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Press release

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Some improvements at Argyll & Bute Council but insufficient progress overall

In a report published today the Accounts Commission says that the council still has much to do and must increase its pace of change to establish Best Value for local people.

Today's report follows the initial report into Best Value & Community Planning at the council, published in February 2006. This found that the council had made limited progress in establishing Best Value and needed to become more outward looking and responsive to people using its services.

The Commission acknowledges recent improvements in leadership and strategic direction and the work of the newly appointed Chief Executive. It also highlights the council's innovative approach to its audit committee, with the appointment of external, non-executive members as Chair and Vice Chair.

However, it says that progress has been insufficient in a number of key areas and there remains much to be done to develop a culture of continuous improvement.

The council's ability to effectively manage its own performance is still of concern. It does not yet have a fully functioning performance management system and needs to develop systems and processes for this.

Other areas needing particular attention are risk management, learning from other organisations, reporting to the public on its performance, putting into action strategies for workforce and asset management and developing the role of Area Committees.

Chairman of the Accounts Commission, John Baillie, said:

"Argyll & Bute Council is working towards providing Best Value for local people. There have been improvements since our last report, such as in political leadership and strategic direction, and in the work of the new Chief Executive.

"However, overall insufficient progress has been made since we last reported in 2006. Much more needs to be done and the council needs to increase its pace of change. We encourage the council to act on the areas highlighted in the report and in our findings."

Progress will continue to be monitored through routine audits.

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Notes to Editors:

1. This latest report is based on audit work carried out in 2008, looking back at progress from February 2006 to the present day, concentrating on the period to June 2008.
2. 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.
3. Best Value is the duty placed on local authorities to demonstrate their on-going commitment to providing better services to local people.

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 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.
 - All 32 councils in Scotland are audited.
 - Each audit results in a report to the Accounts Commission.
 - A report is published after each individual audit.
 - In most cases Key Findings from the Commission are 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 council before reporting its findings; publish findings which include recommendations to the council and/or Scottish Ministers.
 - The council's external auditor monitors progress and reports through an annual review. If the council has made insufficient progress, the Commission is alerted and it may ask for further action to be taken.

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