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Press release

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Accounts Commission is concerned by East Lothian Council's limited progress and capacity to establish Best Value

East Lothian Council is performing just below the Scottish average, and has made limited progress in establishing Best Value. The Accounts Commission says that the council now has a very good opportunity to introduce change to address the major issues it faces.

In its first report on Best Value and Community Planning at East Lothian Council, published today, the Accounts Commission for Scotland says East Lothian Council has many inherent advantages: the area has relatively high employment and life expectancy rates, low rates of deprivation and crime, good transport links and an attractive environment. So it is therefore of particular concern that the council is performing just below the middle of the range and has made such limited progress in establishing Best Value.

Staff are committed and there are examples of successful service delivery and good improvement work within services, but the audit (prior to the council elections) found significant weaknesses:

- There has been informal decision making and a lack of openness and transparency, caused by relationships between political and managerial leaders being unduly close.
- The council has no financial strategy and does not have a systematic approach to the management of assets.
- Leadership of the council has lacked vision and coherence and has not promoted continuous improvement.
- Elected member leadership capacity has been limited and they have not been well supported to develop this capacity.
- This is combined with a lack of strategic focus and leadership by the Corporate Management Team.

Accounts Commission Deputy Chair Isabelle Low said: "East Lothian Council has so far made limited progress in establishing Best Value for its local population, which is of particular concern considering its advantages. And its lack of openness and lack of leadership have not served it well.

"However, with significant changes in political leadership since the May 2007 elections and plans for a review of senior management with the departure of the Chief Executive, the council now has a very good opportunity to introduce a programme of change and development to achieve Best Value. We urge the council to make the most of this and consider the options it has for external assistance, including learning from best practice in the local government community."

The Commission says the issues the council should address immediately are:

- Open and transparent decision making, with members and officers adhering to their roles and responsibilities
- More robust and effective scrutiny arrangements
- Effective support and training for members
- A stable senior management structure with the capacity to take forward the improvement agenda
- Medium to longer term strategies for effective management of resources including financial planning and asset management
- An effective framework for strategic planning and an integrated framework for continuous improvement

Isabelle Low continued "We look forward to receiving an improvement plan from the council which addresses the issues raised."

For further information contact Anne McCubbin at Audit Scotland tel: 0131 625 1653 or Simon Ebbett tel: 0131 625 1652

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Notes to Editors:

1. The report - which includes the findings – will be available on Audit Scotland's website on Tuesday 16 October. It is available to the media under embargo from Monday 15 October.
2. The Accounts Commission for Scotland was set up in 1975 and is independent of both central and local government. The Commission checks whether local authorities, police forces, fire & rescue services spend £18 billion of public money properly and effectively.
3. Best Value is the duty placed on local authorities to demonstrate their on-going commitment to providing better services to local people.
4. The Audit of Best Value is undertaken by Audit Scotland on behalf of the Accounts Commission. It responds to the Local Government in Scotland Act 2003, which gave councils a new power to promote or improve the well-being of their area and the people living within it and new responsibilities including:
 - making arrangements which secure Best Value, defined as 'continuous improvement in the performance of the authority's functions, having regard to efficiency, effectiveness, economy and equal opportunities'.
 - discharging their duties in a way which contributes to sustainable development
 - maintaining a community planning process
 - making arrangements for reporting to the public on their performance
 - meeting new rules relating to trading.
5. Key Features of the Audit are:
 - The focus is on each council's performance over time rather than comparisons between councils. It takes account of differences in local priorities, constraints and opportunities and therefore league tables and scores are inappropriate.
 - All 32 councils in Scotland are audited on a rolling programme.
 - Each audit results in a report to the Accounts Commission.
 - A report is published after each individual audit.
 - In most cases Key Findings from the Commission are published at the same time as the Report. However, the Commission also has the power to: Ask the Controller of Audit to carry out further investigations before reporting its findings; hold a hearing with council before reporting its findings; publish findings which include recommendations to the council and/or Scottish Ministers.
 - The council's external auditor will monitor progress and report through an annual review. If the council has made insufficient progress, the Commission will be alerted and it may ask for further action to be taken.

A full press briefing on the process and aims of Best Value is available on Audit Scotland's website:
www.audit-scotland.gov.uk/accounts/pdfs/BestValuebriefingnote.pdf