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Press release

Strictly embargoed until 00:01, Thursday 1 July 2010

National plan outlines new streamlined system for scrutiny of Scotland's councils

The work-plan for a new streamlined scrutiny system for Scotland's councils is published today, with a 36 per cent reduction in the time scrutiny bodies spend in councils undertaking strategic scrutiny work.

In the *National Scrutiny Plan for Local Government 2010/11*, Scotland's scrutiny agencies jointly set out the strategic scrutiny work they will do in councils during the year. The agencies are coordinating their work and focusing on the key issues at each council, in order to make scrutiny more efficient and effective.

Under the plan, scrutiny bodies will spend 36 per cent less time in councils overall compared with 2008, with visits and inspections generally quicker, more focussed, and involving fewer inspectors. To achieve this, the scrutiny activity within each council will also be more proportionate and risk-based. For some councils, this will mean less activity but in others it could mean an increase.

This plan follows a request from the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth, asking the Accounts Commission to take on a coordinating and gate-keeping role for corporate level scrutiny in councils. The main audit and inspection agencies for local government have worked together to share information and come to an agreed view on what strategic level scrutiny activity is necessary in each council and where scrutiny bodies need to target their work.

Accounts Commission chair John Baillie said: "We have worked closely with colleagues in other scrutiny bodies to develop this plan. It is a significant step towards a more streamlined and proportionate system of scrutiny for local government in Scotland and sets out clearly what work will be undertaken in each council over the next year. This is based on a joint agreement among scrutiny bodies about the risks and issues in each council, ensuring that the approach to each local authority is proportionate and individually tailored.

"In the past, when we have planned and undertaken scrutiny of a council, much of the scrutiny took place through scrutiny bodies working independently and with a 'one size fits all' approach. This was inefficient for them and also created a significant demand on councils' time and resources. With the publication of the National Scrutiny Plan for Local Government, councils will have a clear picture of what is happening, with the aim that scrutiny activity is more proportionate, more efficient and appropriate to their circumstances."

The National Scrutiny Plan for Local Government is supported by Assurance and Improvement Plans (AIPs) for each of the 32 councils. These local plans set out in more detail the reasons behind the planned scrutiny activity for each council.

For further information please contact Simon Ebbett on 0131 625 1652

Notes to editors

1. The National Scrutiny Plan for Local Government has been jointly prepared by the Local Government Scrutiny Co-ordination Strategic Group. This group was set up by the Accounts Commission through Audit Scotland and includes Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education, Social Work Inspection Agency, Scottish Housing Regulator, the Care Commission, Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary for Scotland, and NHS Quality Improvement Scotland. The group also has observer representation from the Scottish Government and from SOLACE and COSLA.
2. Following the Crerar review of public scrutiny in 2007, the Scottish Government asked the Accounts Commission to take a 'coordinating and gate-keeping role' with local government scrutiny. The National Scrutiny Plan for Local Government is the key output from work undertaken in that role.

3. The plan covers strategic scrutiny work. This is scrutiny activity that looks at corporate process (such as the way the council is run and how it uses its resources) and at service level (services include functions like education and social work and sub divisions of these functions such as adoption and fostering services). The plan excludes scrutiny at the level of individual units such as schools and care homes.
4. All Audit Scotland and Accounts Commission reports published since 2000 can be found on Audit Scotland's website www.audit-scotland.gov.uk
5. 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, fire and police boards spend £19 billion of public money properly and effectively
6. Audit Scotland is a statutory body set up in April 2000, under the Public Finance and Accountability (Scotland) Act, 2000.
7. For more information about the National Scrutiny Plan, please visit www.audit-scotland.gov.uk/work/scrutiny/
8. For more information about scrutiny agencies, please visit their websites:
 - Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education www.hmie.gov.uk
 - Social Work Inspection Agency www.swia.gov.uk
 - Scottish Housing Regulator www.scottishhousingregulator.gov.uk
 - Care Commission www.carecommission.com
 - Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary for Scotland www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Justice/public-safety/Police/local/15403
 - NHS Quality Improvement Scotland www.nhshealthquality.org