is used. We also want our work to help councils to improve.

We aim to make our work increasingly accessible to increase our reach and impact. By reporting independently on councils, we can help residents and communities take a greater and more informed part in their local services.

This engagement strategy and plan complements the Commission's [Strategy](#) and sets out how we will promote our messages and engage the public and our stakeholders. It identifies our stakeholders, the reasons why we engage with them and the methods or channels we will use. It sets out areas we will continue to develop to promote its messages more widely and involve the public. We will report annually on our progress.

Our stakeholders

We engage with a wide range of stakeholders



Our engagement objectives

Public scrutiny is vital to drive improvement and hold councils to account. The Accounts Commission is the only body that gives an independent assessment of all aspects of the performance of each council. Our engagement activity comprises two main areas:

- Our external engagement to communicate our messages clearly and involve the public and our stakeholders in our work
- Our internal communications within our organisation and with our audit and scrutiny partners.

The following objectives apply to our communications activity for 2019/20 and beyond. We will incorporate these broad aims into the Accounts Commission's future strategy statements and report on these accordingly:

We hold councils to account and help them to improve. We operate impartially and independently, and we meet and report in public. In engaging with the public and our stakeholders, we will:

- support public scrutiny by informing the public about how public money is spent and the quality of local services
- increase the reach of our work and demonstrate its impact
- keep our audit relevant to the public, local government and other stakeholders
- work in partnership with others to plan and deliver public audit
- communicate with our audit peers and scrutiny partners to improve our effectiveness.

Who are our audience and how should we engage?

We engage with the public and a wide range of stakeholders: councils, Scottish Parliament, and the various professional bodies and representative groups we deal with. The public covers many and varied groups, for example people who use services, tax payers and disadvantaged or minority groups.

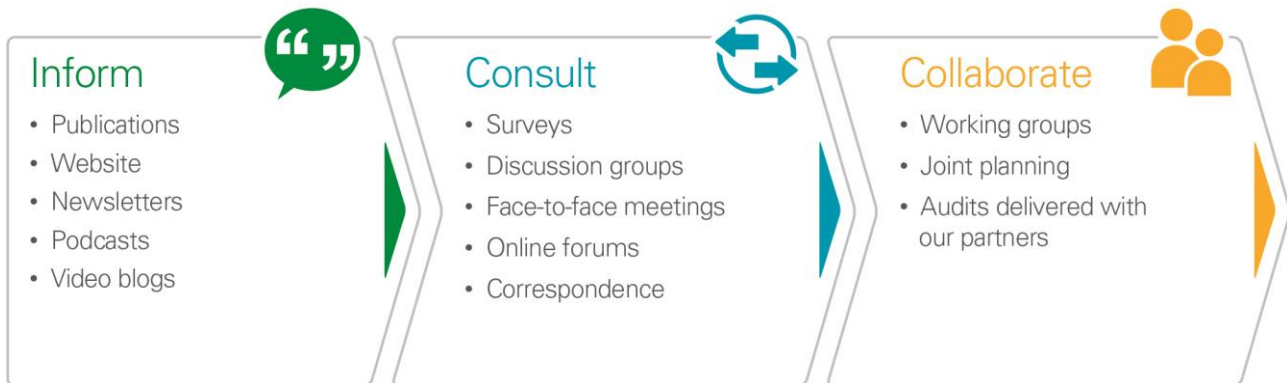
We recognise that the requirements of those we consult with – and how they may use of our work – will be different. We need to use different ways to communicate with and involve them. The potential 'asks' or interests of our different audiences are outlined below.

The 'How we engage' section of our strategy shows how we plan to tailor our work to these different audiences. In turn this will help to increase the impact of our work. We will continue to develop our understanding of the 'asks' or expectations of our stakeholders.

Audience	Potential 'asks'
 <p>The public</p> <p>Our work is relevant to people who use services, tax payers, citizens and communities. We will use local promotion plans to sign-post our work and promote our messages in different ways.</p>	<p>How good are my services?</p> <p>Does my council offer good value?</p> <p>Does it need to improve?</p>
 <p>Press and broadcast media</p> <p>The media is vital to help us engage with the public and communities. We will use press releases, video blogs, podcasts and other means to help promote our messages.</p>	<p>What has the watchdog found?</p> <p>Where is the council doing well?</p> <p>Where do things need to improve?</p>
 <p>Councils</p> <p>We will engage with councils and their partners to make clear our role in assurance and improvement and promote our audit work. We will keep up-to-date of the issues facing them.</p>	<p>How well is my council performing?</p> <p>Are we self-aware?</p> <p>Where do we need to improve?</p> <p>Do you recognise the pressures we face?</p> <p>How will your audit add value?</p>
 <p>Scottish Parliament and Government</p> <p>We will support parliament's scrutiny of government by presenting our findings. We will engage to assure our activities fit with the wider agenda for public service reform.</p>	<p>How well is local government working?</p> <p>How do councils contribute to national priorities?</p> <p>How do they improve outcomes for local people?</p>
 <p>Auditor General and Audit Scotland</p> <p>We work together to deliver public audit in Scotland. We will ensure a mutual understanding of our priorities, agree work that we can do jointly, and to ensure that our priorities are delivered by Audit Scotland.</p>	<p>What are our shared priorities?</p> <p>Where can we work jointly with others?</p> <p>How do we add value?</p> <p>How do we help to improve?</p>

How we engage

We use different methods to engage depending on the message and the audience



We engage with others for varying reasons, for example to communicate our messages, to seek views on our work, and to work together in partnership. Our engagement has three purposes:

- **Inform** – promoting our audits and related information.
- **Consult** – seeking the public and our partners' views on our work
- **Collaborate** – working with others to shape and deliver what we do.

The Commission communicates externally with the public and other stakeholders to inform them about our audit and its messages. This includes our 'Best Value' audit reports on individual councils, and our performance audit and overview audits that look across councils and services nationally. We also report on the Commission's priorities, plans and progress through our annual reports and strategy.

We use different channels or tools to share our reports and key messages, for example:

- performance audits and our Best Value reports on councils each have a promotion plan
- podcasts, blogs, animations and press releases are used to share key messages
- reports are designed to make them easily read on mobile devices, and key exhibits are shared through social media to sign-post our work.

In doing this, we consider the likely expectations, or 'asks' of our audience. We will also consider the costs involved and their likely impact. We encourage councils themselves to report their performance to their communities. Our [Statutory Performance Information Direction](#) sets out requirements for how councils should publish public information on their activities and performance.

Meeting our local government stakeholders

We meet with councils, parliament and other stakeholders to discuss our work and seek their feedback. Our Engagement Plan (page 10) sets out in detail what this will involve.

Much of our engagement work involves our local government stakeholders. For example, briefing newly elected councillors on our work, and meeting with representative bodies such as the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA) and the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives in Scotland (SOLACE). We seek views from councils, trades unions and other public bodies on our work programme, and our Statutory Performance Information Direction.

The Scottish Parliament is a key stakeholder and our reports are considered by its scrutiny committees and other committees as appropriate as a part of their public scrutiny role. Our briefings to the Local Government and Communities committee on our overview reports are now an established part of its budget scrutiny process.

We meet with individual councils after the publication of a Best Value Assurance report. This exchange of views gives us valuable insight into issues important to councils and helps build our dialogue with councils.

The Commission coordinates local government scrutiny through a strategic group of scrutiny partners including the Care Inspectorate, Education Scotland, and the Scottish Housing Regulator. We also engage internally with Audit Scotland and our partners including the audit firms we work with, to plan and deliver our work.

Involving the public in our work

We need to understand issues relevant to the people of Scotland to keep our work relevant and help improve our public services.

Involving the wider public more in our work is an increasing focus for the Commission. For example, we meet with an Equalities and Human Rights Group to inform our work. Audit Scotland run a youth panel with Youth Scotland to seek the views of school-age people from various backgrounds. We also seek councils' and others' opinion on aspects of our audit reports through our quality assurance team.

We will develop our public engagement work further. We plan to look at options to engage further with other advocacy or representative bodies, and make greater use of social media to promote and gather feedback on our work. We will report on progress through our Annual Report.

Our annual engagement plan

Our annual engagement plan sets out our key engagement activities over the next year (to 31 March 2020). We will report our progress against this plan at the end of the year.

What we will engage about	Who we will engage with	How we will engage	When we will engage
Involving the public and stakeholders			
Meeting our stakeholders to discuss our strategy and our work	Councils, COSLA, SOLACE, Scottish Parliament, Scottish Government	<p>Meet as required with COSLA, SOLACE, Parliamentary committee conveners, party representatives, and the Scottish Government.</p> <p>Meet with the Parliament's Local Government and Communities Committee re our local government overview reports.</p> <p>Hold <i>Council Conversation</i> events (currently every two years) with leaders and chief executives from all councils.</p>	<p>Throughout the year</p> <p>Consult</p>
Seeking views on our audit work programme	Councils, trades unions, third sector and other stakeholders.	<p>Seek views on our five-year rolling audit programme.</p> <p>Publish our programme on our website, promoted through social media.</p>	<p>Early 2020, and throughout the year</p> <p>Consult</p>
Involving the public in our work	The public and representative groups	<p>Continue to engage our Equalities and Human Rights Advisory Group, and Youth Panel.</p> <p>Explore options to engage with new representative groups to inform our work.</p>	<p>Throughout the year</p> <p>Collaborate</p>
Assuring the quality of our work	Councils, the public and our partners	<p>Meet with councils following publication of a Best Value assurance report to seek their views on the audit.</p> <p>Consider and report publicly on our independent Audit Quality team assessment of our audit quality.</p>	<p>Throughout the year</p> <p>Consult</p>
Working with our audit peers	Auditor General, Audit Scotland	Develop a joint programme of work with the Auditor General in areas of mutual interest in consultation with Audit Scotland.	<p>Throughout the year</p> <p>Collaborate</p>

What we will engage about	Who we will engage with	How we will engage	When we will engage
Working with our partners	Scrutiny Partners, audit firms, public sector representatives	<p>Coordinate scrutiny activity with our scrutiny partners through our Strategic Scrutiny Group.</p> <p>Engage with stakeholders to plan and deliver our work eg through advisory groups; identifying good practice; and incorporating the service user perspective.</p> <p>Commission members, as audit sponsors, will attend stakeholder advisory groups to inform the audit.</p>	<p>Throughout the year</p> <p>Collaborate</p>
Supporting improvement and promoting our work	Local government stakeholders	<p>Continue to share good practice through exhibits, infographics and checklist tools.</p> <p>Develop and promote our How Councils Work series.</p> <p>Support councils, Improvement Service and other partners in learning events, conferences and webinars.</p> <p>Provide updates of current issues through briefings and other events such as round table discussions</p>	<p>Throughout the year</p> <p>Inform</p>
Promoting our <u>programme of audit work</u>			
Local Government Overview reports	The public, councils and our stakeholders	<p>Publish our overview reports, promoting key issues and themes using checklists, podcasts, key exhibits, social media.</p> <p>Notify council leaders, chief executives, Scottish Parliament/Government representatives as appropriate.</p> <p>Present these reports to Parliament committees as appropriate.</p>	<p>Spring and autumn 2019</p> <p>Inform</p>
Best Value Assurance reports (BVAR) for individual councils	The public, councils and our stakeholders	<p>Publish six BVARs each with a tailored promotion plan re:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Highland • Midlothian • North Lanarkshire • Perth and Kinross • Scottish Borders • South Lanarkshire • Stirling. 	<p>Throughout the year</p> <p>Inform</p>

What we will engage about	Who we will engage with	How we will engage	When we will engage
Our national performance audits	The public, councils and our stakeholders	<p>Publish reports on areas of significant public interest (each with a promotion plan, and subject to a future impact report):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • City region and growth deals • Early learning and childcare – impact and follow-up • Educational outcomes • Affordable housing • Revenue financing of assets. 	<p>Throughout the year</p> <p>Inform</p>
Impact reports	The public, councils and our stakeholders	<p>Publish two impact reports:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-Directed Support follow up (published August 2017) • Equal Pay in councils (published September 2017). <p>(These report on how public bodies have responded to our recommendations.)</p>	<p>Throughout the year</p> <p>Inform</p>
Our strategy and annual reports	The public, councils and our stakeholders	<p>Publish on our website and inform our stakeholders in local government, Scottish Parliament / Government:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strategy and annual action plan • Engagement strategy and plan • Annual report (including progress against our action plans). <p>We will review future options to streamline our annual reporting in 2019/20.</p>	<p>Spring 2019</p> <p>Inform</p>
Our work programme	The public, councils and our stakeholders	<p>Publish our work programme on our website after we have consulted with stakeholders.</p>	<p>Early 2019</p> <p>Inform</p>
Briefings	The public, councils and our stakeholders	<p>Share with stakeholders briefings on current issues as appropriate including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cybersecurity • Drug and alcohol policy • Local economic development • Teacher workforce planning. 	<p>Throughout the year</p> <p>Inform</p>

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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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