

Accounts Commission for Scotland
Annual Report on Disability Equality

**A Progress Report for
December 2007 to November 2008**

Introduction

Background

1. The Accounts Commission was established in 1975 to secure the audit of Scottish local government and to consider reports arising from that audit. The Commission's original functions have developed and its responsibilities are now:
 - to secure the audit of all accounts of local authorities and associated bodies either by employed staff of Audit Scotland or by firms of accountants
 - to secure the audit of the performance by local authorities of their Best Value and Community Planning duties
 - to consider reports made by the Controller of Audit, to investigate all matters raised and to conduct hearings where appropriate
 - to undertake or promote Best Value studies in local authorities
 - to give directions to local authorities on performance information
 - to make recommendations to Scottish ministers and to local authorities, and to impose sanctions on individual officers and members responsible for illegality
 - to help advise Scottish ministers on local authority accounting matters.

Accounts Commission Members

1. The Accounts Commission can have between 6 and 12 members appointed by Scottish Ministers, and currently has 11 members. The Accounts Commission does not employ any staff directly but Audit Scotland supports the Commission in its work.

Leading and co-ordinating work on the disability equality duty

1. The Accounts Commission as a whole has overall responsibility for the Disability Equality Scheme. Since the Accounts Commission does not employ any staff the employer's duty does not apply and this is reflected in our Disability Equality Scheme. Responsibility for implementation of the Accounts Commission scheme rests with Audit Scotland.
2. This disability equality duty annual report should be read alongside that of Audit Scotland who, as the delivery agency and employer, are engaged in the wider range of work to promote disability equality through audit.

Progress to November 2008

1. Accounts Commission Equality Schemes

The public sector duties require us to publish equality schemes and action plans detailing our approach to addressing key issues. We currently have three schemes in place for Race, Disability and Gender covering staggered three year periods linked to when the duties were introduced. In 2008 we started the ground work to merge these schemes into one overarching equality scheme which covers all six equality strands in readiness for future legislative developments. The additional strands to be covered are Age, Religion & Belief and Sexual Orientation. This has included researching the guidance for building an effective, fit for purpose scheme. A single integrated scheme will allow us to take better account of the range of diversity issues (such as multiple discrimination effects). We will ensure that no one equality strand is sidelined by combining the schemes. In early 2009 we will start the consultation process for developing our new scheme.

2. Members of the Accounts Commission

Accounts Commission members are appointed by Ministers, with support from the Office of the Commissioner for Public Appointments, and so the process of appointment has regard to disability equality. Members of the Commission are appointed on a single set of terms and conditions and there are appropriate arrangements in place for induction, re-appointment, allocation to the Accounts Commission's committees and engagement with best value reports and performance audit studies. In addition, where reasonable adjustments are required to accommodate any member's disability, these would be put into place.

As Audit Scotland is the body who deliver work on our behalf, and to support our work, we maintain an overview of Audit Scotland's approach to diversity and equality to ensure that their work on our behalf promotes equality.

3. Best Value audits and the development of Best Value 2

All Best Value audits assess local authorities' approach to addressing equalities issues. To ensure consistent and appropriate treatment of equality and diversity issues an on-line guide to equalities has been developed in the Best Value audit manual.

As we are now approaching the end of the first round of Best Value audits, one of our most important activities during 2007-2008 has been reviewing our best value audit approach. In our Best Value 2 development work, we have been guided by 7 principles, including a "stronger focus on the experiences of citizens and service users". This means considering all diversity strands and equality issues as a key cross-cutting theme as part of BV2. We are currently developing our approach to auditing equalities and diversity as part of BV2, and engaging with the EHRC and other stakeholders as part of that process, prior to implementation of BV2 in Spring-Summer 2009

4. Performance Audit Work and Public Reporting Studies

In order to realise the opportunity to promote equality in our externally focussed work, we ensure that Audit Scotland make consideration of equality and diversity mandatory in

developing project and study briefs. In order to ensure the right questions are asked, a guidance booklet entitled 'Building diversity and equality into our work' has been developed by Audit Scotland. The booklet raises awareness about disability considerations alongside other equality strands. It also gives explicit guidance on how to consider diversity and equality at every stage of research.

On our behalf, Audit Scotland have also consulted and involved disabled people in the preparation of our forward work programme to ensure we are taking the opportunity to promote equality of opportunity and eliminate unlawful discrimination in our work. The outcomes of this consultation and involvement are covered in more detail below.

In November 2008 we published a report on the impact of the race equality duty on council services. The focus of this study was on race equality policies and processes and the need to ensure these have a positive impact on services. Full details can be found on Audit Scotland's external website.

5. Statutory Performance Indicators

The Accounts Commission specifies statutory performance indicators (SPIs) which all councils, police forces and fire and rescue services must publish. There are specific indicators relating to gender equality and the accessibility of council buildings to people with disabilities within the Commission's SPI regime. Consultation is ongoing to ensure these measures are relevant.

6. Impact Assessments

Audit Scotland carry out impact assessments on our behalf. The impact assessment process includes consideration of impact in relation to disability to determine if any unjustified discrimination exists. As part of developing a single equality scheme, Audit Scotland is currently in the process of reprioritising our functions and policies to build an updated programme of impact assessments. Audit Scotland will publish impact assessment results on our behalf annually.

In acting on our behalf, Audit Scotland recognise that integral to their work is a consideration of how people are affected by public policy and practice. Impact assessment type activity has been happening as part of Audit Scotland's normal practices and they are now working to make this more explicit and evidenced.

We are starting work on the impact assessment of the second round of best value audits in local government.

The Scottish Government's Equality Impact Assessment tool is being used to support the impact assessment process in Audit Scotland. Training will be organised during early 2009 for those responsible for completing Equality Impact Assessments. This will ensure they have a full understanding of the process.

7. Internal Delivery Infrastructure

Audit Scotland's Diversity and Equality Working Group has now been superseded by a Diversity and Equality Steering Group. This group is supported by delivery teams across the business to reinforce the fact that responsibility for delivery on diversity and equality is shared across the whole organisation. The new Steering Group is finalising its work plan for 2009.

8. Consultation and Involvement of disabled people

We have a history of consulting widely, through Audit Scotland, on the work we do and include equality organisations within the scope of this consultation. In order to develop this further, during 2008 we have been building a working relationship with Capability Scotland, a disability organisation who can support the delivery of our equality objectives. In September 2008 we hosted an involvement event with Capability Scotland where a number of disabled people were invited to contribute to debate and discussion in three areas of current focus. These were:

- Audit Scotland's Corporate Priorities for 2008-2013
- The Forward Study Programme of the Accounts Commission and Auditor General for Scotland
- Audit Scotland's internal best value review of recruitment

The event was very worthwhile and a significant number of recommendations were made by the group. These are currently being considered in detail by the respective teams and, where appropriate, will be implemented and/or incorporated into our ongoing equality scheme and action plans. A final report of the consultation event showing discussion themes, recommendations and actions to be taken will be published on our website once this process is completed. However, there are several emerging themes which are highlighted here and are covered in more detail in Audit Scotland's Disability Progress Report:

- Raising Awareness – the need to ensure the general public (including people with disabilities) are aware of the work of the Accounts Commission and Audit Scotland, particularly in relation to studies.
- Accessibility – ensuring publications are accessible in different formats and summaries available in clear, understandable formats.
- Leveraging influence – how the organisation can further use its powers and influence to promote compliance with equality legislation in the public sector and share best practice in the area of disability equality (and equality generally).
- Sensitive handling of disability related information – this particularly relates to recruitment and employee records.
- Mainstreaming equality – particularly ensuring that in mainstreaming there is still clarity of where equality and diversity issues have prominence.
- Skills and Competence - Ensuring auditors and advisory groups who are expected to highlight diversity issues have the training and support to deliver on this.

It is our intention to run regular consultation and involvement events in conjunction with Capability Scotland. We are in the process of identifying suitable topics for another event in Spring 2009.

9. Communication

Diversity and equality issues have been particularly considered with regard to the publication of the Accounts Commission's work. Following consultation with users internally and externally, our website has been rebuilt and offers different formats for users including pdf, rtf and mp3 versions of publications. The Shaw Trust have approved the accessibility of our website and 'Browsealoud' software can be downloaded from their website and used to access all content as the spoken word. Shaw Trust is a national charity that provides training and work opportunities for people

who are disadvantaged in the labour market due to disability, ill health or other social circumstances. We received their accreditation in August 2008 as recognition of the highest level of accessibility built into our website. We will strive to maintain this standard in the years to come.

Consideration is also given to the likely needs of different audiences which enable reports to be printed in alternative formats in advance. We will continue to develop the inclusivity of communication processes. In addition, we will be more explicit in promoting our equality and diversity work in core publications and by using our website more effectively. We continue to publish all our reports in RTF format to allow ease of access. We also provide podcasts for most of our major reports, which continue to prove popular.

Next Steps

Our key immediate priorities going forward are:

- Introducing a combined Accounts Commission equality scheme and updating our action plans to reflect current work priorities.
- Reflecting the equality duties effectively through all aspects of Audit Scotland's activities, including the next stage of best value.