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Third quarterly update on improving local government scrutiny

Thank you for your third quarterly update detailing progress to June 2009. I also found the meeting on 6 October very helpful.

I am encouraged by the manner in which the Accounts Commission and partners on the Local Government Scrutiny Co-ordination groups have continued to respond to the challenge of improving the approach to external scrutiny of local government activities. As indicated at the meeting I also welcome the invitation to both CoSLA and SOLACE to join the Strategic Group as Observers which I anticipate will add a valuable local government perspective to future quarterly updates.

At the meeting attendees agreed that whilst we have seen a reduction in scheduled corporate scrutiny activity between 2007 and 2009, there is a recognition that an increase in pace of the development of an improved scrutiny approach is necessary to ensure effectiveness, efficiency and assurance, whilst also ensuring that the approach is proportionate, risk-based and increasingly reliant on service providers having in place robust approaches to self-assessment and self-improvement.


The dissemination of the findings from the pilots on Best Value 2 and Shared Risk Assessments, together with further development of Local Area Scrutiny Networks and a Joint Code of Scrutiny Practice, offers the prospect of further evidenced reductions in external scrutiny activity over the next 12 – 15 months. I look forward to receiving further reports as the impact of this collaboration takes effect for councils.

The Scottish Government will continue to look at any proposals for new scrutiny work, together with current scrutiny needs, using the agreed priorities, risk categories and mechanisms embedded in the Systematic Scrutiny Check.

It is essential that our work on scrutiny improvement ensures that external scrutiny activity adds value to public services, service users and the wider public, by continuing to help drive forward continuous improvement. Given the fiscal pressures Scotland faces it is clear that this is given an added impetus.

As you noted at the October meeting, budget pressures should be regarded as contributing to the opportunity to come up with new methodologies and new ways of working which will be more cost-effective.

In conclusion I would like to emphasise our continuing support for the work being undertaken by the Accounts Commission as it moves into the gate-keeping role which we asked it to undertake. This work is paving the way for delivery of a more risk based, proportionate and co-ordinated system of scrutiny of local government activity underpinned by the "duty to co-operate" provision contained in the Public Service Reform Bill. As indicated in our previous exchanges, the Government is keen to see a strong and effective gate-keeping role and to support the Accounts Commission as it further develops the role in the next phase of its work.

Yours truly,

JOHN SWINNEY