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Press release

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Councils must strive to improve customer service

An Accounts Commission report published today looks at how councils deal with requests for services and information from their customers, including taxpayers and business contacts. Good customer service is an integral part of councils' duty of Best Value. The report says that councils have made improvements, but need to review organisation and leadership to ensure their customer service is as efficient and effective as possible.

Providing consistent, high quality service to customers is a big challenge for councils because of the enormous range of services and information they must provide in response to requests from customers. Each year councils deal with 35–40 million such enquiries or more and spend at least £40 million on customer service. Clear leadership and management is needed to address the complex and diverse issues that arise.

In the last three years councils have made important changes in how they deal with customers. For example, two out of three customers prefer to contact their council by phone and 16 councils have opened call or contact centres to help respond better to these enquiries. Easier access to services and information helps customers and should help councils become more efficient.

Most councils have carried out surveys of customer satisfaction with some or all their services, but there are big differences in survey methods, scope and objectives. Overall the results do not give assurance that councils are consistently performing to high standards. For 17 councils which have surveyed users of all services since 2000, satisfaction levels ranged between 59% and 92%. Audit Scotland's own 'mystery shopper' research suggests that council customers often get what they are looking for, but not consistently, with much depending on the individual member of staff contacted.

The report also says:

- 24 councils now operate contact centres and/ or a network of first stop shops or similar facilities, though few have information about customer contacts across all main departments.
- Some councils used Modernising Government funding to put in place technology based improvement projects, but none of the councils visited had formally reviewed these projects.
- A deliberate programme to manage customer service improvements is good practice. Most councils do not have an explicit customer service programme or their plans are not completed.
- Seven councils have set up dedicated review teams to assess services and identify potential process improvements for customers. Other councils should consider establishing project teams with a specific remit to support better customer service.
- Councils should improve how they research customers' opinions on service. Targets for customer satisfaction should distinguish clearly between satisfaction with how a contact is handled and satisfaction with outcomes, to allow better comparisons between councils and services.

Accounts Commission Chair, Alastair MacNish says:

"Under Best Value Councils are working towards providing high quality customer service that is as efficient and effective as possible. This report shows councils have made a start on improvements, but it is time to take stock of what remains to be done.

In the light of these findings councils should ask if they are giving good customer service enough priority. Although there is no simple solution, councils without a solid strategy in place to manage improvement in customer service seem unlikely to succeed. Without council-wide commitment, there is a risk that worthwhile initiatives may fail and councils will not be able to meet customers' reasonable service expectations. The ultimate measure of success is customer satisfaction and councils should set targets for local improvement."

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Notes to editors

1. The report is based on results from a survey of all councils, audit visits to selected councils and 'mystery customer' research commissioned by Audit Scotland.
2. The Accounts Commission is responsible for securing the audit of 32 Scottish councils and 34 joint boards, including police and fire services. The Commission investigates whether spending bodies achieve the best possible value for money and adhere to the highest standards of financial management. The Accounts Commission is independent and is not subject to the control of the Scottish Executive or the Scottish Parliament.
3. The Local Government in Scotland Act 2003 gives local authorities new responsibilities to continually improve their service delivery, and to report publicly on their performance. The objective of Best Value is to ensure that effective management delivers better and more responsive public services. It is about local authorities:
 - balancing the quality of services with cost
 - achieving sustainable development
 - being accountable and transparent, by engaging with and being responsive to the needs of communities, citizens, customers, employees and other stakeholders
 - ensuring equal opportunities
 - continuously improving the outcomes of the services they provide
4. The Scottish Executive established the Modernising Government Fund (MGF) in 2000 to provide funding to councils and other public bodies in Scotland to help progress towards the reform and the modernisation of public services. To date the Executive has spent or committed some £100 million to MGF supported projects in three main funding rounds.
5. Audit Scotland is a statutory body set up in April 2000, under the Public Finance and Accountability (Scotland) Act, 2000. It provides services to the Accounts Commission and the Auditor General for Scotland.