

Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth
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Your ref:
Our ref:
3 June 2009

Second quarterly update on improving local government scrutiny

Thank you for your recent quarterly update.

I am encouraged by the manner in which the Accounts Commission and partners on the Local Government Scrutiny Co-ordination Group have responded to the challenges. It is clear that the work undertaken by the Accounts Commission and other scrutiny bodies is beginning to bear fruit. In particular the evidenced reduction in scrutiny contact is highly encouraging, and I will make sure that this is passed on in my contacts with local authorities.

You will be aware however that there remains a perception amongst some local authorities that there has been no reduction in external scrutiny. This was reflected to me in a letter from SOLACE (prior to receiving your update and, as I understand it, prior to them receiving your update). I have asked for further evidence from the local authorities they drew evidence from. My officials will pass this on to you when received.

You are of course fully aware that we need to continue with the pace of work to bring about a sustained improvement in how local government is scrutinised.

I would reiterate that while Government is very clear on the need for a more risk based and proportionate system of scrutiny, there is also a responsibility on individual local authorities to put in place robust processes of self assessment which can give assurance on the performance of services.

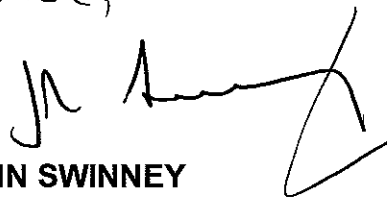
In terms of other aspects of your quarterly report, Government will support your work by ensuring our own demand on scrutiny bodies is following the same principles of being risk based and proportionate and communicating this with you.

This will be reinforced by our implementation of an ongoing review process to question the overall need for scrutiny through a regular Systematic Scrutiny Check (SSC) programme of new or continuing scrutiny of services. The SSC programme will help the Scottish Government and Parliament regularly check the cost and benefit of scrutiny activity and check that scrutiny continues to be proportionate and based on risk. We will work with you on the SSC and ensure consistency with your Shared Risk Assessment, which is being developed.

Finally, I would reiterate the importance of communication. I am encouraged that a strategy has been adopted and included initial contact with council Chief Executives, council leaders, SOLACE and CoSLA. This will benefit from the further cascading down through scrutiny bodies involved in this work (as you plan to do). The ability to deploy tangible evidence of progress within the communications strategy is very important, especially when negative perceptions of progress are evident in some local authorities.

I attach great importance to maintaining the momentum on this important package of work and to offer any assistance which can help drive this forward. I look forward to your next quarterly report after which I would like to come back and discuss progress with the group.

Yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'John Swinney', with a large, stylized flourish at the end.

JOHN SWINNEY