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Press release

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Argyll & Bute Council needs to focus on improvement

In its report on Best Value at Argyll & Bute Council published today (Tuesday 14 February), the Accounts Commission says that the council needs to do more to ensure that services for local people improve.

The report says that Argyll & Bute Council faces particular challenges because of its geographical make-up and the fact that its population is spread over a wide area. However, even taking this into account, the council needs to do far more to ensure services for local people improve.

Alastair MacNish, Chair of the Accounts Commission says:

“Some of the council’s services perform well and traditional aspects of management are sound, but overall Argyll & Bute has made limited progress in modernising or in establishing Best Value and a culture of continuous improvement. It needs to become more outward looking and responsive to the people using its services.

“To achieve this, the council needs clearer leadership. Its management needs to focus on what it is trying to achieve overall, set clear strategies and targets and ensure that these are met. Service reviews need to become more challenging and particular attention should be given to the strategic management of the council’s resources, so that financial planning fits in with overall aims and resources are matched to agreed priorities.”

The Commission identified a number of areas that need particular attention. These include:

- Developing the management team’s ability to play a more effective role in promoting continuous improvement across the council.
- Developing effective service planning and performance management systems
- Developing and using a clear and sustainable financial strategy, which links financial planning to corporate objectives and shifts resources to agreed priorities
- Learning to recognise and spread good practice within individual services across the council as a whole
- Gaining a better understanding of how other organisations, including other councils, are improving and modernising services

The Accounts Commission requires Argyll & Bute Council to produce an Improvement Plan that addresses the report and the Commission’s findings. The Commission will continue to monitor the council’s progress through the normal audit process.

Ends

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Notes to Editors:

Audit Scotland provides services to the Auditor General for Scotland and the Accounts Commission

1. Best Value is the duty placed on local authorities to demonstrate their on-going commitment to providing better services to local people. Today's report is the eleventh in a rolling programme affecting all local authorities in Scotland and provides information to local people for the first time about how well Argyll & Bute Council is organised to deliver improvement.
2. The Accounts Commission for Scotland was set up in 1975 and is independent of both central and local government. The Commission checks whether local authorities, fire and police boards spend £9 billion of public money properly and effectively.
3. The Audit of Best Value is undertaken by Audit Scotland on behalf of the Accounts Commission. It responds to the Local Government in Scotland Act 2003, which gave councils a new power to promote or improve the well-being of their area and the people living within it and new responsibilities including:
 - making arrangements which secure Best Value, defined as 'continuous improvement in the performance of the authority's functions, having regard to efficiency, effectiveness, economy and equal opportunities.
 - discharging their duties in a way which contributes to sustainable development
 - maintaining a community planning process
 - making arrangements for reporting to the public on their performance
 - meeting new rules relating to trading.
- 4 Key Features of the Audit are:
 - The focus is on each council's performance over time rather than comparisons between councils. It takes account of differences in local priorities, constraints and opportunities and therefore league tables and scores are inappropriate.
 - All 32 councils in Scotland will be audited about once in every three years. Each audit will take around 20 weeks from start to finish.
 - Each audit results in a report to the Accounts Commission
 - A report will be published after each individual audit.
 - In most cases Key Findings from the Commission will published at the same time as the Report. However, the Commission also has the power to: Ask the Controller of Audit to carry out further investigations before reporting its findings; hold a hearing with council before reporting its findings; publish findings which include recommendations to the council and/or Scottish Ministers.
 - The council's external auditor will monitor progress and report through an annual review. If the council has made insufficient progress, the Commission will be alerted and it may ask for further action to be taken.

A full press briefing on the process and aims of Best Value is available on Audit Scotland's website:
www.audit-scotland.gov.uk/accounts/pdfs/BestValuebriefingnote.pdf