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## Press release

Embargoed until 00.01 hours, Tuesday 22 January 2008

# Accounts Commission acknowledges progress at West Dunbartonshire Council and urges further work

**The Accounts Commission for Scotland published its latest findings today on Best Value at West Dunbartonshire Council. The Commission acknowledges the council's progress and increased commitment and urges the council to move forward as quickly as possible on areas where progress has been limited.**

West Dunbartonshire remains the only council to have been the subject of a Hearing during the course of its Best Value and Community Planning audit. The Hearing was held in November 2006 at Clydebank Town Hall. In its subsequent findings the Accounts Commission stated that it believed the council was not in a position to deliver Best Value and Community Planning, decision making at the highest levels was not open and transparent and the council needed significant and sustained investment across a range of activities. The Commission set out priorities for an improvement plan and asked for a further formal report from Audit Scotland on the council's progress as at 31 July 2007. Today's findings are based on this report.

Today's findings state:

'The Commission acknowledges the Council's increased commitment to continuous improvement and the progress made by the Council within a fairly short timescale. We endorse the conclusions of the Controller of Audit in her report and would urge the Council to move forward as quickly as possible on the areas where progress has been limited.

Priority should be given to:-

- Continuing to develop member-officer relationships
- Establishing arrangements to demonstrate the competitiveness of its services
- Developing robust financial planning
- Improving community engagement.

The Commission believes that West Dunbartonshire Council needs a longer period of time to put in place the improvements required to demonstrate Best Value and would encourage the Council to increase the momentum of change. The Commission accordingly requires a further report from the Controller of Audit in eighteen months time.'

The Controller of Audit's report referred to in these latest findings concludes that:

- The council has accepted the Commission's Jan 07 findings and developed an appropriate improvement plan
- There are still significant challenges including developing strategic leadership, HR and financial capacity
- There is an increased commitment to continuous improvement but still much to do to develop a positive culture and environment within which this can flourish
- Work is underway on many of the priority improvement areas but the council would benefit from clearer prioritisation and a greater focus on the impact it expects from improvement activities
- The council needs to consolidate its approach and increase the momentum it has established to ensure a best value and continuous improvement culture is systematically embedded throughout the organisation

### **John Baillie, Chair of the Accounts Commission for Scotland, said:**

"It is encouraging and pleasing to see that West Dunbartonshire Council has an increased commitment to Best Value and Community Planning and has made progress in a relatively short time to address the serious problems we identified in 2006.

"We recognise, however, the scale of change still required. Whilst we want this to happen as quickly as possible, we know it will take more time to properly develop and implement.

"We now urge the council to speed up their improvement activity and become more focused. In particular we would like to see the council prioritise relationships between members and officers, establishing arrangements to test the competitiveness of its services, developing robust financial planning and improving how it engages with the local community."

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**Notes to Editors:**

1. The full report, including the findings, is available on Audit Scotland's website, together with all other publications and press releases [www.audit-scotland.gov.uk](http://www.audit-scotland.gov.uk)
2. The primary purpose of the November 2006 Hearing was to assist the Commission to make findings by listening to appropriate evidence. At the Hearing the Commission heard evidence from Audit Scotland, the council Leader, Chief Executive and former Chief Executive, Labour and Opposition councillors, Jackie Baillie MSP, John McFall MP, trade union representatives, the Community Planning partnership manager and community representatives. A transcript is available on Audit Scotland's website.
2. Best Value is the duty placed on local authorities to demonstrate their on-going commitment to providing better services to local people. The audit of West Dunbartonshire Council is part of a rolling programme affecting all local authorities in Scotland.
3. 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. For more information go to: <http://www.audit-scotland.gov.uk/accounts/index.htm>

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.

(The Audit Commission operates only in England.)

4. 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.
5. 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. Therefore league tables and scores are inappropriate.
  - All 32 councils in Scotland are audited, on a rolling programme basis
  - Each audit results in a report to the Accounts Commission for Scotland
  - A report is published after each individual audit.

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)