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## News release

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# New report highlights strengths and challenges as Scotland moves to a single fire service

Scotland has the potential to create a world class fire and rescue service but faces major challenges in doing so, says an Accounts Commission report published today.

The report draws together the findings of the recent audits on each of the eight fire and rescue services on how well they use resources to deliver best value for the communities they protect. It says the single service, due to be established next year, will inherit many aspects of strong performance from the existing services. But there is still scope for significant improvements.

Fire and rescue services provide an effective emergency response to fires and other emergencies such as road traffic collisions and flooding. However, while the number of fires and casualties has steadily fallen over the past decade, thanks in part to an increasing focus on prevention, the rate of decline has been slower than in other parts of the UK, and the level of house fires and deaths in Scotland is still almost double the rate of England and Wales.

In addition, despite some savings being made in recent years, the cost of fire and rescue services in Scotland remains significantly higher. The report says these differences cannot be explained solely by historic and external factors such as higher levels of urban deprivation or the additional costs involved in serving remote and rural communities.

Fire and rescue services have used Integrated Risk Management Planning to help target their work on areas of greatest risk. But the pace of change has been slow and the deployment of fire stations and firefighters has changed little over the past decade.

There are striking differences between Scotland's eight fire and rescue services, which are not explained by the context in which they operate. There is little agreement, for example, on fundamental issues such as:

- crewing levels,
- shift patterns
- the role of full-time, on-call retained or volunteer firefighters, or
- how preventative work should be targeted.

There are also very few examples of support services, such as ICT, human resources or procurement, being shared between fire and rescue services or with other emergency services such as police or ambulance.

The report says that on the whole, councillors, sitting on joint fire and rescue boards, have not provided a strong lead in scrutinising performance or in helping to drive change. Public engagement with local communities over their needs is patchy.

John Baillie, chair of the Accounts Commission, said: "This is a critical time in the history of the fire service in Scotland. There are many strengths from around the country which can be incorporated into the new service. Equally, there are many challenging issues around performance, prevention and staffing which it will also inherit.

"Strong leadership, both nationally and locally, will be needed to deal with the financial pressures facing the service. More attention needs to be paid to finding new ways of engaging effectively with communities and the workforce over service changes that will be needed in the longer term.

"All of these factors underline the scale of the challenge - but also the opportunity to create a world class fire service for Scotland. We hope this report will provide valuable pointers for future improvement."

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**Notes to editors:**

1. The *Best Value in fire and rescue services in Scotland overview report* draws on recent Best Value audits of Scotland's eight fire and rescue services. These are available online at [www.audit-scotland.gov.uk](http://www.audit-scotland.gov.uk)
2. The Accounts Commission for Scotland was set up in 1975. The Commission checks whether local authorities, fire and police boards spend public money properly and effectively,
3. Best Value is the duty placed on local authorities by the Local Government in Scotland Act 2003. It requires local authorities to demonstrate their on-going commitment to providing better services to local people.