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## Press release

Embargoed until 00.01 Thursday, 17 August 2006

### Commission 'concerned' at comhairle's lack of progress on Best Value

**The Accounts Commission has today published its Best Value report on Comhairle nan Eilean Siar (Western Isles Council), citing a number of areas of performance where the comhairle must improve.**

Isabelle Low, deputy chair of the Accounts Commission, said: "We are concerned that the comhairle is currently unable to demonstrate a commitment to continuous improvement built into its processes. Without this the comhairle will find it increasingly difficult to deliver effectively for the people of the Western Isles."

Particular areas of concern include:

- The failure to plan for and to introduce Best Value processes
- The absence of robust performance management arrangements
- Limited performance information gives, at best, a mixed picture of service delivery
- A poor working relationship with the health board.

The report takes full account of the particular geographical and historical circumstances faced by the comhairle and that the Western Isles also experiences the common difficulties faced by local authorities, often in more acute or extreme ways.

It also recognises the advantages and strengths on which it can build such as strong community engagement, active and committed leadership from elected members and effective financial stewardship with a strategic approach to capital planning.

However, the Commission concludes that the comhairle must adopt a more focused approach and the pace of change must increase if it is to be able to cope with the challenges ahead.

Isabelle Low said: "We are encouraged by the fact that the comhairle has commissioned its new chief executive to undertake a root and branch review of how the authority operates and we look forward to receiving from the comhairle an Improvement Plan which is specific as to resources, responsibilities and timescales to deliver this important agenda."

Ends

**For further information contact Leon Thompson tel: 0131 624 9974 or Anne McCubbin tel: 0131 624 9970**

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#### Notes to Editors:

1. 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.
2. 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 provides information about how well Comhairle nan Eilean Siar is organised to deliver improvement.

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 be 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.
5. 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](http://www.audit-scotland.gov.uk/accounts/pdfs/BestValuebriefingnote.pdf)