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Press release

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Further progress still needed at West Dunbartonshire Council

The Accounts Commission has published its findings on West Dunbartonshire Council today, following its consideration of the latest update report from Audit Scotland on the council's progress in meeting its Best Value duties to local people.

Looking at progress since July 2009, the Commission welcomes some positive steps taken by the council. However it also says the council has made insufficient progress on many of the areas identified in 2006 as priorities for immediate improvement and its financial situation is also concerning.

Commenting on today's findings, Chair of the Accounts Commission John Baillie said: "We welcome the fact that the council now has an agreed improvement plan and the benefit of formal external peer support for both councillors and senior officers."

"However there has been insufficient progress against many of the areas identified in the original Best Value audit as priorities for immediate improvement, such as strategic leadership and councillor and officer relations. A number of the issues raised in this report have been matters of concern for some time and councillors could be more engaged with the improvement agenda."

The findings highlight that the council now faces significant pressures in achieving operational sustainability and financial stability and it has a relatively low level of reserves.

John Baillie continued: "West Dunbartonshire Council's financial position is a matter of concern in itself, but is even more troubling as the council has made limited progress on ensuring appropriate strategic leadership and effective relationships between councillors and senior officers. We cannot be confident of the council's ability to make difficult decisions that address its financial difficulties."

The Commission recommends the council focus on two areas in order to achieve a sustainable financial position, and ensure progress with the improvement plan. These are:

- Establish systems to ensure the management, monitoring and reporting of progress against projected savings. Key milestones should be clear, and senior councillors must be in the position to deliver active, regular and robust scrutiny of their achievement.
- Take urgent steps to make more effective use of the support available from others in the local government community, so faster progress can be made with the improvement plan. COSLA and the Improvement Service are helping the council with this.

The Commission will seek regular updates to provide it with assurance that the financial position of the council is being addressed effectively.

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Notes to Editors:

1. In 2006 the Accounts Commission held a public hearing at West Dunbartonshire Council and issued findings, raising serious concerns about how the council was being run. Commenting on updates in 2008 and 2009, the Commission recognised that a number of services continued to demonstrate good levels of performance. However it still had concerns about the extent and pace of progress against key improvement priorities and the effectiveness of working relationships between councillors and senior officers. The 2009 report is at http://www.audit-scotland.gov.uk/work/local_bestvalue.php.

The 2008 report is at http://www.audit-scotland.gov.uk/work/local_bestvalue.php?year=2007. The original report from 2006 is at http://www.audit-scotland.gov.uk/work/local_bestvalue.php?year=2006

2. Audit Scotland and other scrutiny bodies are currently drawing up shared risk assessments and schedules of activity for audit and inspection work in each of Scotland's councils. This will assess the use of resources and the performance of key services.
3. The Accounts Commission for Scotland was set up in 1975. The Commission checks whether local authorities, fire and police boards spend public money properly and effectively.
4. Best Value is the duty placed on local authorities to demonstrate their on-going commitment to providing better services to local people.
5. 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 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.