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Press release

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Accounts Commission publishes its findings following its 'Best Value' Hearing at West Dunbartonshire Council

The Accounts Commission for Scotland published its findings today (Friday 15 December) on the extent to which West Dunbartonshire Council is meeting its Best Value duties. The Commission finds that the council is not currently in a position to deliver Best Value and must accept the need for effective leadership and for external assistance.

The findings state:

- decision making at the highest level in the council is not as open and transparent as it should be
- there are serious problems of staff morale
- the council's scrutiny regime is inadequate
- there is a lack of effective leadership from senior members and officers
- there are poor relationships among members and between members and officers

The Commission lists a number of short and medium term priorities and recommends to the council that it takes immediate action to prepare and formally adopt an improvement plan to address these findings. The Commission also requires the Controller of Audit to make a further formal report on the council's progress as at 31 July 2007.

Today's findings follow the Commission's Hearing at Clydebank Town Hall, West Dunbartonshire on 29 and 30 November. When the Commission considered the Controller of Audit's report it decided a Hearing would be the best course of action in light of all the circumstances of this case, including representations received. This was the first time the Commission held a Hearing as part of a Best Value and Community Planning audit. Its primary purpose in this case was to assist the Commission to make findings by listening to appropriate evidence.

At the Hearing the Commission heard evidence from Audit Scotland, the council Leader, Chief Executive and former Chief Executive, Labour and Opposition councillors, Jackie Baillie MSP, John McFall MP, trade union representatives, the Community Planning partnership manager and community representatives.

Today's findings are based on the Controller of Audit's report, the written submission sent by the council's Chief Executive in advance of the Hearing, evidence given at the Hearing and documents referred to in evidence at the Hearing.

Alastair MacNish, Chair of the Accounts Commission for Scotland, said:

"As our findings state, there are serious problems at West Dunbartonshire Council. People in West Dunbartonshire deserve better and need to know that these problems are being addressed. Our role is to hold councils to account but also to make clear recommendations, with the aim of supporting and encouraging councils to deliver Best Value. We hope that our findings today will mark a turning point for West Dunbartonshire Council, acting as an impetus for change and encouraging this council to address its Best Value duties."

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Notes to Editors:

1. The findings and a full transcript of the Hearing proceedings are available on Audit Scotland's website www.audit-scotland.gov.uk
2. For more information on the Accounts Commission for Scotland and biographical details of the Panel members for the Hearing (Alastair MacNish, Jean Couper, John Baillie, Keith Geddes and Iain Robertson) go to: <http://www.audit-scotland.gov.uk/accounts/index.htm>

3. The Controller of Audit's West Dunbartonshire Council Best Value Audit and Community Planning report is available from the Council tel: 01389 737 000 or from Audit Scotland www.audit-scotland.gov.uk tel: 0845 146 1010
4. Best Value is the duty placed on local authorities to demonstrate their on-going commitment to providing better services to local people. The audit of West Dunbartonshire Council is the 16th in a rolling programme affecting all local authorities in Scotland.
5. 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.

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 Audit Commission operates only in England.

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 will be audited, on a rolling programme basis
 - Each audit results in a report to the Accounts Commission for Scotland
 - A report will be published after each individual audit.

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