

# Scrutiny Supplement - School education



Prepared by Audit Scotland

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Audit Scotland is a statutory body set up in April 2000 under the Public Finance and Accountability (Scotland) Act 2000. We help the Auditor General for Scotland and the Accounts Commission check that organisations spending public money use it properly, efficiently and effectively.

# Introduction

1. The Accounts Commission published its national report, *School education*, on 19 June 2014. One of its key findings was that elected members could do more to scrutinise and challenge the performance of education services in delivering improved educational attainment and achievement. Copies of the national report are available to download from the Audit Scotland website.
2. At the time of the audit we produced a self-assessment checklist to support elected members to hold education services to account. This set out key issues for elected members to consider and ask of officers. We recognise that the circumstances of individual councils are likely to be different, requiring specific questioning; however, we consider that the checklist captures the type of issues which are generic to every council. A copy of this supplement can be found [here](#).
3. We have now produced a further supplement which sets out a range of factors that we consider to be important in creating the right environment to ensure that effective scrutiny and challenge can take place within the committee responsible for education. Effective scrutiny is vital for councils to deliver high quality services which meet the needs of the public and make the best use of their resources. The information presented in the supplement was gathered as part of our impact work for the *School education* report, where we attended a large number of council committees and observed how effectively scrutiny was undertaken.
4. This new supplement is likely to be of most use to both members of committees with responsibility for education and the officers who attend and support the committee.

# Scrutiny – Further work

5. This supplement forms part a series of planned outputs by the Accounts Commission reflecting the importance they place on scrutiny work. The Accounts Commission understand that effective scrutiny can improve the evidence base for decisions on the allocation of resources as well as ensuring that decisions are transparent and in accordance with the needs of the local community. Scrutiny also has an important role to play in contributing to policy, undertaking specific reviews and monitoring performance.
6. Further scrutiny work by the Accounts Commission currently being undertaken or planned includes:
  - Follow-up work to the 2010 *How council's work – Roles and working relationships*. This work will comment on the link between scrutiny and effective decision-making
  - The development of auditor guidelines for applying the Best Value Statutory guidance in the next round of BV audits, due to commence in October 2016. Scrutiny is given much greater emphasis in the guidance
  - In 2017/18 audit work will commence to consider how councils use member scrutiny and their internal audit function to ensure effective challenge and improvement.

**What are the key factors to ensuring effective scrutiny can take place within the committee responsible for school education?****Agenda and Reports**

- The agenda is well-planned, with sufficient time devoted to the topic for presentation, discussion and debating possible conclusions and recommendations
- Agendas and reports are sent out in advance of meetings allowing members enough time to read and fully prepare for the meeting
- Information provided within reports is high quality, relevant, timely and in an appropriate format. The information is clear and easy to understand.
- Reports provide a broader range of information to give a more rounded picture, for example information on wider achievement and primary testing (where undertaken)
- Reports include appropriate analysis that aids members' understanding of the issues and include clear recommendations
- Reports clearly outline the intended role for the Committee.

**During the meeting**

- Effective Chairing - for example, strong skills in questioning and ensuring that questions and discussions remain focussed
- Clearly set out roles and responsibilities between members and officers
- Effective questioning skills by members (eg, challenging and probing questions)
- Empowering members to effectively challenge officers and scrutinise the information provided
- Expertise and knowledge of officers is drawn on by the Committee, while ensuring that scrutiny processes remain led by members
- Members have a solid understanding of performance indicators, comparative data and financial processes
- Members actively engage in evidence-based challenge of information presented in reports
- Members are able to work together across party divides
- Scrutiny draws effectively on the work of audit, inspection and other third sector organisations
- Clear and simple presentations by officers to ensure Members have a full understanding of any information presented
- High levels of attendance from Members.

**Other**

- Members undertake appropriate training and development to undertake their role effectively.