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Press release

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Fire and rescue authorities are making progress but need to do more to achieve best value

Fire and rescue authorities have made progress in reforming services, according to an Audit Scotland report published today on behalf of the Accounts Commission. However, they still need to do much more to ensure they are working as effectively and efficiently as possible and delivering best value services.

The report, *Scottish fire and rescue authorities 2007/08*, shows some improvements have been made since the main national report on performance was published in March 2007. That report included a number of recommendations, and progress on these has been made in engaging elected members and putting more resources into community safety and fire prevention in particular. Home fire safety visits are increasingly targeted to the most vulnerable groups in the community and there is some evidence that these are making a difference, with a continued reduction in accidental dwelling fires between 2003/04 and 2006/07.

Councillors are now more aware of their governance and scrutiny responsibilities and there is a better approach to working with partners. Staff management has also improved with the development of personal appraisal systems and positive steps have been taken to build a more diverse workforce and improve equalities issues.

However, there has been slower progress in other important areas. Fire and rescue authorities need to evaluate the impact and cost-effectiveness of their different approaches to community safety work and performance management generally needs to improve. Further work is also needed to demonstrate that efficiency savings are being delivered.

John Baillie, Chair of the Accounts Commission, said: "Fire and rescue authorities are improving, but this report suggests that arrangements for Best Value, on which fire and rescue authorities will be assessed from 2009, are not generally as well developed in fire and rescue authorities as they are in most councils. The pace of change has been slower than we would have liked in some areas and they need to maintain momentum in their drive to become more efficient and effective. There is a particular need for the Government, the fire service and COSLA to implement a coherent national approach to performance information.

"I have written to each convenor to emphasise how important it is that authorities act on the findings in this review and put the necessary improvements in place."

The Accounts Commission intends to introduce Best Value audits of fire and rescue authorities during 2009 and these will examine the progress of individual authorities in demonstrating continuous improvement.

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Notes to editors

1. This report tracks progress against recommendations made in *A review of service reform in Scottish fire and rescue authorities*, published by Audit Scotland in March 2007. It looked at the progress made by the eight Scottish fire and rescue authorities in reforming their services since the introduction of the Fire (Scotland) Act 2005 and concluded that while more emphasis was being given to fire prevention and community safety it was too early to demonstrate a sustained reduction in risks from fire.
2. Accidental dwelling fires have decreased from 12.2 in 2003/04 to 10.7 in 2006/07 per 10,000 population. This data is from the statutory performance indicators, which are available on the Audit Scotland website.
3. There are eight fire and rescue authorities in Scotland; Central Scotland, Dumfries and Galloway, Fife, Grampian, Highlands and Islands, Lothian and Borders, Strathclyde and Tayside.

4. Audit Scotland is a statutory body set up in April 2000, under the Public Finance and Accountability (Scotland) Act, 2000. Audit Scotland has prepared this report for the Accounts Commission for Scotland:
5. The Accounts Commission for Scotland was set up in 1975 and operates independently of central and local government. The Commission checks whether local authorities, fire and police boards spend £18.9 billion of public money properly and effectively.
6. The report will be on Audit Scotland's website from the morning of publication. www.audit-scotland.gov.uk. A podcast of the report's key findings and recommendations is available on request before publication and will be available afterwards on the website.