

News release

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Testing times ahead for new councillors

New councillors elected in May face major challenges and need to focus on improving long-term planning, says the Accounts Commission.

In its 2017 overview published today, the local government spending watchdog outlines a long-term decline in Scottish Government real terms funding which makes up around 60 per cent of council income.

At the same time, there continue to be increasing pressures on services, particularly in social care and education which together account for over 70 per cent of council spending.

The report says councils overall have maintained or improved their performance in the face of these challenges. However, public satisfaction is declining and complaints are increasing. Looking ahead, they need to better involve their communities in service design and deliver.

There are wide variations between councils. Some have grasped the nettle in finding new ways to provide services more efficiently. Others have been slower off the mark. Councils have made savings by cutting jobs but half of them still don't have organisation-wide workforce plans.

Councils must learn more from each other and collaborate better to improve services and reduce costs.

Councillors elected in May must have the necessary training and tools to do an increasingly complex job determining local priorities, overseeing delivery of essential services and working in partnership with other public bodies to improve outcomes for communities and individuals.

Ronnie Hinds, deputy chair of the Accounts Commission, said: "New councillors will require time to settle in and develop skills to make strategic plans, consider options for service delivery and scrutinise how well this is happening in practice.

"But they have four years ahead of them, and they need to plan effectively for the longer term, work with their communities to decide key priorities and then make that plan happen.

"We hope our report is helpful to councillors and officers as they strive to maintain or improve services for the public with reduced resources."

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Notes to editors

1. Audit Scotland prepared this report for the Accounts Commission. It is accompanied by a good practice guide and check list for councillors.
2. The Commission previously published a single overview report in the spring of each year. This year it has been split into two parts. Today's overview covers performance and challenges and follows a financial overview published in November 2016.

3. The Accounts Commission is the public spending watchdog for local government. It holds councils and various joint boards and committees in Scotland to account and help them improve. It operates impartially and independently of councils and of the Scottish Government, and meets and reports in public.
4. Audit Scotland is a statutory body set up in April 2000, under the Public Finance and Accountability (Scotland) Act 2000. It provides services to the Auditor General for Scotland and the Accounts Commission for Scotland.
5. The Improvement Service has also published a [guide](#) for new councillors.