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Press release

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Improvements in youth justice processes, but impact on outcomes unclear

An Audit Scotland report published today says that increased funding and a stronger focus on youth justice services over recent years have delivered some positive changes. However it is still not possible to demonstrate clearly that resources provide value-for-money and are being used effectively.

Robert Black, Auditor General for Scotland, said: "Youth justice is a complex area. It is encouraging that recent initiatives have resulted in some improvements, for example quicker reports from the police, faster decision making by the children's reporter service and better partnership working by the various agencies.

"The Scottish Executive has given a commitment to develop new measures that give a broader picture of the behaviour of young people. This should be welcomed. Effective performance measures would make it easier to direct resources where they will have greatest impact."

The Scottish Executive has put substantially more funding into youth justice services in recent years (£235m in 2000/01 rising to £336m in 2005/06). It also introduced national standards and targets for youth justice services and provided a range of practical support and guidance for local authorities.

Today's report says that the national standards have provided a focus for improvement. More services are now in place and partnership working at a local level has improved. Timeliness of police reporting now meets national standards, it is taking far less time for children's reporters and hearings to process referrals and reach decisions, and additional social workers have been recruited.

Despite these improvements, significant challenges remain:

- Securing reductions in levels of offending behaviour by young people, given that the Executive's target of reducing the number of persistent young offenders by ten per cent by March 2006 was not met.
- The overall increase in referrals to the children's reporter since our last report has put pressure on the children's hearings system, and there is evidence that some referrals would be better served by agencies taking action themselves.
- The introduction of anti-social behaviour orders for 12-15 year olds has created tensions with other approaches to dealing with young offenders. Most councils have found it difficult to overcome the differences between the child-centred focus of the children's hearings system and the community-focused design of the anti-social behaviour legislation.
- A stronger emphasis is required on prevention and early intervention to achieve a sustained reduction in levels of offending.
- Improvements in NHS and local authority education services' engagement with the youth justice agenda are still needed in some areas.

Alastair MacNish, Chair of the Accounts Commission, said:

"Local authorities have a key role in youth justice but they have to balance a child-centred approach with looking after their community's concerns about offending by young people. They put substantial effort into youth justice services and it is pleasing to hear that they are generally working very well with other agencies.

"Progress has been made in social work services but assessment and case management practices still need to improve, as does the timeliness of social work reporting."

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Notes to Editors:

1. The full report *Dealing with offending by young people performance update* will be available on www.audit-scotland.gov.uk from Thursday 23 August.
2. This is an update report to the *Dealing with offending by young people* reports published by Audit Scotland in December 2002 and November 2003. Those reports can be read at <http://www.audit-scotland.gov.uk/publications/pdf/2003/03pf11ag.pdf> and <http://www.audit-scotland.gov.uk/publications/pdf/2002/02pf06ag.pdf>
3. 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.
4. The Auditor General is responsible for securing the audit of the Scottish Executive and most other public bodies in Scotland, except local authorities. He investigates whether spending bodies achieve the best possible value for money and adhere to the highest standards of financial management. The Auditor General is independent and is not subject to the control of the Scottish Executive or the Scottish Parliament.
5. The Accounts Commission for Scotland was set up in 1975 and is independent of both central and local government. The Commission considers whether local authorities, fire & rescue services and police forces spend nearly £16 billion of public money properly and effectively.

The Audit Commission operates only in England.