

Accounts Commission for Scotland

Annual Report on Gender Equality

**A progress report for
July 2007 to June 2008**

Introduction

Background

1. The Accounts Commission is a statutory, independent body which, through the audit process, assists local authorities, police and fire boards in Scotland to achieve the highest standards of financial stewardship and the economic, efficient and effective use of their resources. The Commission has four main responsibilities:
 - securing the external audit, including the audit of Best Value and Community Planning
 - following-up issues of concern identified through the audit
 - carrying out national performance studies to improve economy, efficiency and effectiveness in local government
 - Issuing an annual direction to local authorities which set out the range of performance information they are required to publish.
2. The Commission secures the audit of 32 councils and 40 joint boards (including the police and fire services). Local authorities spend over £14 billion of public funds a year. Together with Audit Scotland and the Auditor General, they ensure that the Scottish Executive and public sector bodies in Scotland are held to account for the proper, efficient and effective use of public funds.

Accounts Commission Members

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

Leading and co-ordinating work on the gender equality duty

1. The Accounts Commission as a whole has overall responsibility for the Gender Equality Scheme. Since the Accounts Commission does not employ any staff the employer's duty does not apply and this is reflected in our Gender Equality Scheme. Responsibility for implementation of the scheme rests with Audit Scotland.
2. This general 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 gender equality through audit.

Progress to June 2008

1. Accounts Commission Equality Schemes

The public sector duties require us to publish equality schemes and action plans to detail 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 will be merging these schemes into one overarching equality scheme which covers all six equality strands in readiness for future legislative developments. This will also allow us to take account of cross strand issues (such as the multiple discrimination effects) whilst at the same time ensuring that none of the equality strands are sidelined by combination into one 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 gender equality.

Members of the Commission are appointed on a single set of terms and conditions, and there is a single gender-neutral set of arrangements for induction, re-appointment, allocation to the Accounts Commission's committees, and engagement with best value reports and performance audit studies.

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. Reviewing Best Value

During the period, one of our most important activities has been reviewing the best value audit. In this review, and in the preparatory work for Best Value 2, 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 in all of the key Best Value criteria and we comment on this in every Best Value report. To support the consideration of equality and diversity issues in Best Value 2 we have developed a guide to equalities in the Best Value audit manual which comprises an on-line tool. We also report through the statutory performance indicators on the number of women in senior positions.

4. Performance Audit Work 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 as mandatory in developing project and study briefs. In order to ensure the right questions are considered a guidance booklet entitled 'Building diversity and equality into our work' has been developed by a sub group within the Public Reporting Group and has been made available across the Audit Scotland. This booklet raises awareness about gender considerations alongside other equality strands and gives explicit guidance on how to consider diversity and equality aspects at every stage of research.

5. Statutory Performance Indicators

Audit Scotland (on behalf of the Accounts Commission) specifies statutory performance indicators (SPIs) which all councils, police forces and fire brigades must publish. There are specific indicators relating to gender. Consultation remains ongoing to ensure that these measures remain relevant.

6. Impact Assessments

Audit Scotland carry out impact assessments on behalf of the Accounts Commission. The impact assessment process includes consideration of impact in relation to different genders to determine if there is unjustified discrimination. Audit Scotland is currently in the process of reprioritising our functions and policies to build an updated programme of impact assessments as part of developing a single equality scheme. 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 to ensure compliance with the equality duties.

The Scottish Governments Equality Impact Assessment tool is currently being piloted in Audit Scotland's review of their Recruitment & Selection policy and the learning from this assessment exercise will be incorporated into Impact Assessment activity across the organisation.

7. Involvement

Audit Scotland's Diversity and Equality Working Group have made significant progress over the past two years particularly in putting together equality schemes for disability and gender. Audit Scotland has now reviewed how to organise its work on diversity and equality, including ongoing involvement from stakeholders. It has established a new diversity and equality steering group with diversity leads and delivery teams across the business. This will reinforce the fact that responsibility for diversity is shared across the whole organisation.

8. Communication

Diversity and equality issues have been particularly considered with regard to the publications side of the Accounts Commission's work. Following consultation with users internally and externally, the website has been rebuilt and offers different formats for users including pdf, rtf and mp3 versions of publications.

With regard to gender, our communication approach is designed to ensure inclusivity in language and we consciously avoid gender bias in terminology used.

Consideration is also given to the likely needs of different audiences which enables reports to be printed in alternative formats in advance (e.g. the Western Isles audit report was produced in Gaelic as well as English.) More work will be undertaken in 2008 to develop the inclusivity of communication processes and also to continue building effective methods of consultation in support of meeting our equality duties. In addition, we will be more explicit in promoting our equality and diversity work in core publications.

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 efficiently through the next stage of best value.