

Accounts Commission Findings

West Dunbartonshire Council – Update on Best Value Progress Report

Following the original Best Value audit carried out on West Dunbartonshire Council in 2006, the Accounts Commission held a public hearing and subsequently issued findings. The Commission then considered a further report and issued findings on it in January 2008. The Commission published its findings on a second progress report in July 2009. At that time the Commission recognised that a number of services continued to demonstrate good levels of performance. However, we criticised the extent and pace of progress against key improvement priorities and in developing effective working relationships between elected members and senior officers. The Commission requested a further report from the Controller of Audit in early course, and accepts this update as fulfilling that requirement. We acknowledge the co-operation and assistance given to the audit process by the council.

The Commission finds that the Council has still not made sufficient progress against many of the areas identified in the original Best Value audit as priorities for immediate improvement. We acknowledge that the Council has now agreed an improvement plan, although progress towards achieving that has been slow. Many of the issues raised in this update report have been matters of concern for some time. We are concerned that elected members do not appear to have been sufficiently engaged with the improvement agenda.

The Council faces significant pressures in achieving operational sustainability and financial stability, and starts from the position of a very low level of free reserves at 31 March 2009. This in itself is a matter of concern; the more so because the Council has made limited progress on ensuring appropriate strategic leadership and effective relationships between members and senior officers. We cannot, therefore, be confident of the Council's ability to make difficult decisions that address these financial difficulties.

We consider that, in order to achieve a sustainable financial position, the Council must establish systems to ensure the management, monitoring and reporting of progress against projected savings. Key milestones must be clear, and senior members must be in the position to deliver active, regular and robust scrutiny of their achievement. We are concerned that West Dunbartonshire Council has not yet demonstrated its capacity to deliver such progress.

We welcome the steps the Council has taken in response to our previous recommendation that it should secure appropriate external peer support for both members and senior officers. We recommend that the Council takes urgent steps to make the most effective use of this external support in order to make faster progress with its improvement plan. The Commission will also seek regular updates from its appointed auditor to provide it with assurance that the financial position of the Council is being addressed effectively.

On behalf of the Commission, Audit Scotland also continues to work closely with other scrutiny bodies to deliver a shared risk assessment of West Dunbartonshire Council. An Assurance and Improvement Plan should be available in May 2010. This should provide a schedule for audit and inspection work to assess the use of resources and the performance of key services.