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## Press release

Strictly embargoed until 00.01 hours Thursday 24 February 2005

# Best Value audit report published following review of North Ayrshire

**The Accounts Commission has published its Best Value Audit Report on North Ayrshire Council today (Thursday 24 February), providing information to local people for the first time about how well the council is organised to deliver its services. The Commission found that the council has laid firm foundations for Best Value and Community Planning, it engages well with its community and there is a general trend of service improvement. However both officers and elected members need to take action to add impetus to the change process. The Commission urges the council to be more flexible and creative in the way it uses existing funds to respond to the needs of the local community, and to provide more comprehensive performance information about how individual services are doing.**

The Best Value audit is part of a rolling programme that will affect all local authorities in Scotland every three years. It does not attempt a comprehensive review of all services, but aims to report on the extent to which the council is meeting its legal duty to improve service delivery, identify where this is in doubt, and outline any remedial action that is required.

Accounts Commission Chairman Alastair MacNish said:

“We are grateful to North Ayrshire Council for their co-operation with the audit process. The council has a positive approach to Best Value and Community Planning and there are clear signs that the council is moving its focus from planning for Best Value, to delivering it in practice. It recognises the need to add impetus to the change process and is developing its improvement plans, taking into account the Commission’s findings. We look forward to receiving more comprehensive performance information in the future that will tell us more about how individual services are doing.”

The Commission found the following:

- The foundations are in place for Best Value and the council’s approach is positive
- The council engages well with its local community and its Community Planning partners at a strategic level, but it has the potential to use its existing resources more creatively in responding to local needs
- The council needs better information about how well its services are doing, but there is evidence of some good service performance and customer care.
- Elected members need to set a clear direction and specific goals for improvement in service delivery. They have shown willingness to develop their strategic, directive and scrutiny roles
- The senior management structure needs to be re-examined to ensure it supports the council’s business processes, and the role of the corporate management team needs to be more strategically focused
- Better measures of the cost and quality of services are needed
- The council faces significant challenges due to local social and economic circumstances, but there is evidence of a general improvement trend. In particular the report highlights:
  - Very effective information technology services have underpinned a successful customer care initiative which has led to improved service delivery and increased user satisfaction.
  - Education inspectors have recognised an increasing capacity in the council’s support to schools resulting in improvements in pupil attainment and achievement
  - Housing services are well-managed and appear to perform well in many areas, although rent arrears remain high and continue to provide a significant challenge

- Social services have worked hard to develop a management culture that will drive improvements for service users.

The council is finalising an action plan with specific and measurable targets to address the key areas for improvement. Progress will be monitored and the Commission is due to report again in three years time.

#### **Enquiries to:**

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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. Audits of Best Value were established as a result of the Local Government in Scotland Act 2003. A rolling programme of audits will affect each local authority in Scotland every three years. The audit assesses the extent to which each council is meeting its legal duty to improve service delivery, identifies where this is in doubt, and outlines any remedial action that is required.
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
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 councils in Scotland will be audited once every three years.
  - The councils that are being audited in the current programme are Angus, North Ayrshire, Shetland, Stirling, Inverclyde, West Lothian and Dundee. They have been selected to reflect a balanced mix of size, geography and socio-economic factors.
  - The council's local 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.
  - Each audit results in a report to the Accounts Commission which will be published.
  - 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 the council before reporting its findings; publish findings which include recommendations to the council and/or Scottish Ministers.

**A full Best Value press briefing is available on Audit Scotland's website [www.audit-scotland.gov.uk](http://www.audit-scotland.gov.uk)**