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Press release

Embargoed until 00.01 hours, Thursday 9 July 2009

Accounts Commission announces findings following latest 'Best Value' audit of West Dunbartonshire Council

The council has made insufficient progress with key improvement priorities. Some key services perform well, but overall progress is inhibited by political conflict and relationships between councillors, and limited development of working relationships between councillors and senior officers. Until these issues are resolved the council will not achieve the necessary shift in attitude and focus required to deliver best value for the people of West Dunbartonshire. External assistance is recommended.

On Wednesday 17 June the Accounts Commission met and considered the Controller of Audit's latest report on Best Value and Community Planning at the council. This report tracks progress since January 2008 and is the second follow up since serious problems were identified in the first Best Value audit report and the Accounts Commission's public Hearing and findings.

The Commission has now drawn up its current findings, based on this latest report. Its view is that there are some positive aspects to the council's work, but overall it has made insufficient progress.

A number of services, including education, social work and benefits administration, continue to demonstrate good levels of performance. Some progress has been made in other areas too, including improved corporate working and increased capacity at senior officer level.

John Baillie, Chair of the Accounts Commission, said "It's important to recognise that West Dunbartonshire Council has some services that perform well, showing the positive commitment of council staff. However, in aggregate, however, there has been insufficient progress against key improvement priorities identified in the 2008 audit report."

"We believe the lack of progress is because the relationships between councillors and the nature of the political conflict among councillors are having a negative effect on the operation and development of the council. Councillors across the political spectrum have not demonstrated the corporate leadership required. There has also been limited progress in developing working relationships between councillors and senior officers. These issues are inhibiting improvement and, until they are resolved, the council will not achieve the necessary shift in attitude and focus required to deliver best value for the people of West Dunbartonshire."

The Accounts Commission recommends the council seek external assistance from the local government community and elsewhere. It says that other councils that have experienced difficulties in implementing Best Value have benefited from external assistance and so, as a matter of urgency, the council should secure appropriate external support from peers (both councillors and officers) and others to address its significant problems.

The Commission has asked the Controller of Audit to monitor the council's response to this report and the Commission will consider a further report from the Controller of Audit in due course.

John Baillie concluded: "We have now published 32 Best Value audit reports and findings, and nine follow-up reports. West Dunbartonshire Council is the only case to date where a follow-up report and findings has led the Commission seriously to criticise the lack of progress. This underlines both the significance of the difficulties facing the council and the need for immediate action."

The council is now required to consider these findings at a full council meeting, to be held within three months.

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Notes to Editors

1. The Controller of Audit's report is available on Audit Scotland's website www.audit-scotland.gov.uk
 2. The first Best Value audit report on West Dunbartonshire Council was considered by the Accounts Commission in late 2006, with findings published in February 2007 following a public Hearing. At that point the Commission found that the council was not in a position to deliver Best Value and there were serious problems with decision-making, scrutiny, staff morale, relationships between councillors and officers, with a lack of effective leadership from senior councillors and officers.
 3. The Commission chose to take the unusual step of holding a Hearing when it considered the Controller of Audit's report on Best Value at West Dunbartonshire Council because it wanted to hear further evidence from Audit Scotland, the council, unions and others with experience of council services. This was the first Hearing to be held as part of a Best Value audit on a council.
 4. The Accounts Commission for Scotland was set up in 1975 and operates independently of central and local government. The Commission checks whether local authorities, fire and police boards spend public money properly and effectively. For more information go to <http://www.audit-scotland.gov.uk/about/ac/>
- 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 Accounts Commission is sometimes mistakenly referred to as the Audit Commission. The Audit Commission is a completely separate organisation that operates only in England.
5. Best Value is the statutory duty placed on local authorities to demonstrate their on-going commitment to providing better services to local people.
 6. 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.
 7. 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 are audited
 - Each audit results in a report to the Accounts Commission for Scotland
 - A report is published after each individual audit.