



WALES AUDIT OFFICE  
SWYDDFA ARCHWILIO CYMRU

# Annual Improvement Report

## Brecon Beacons National Park Authority

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# About the Auditor General for Wales

The Auditor General is independent of government and is appointed by Her Majesty the Queen. He leads the Wales Audit Office and is held accountable by the Public Accounts Committee of the National Assembly for the Wales Audit Office's work.

The Auditor General is the external auditor of the Welsh Government and its sponsored and related public bodies, the Assembly Commission and National Health Service bodies in Wales. He also appoints the external auditors of Welsh local government bodies, including unitary authorities, police, probation, fire and rescue authorities, national parks and community councils. The Auditor General's appointed auditors are responsible for the annual audit of the majority of public money spent in Wales, including the £15 billion of funds that are voted to Wales annually by the Westminster Parliament. Nearly £5.5 billion of this funding is passed by the Welsh Government to local government in the form of general and specific grants. Local government, in turn, raises a further £2.1 billion through council tax and business rates.

As well as carrying out financial audit, the Auditor General's role is to examine how public bodies manage and spend public money, including achieving value in the delivery of public services. The Wales Audit Office aims to make public money count, by promoting improvement, so that people in Wales benefit from accountable, well-managed public services that offer the best possible value for money. It is also committed to identifying and spreading good practice across the Welsh public sector.

Huw Vaughan Thomas, Auditor General for Wales, was supported by John Roberts under the supervision of Alan Morris in conducting the Improvement Assessment and producing this report.

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# Summary report

- 1 Each year, the Auditor General must report on how well Welsh councils, fire and rescue authorities, and national parks are planning for improvement and delivering their services. Drawing on the work of the Wales Audit Office and relevant Welsh inspectorates, this report presents a picture of improvement over the last year. The report is in three main sections, which cover the planning, delivery and evaluation of improvement by Brecon Beacons National Park Authority (the Authority).
- 2 Overall the Auditor General has concluded that the progress the Authority is making with its arrangements makes it well placed to deliver measureable improvements in future years.
- 3 We found that the Authority is putting in place the building blocks it needs to finalise its arrangements for delivering improvement in 2012-13. The Authority has been focusing primarily on its internal arrangements and processes. Improvements in these areas include: increasing the capacity of the Corporate Management Team (CMT); delivering results-based accountability<sup>1</sup> training to all staff and members; reviewing its countryside and land management directorate; engaging more actively with key stakeholders; and developing a performance management and reporting framework which incorporates a requirement to be clear about impact. These, together with improved arrangements that the Authority has put in place over recent years, makes it well placed to deliver measureable improvements in future years.
- 4 We also found that, in spite of short term setbacks in aspects of its planning services, the Authority is improving the way it looks after the Park and how it helps people to enjoy and understand the Park. We based this conclusion on the following:
  - Although some measures indicated a declining performance for the Authority's planning services in 2010-11, the general trend continues to be that of improvement. The Authority worked, often with others, to maintain and improve the physical condition of the Park.
  - In 2010-11, there was increased participation in the events organised by the Authority. Its education service continued to deliver many thousands of contact time with learners. Feedback from users of both its education service and visitor centres, and from those attending its guided walks, was positive.
- 5 Finally, the report comments on the Authority's own assessment of its performance and arrangements. We concluded that the Authority's progress with developing meaningful measures of success and its scrutiny arrangements have not yet led to effective monitoring and evaluation of performance on its priorities.

<sup>1</sup> A practical framework for organisations to think and take action to improve services to deliver better outcomes.

# Proposals for improvement

6 We have not made any statutory recommendations in this report. However, proposals for improvement are set out below.

| Proposals for improvement |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
|---------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>P1</b>                 | Improve the Authority's ability to monitor and evaluate improvement by: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>ensuring the proposed reporting structure focuses on progress on priorities, rather than just on service performance; and</li><li>being clear about the anticipated benefits of its activities, and assessing the extent to which those have been achieved.</li></ul> |
| <b>P2</b>                 | Build on the improvements made to its internal arrangements so as to focus on and deliver measureable outcomes for the Park and people.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
| <b>P3</b>                 | Ensure that, in future, forward-looking improvement plans are published much earlier after the start of the financial year.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |

# Detailed report



## Introduction

- 7 This report is written by the Auditor General supported by staff of the Wales Audit Office. On [page 2](#) you can find a brief explanation of what the Auditor General does.
- 8 Under the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2009 (the Measure), the Auditor General must report each year on how well Welsh councils, fire and rescue authorities, and national parks are planning for improvement and delivering their services. [Appendix 1](#) provides more information about the Auditor General's powers and duties under the Measure. The Annual Improvement Report provides a picture of what each council or authority in Wales is trying to achieve and how it is going about it, and draws on the work of other inspectorates where appropriate. This report also sets out the progress the Authority has made since the Auditor General published his last *Annual Improvement Report*, taking account of the Authority's own self-assessment.
- 9 Throughout the report, we set out what the Authority needs to do to improve its services. Given the wide range of services provided and the challenges facing the Authority it would be unusual if we did not find things that can be improved. The Auditor General is able to:
  - recommend to Ministers of the Welsh Government that they intervene in some way;
  - conduct a special inspection and publish the report with detailed recommendations;
  - make formal recommendations for improvement – if a formal recommendation is made the Authority must respond to that recommendation publicly within 30 days; and
  - make proposals for improvement – if we make proposals to the Authority, we would expect it to do something about them and we will follow up what happens.
- 10 We want to find out if this report gives you the information you need and whether it is easy to understand. You can let us know your views by e-mailing us at [info@wao.gov.uk](mailto:info@wao.gov.uk) or writing to us at 24 Cathedral Road, Cardiff CF11 9LJ.

## **The progress the Authority is making with its arrangements makes it well placed to deliver measureable improvements in future years**

- 11 We do not undertake a comprehensive annual review of all authority arrangements or services. The conclusions in this report are based on our cumulative and shared knowledge and the findings of the prioritised work undertaken this year. In doing so, we have also looked at any improvement objectives the Authority set out to achieve in 2010-11. Where relevant, these improvement objectives are referred to in each of the following sections. Inevitably, any assessment is dependent on the quality and relevance of the information made available.

## The Authority is putting in place the building blocks it needs to finalise its arrangements for delivering improvement in 2012-13

- 12 In our *Corporate Assessment Update* letter of 15 July 2011 to the Authority's chief executive we concluded that initiatives designed to improve capacity, a better-than-expected financial settlement linked to a detailed medium-term financial strategy and a focus on improving scrutiny all strengthened the Authority's ability to improve. Although the Authority is developing an approach that focuses more on outcomes, it had not yet managed to incorporate this in its belated improvement planning arrangements.
- 13 The letter also noted that the Authority's improvement objectives and its improvement plan (called the *Annual Report for 2010 to 2011 and improvement objectives for 2011 to 2012*) met the minimum requirements of the Measure. However, the Authority recognised that there is much more to do, both in terms of timing and in increasing clarity, if its improvement plan for 2012-13 is to accurately reflect its aspirations for delivering improvements.
- 14 The Authority has begun to respond positively to some of the proposals for improvement set out in the letter and in our *2010 Annual Improvement Report*. In particular, capacity at the CMT has been increased by giving heads of service more authority to make operational decisions and by implementing project management training. Establishing a project management culture has become a project in its own right.
- 15 Other areas of progress in response to our earlier proposals include:
  - carrying out a review of Directors' personal objectives;
  - agreeing not to combine the Authority's two improvement plans with a view to ensuring the Authority's annual forward-looking improvement plan is published much earlier; and
  - developing a performance management and reporting framework which incorporates a requirement to be clear about impact.
- 16 The Authority's improvement objectives for 2010-11 included the need to deliver the second year of its three-year improvement plans for Finance, Performance Management and for Information and Governance. As at 31 March 2011, of the 34 actions planned, 25 had been completed, four were in progress, one was overdue and four had not been started (although two of these had subsequently been completed by the end of June 2011). Overall, this shows good progress and a strong commitment by the Authority's staff to deliver improvements. Examples of actions completed include:
  - defining and agreeing a business continuity plan;
  - approving a records management policy approved;
  - delivering results-based accountability training to staff and members; and
  - reviewing and redesigning the Authority's procurement process.
- 17 Although the actions within the three-year

- plans focus on processes rather than on outcomes, they are a continuation of the Authority's intention to put in place the building blocks on which improvement for the Park and people can be built.
- 18 The Authority is carrying out a structural review of its countryside and land management directorate. Staff have been extensively involved in developing the proposals and the broad strategy was approved by the Authority in September 2011, with detailed proposals submitted to the Authority on 9 December 2011. Implementation of the new structure, which aims to increase the effectiveness of the directorate, is planned for the end of March 2012. The review is supported by members, especially since it should support their desire to increase the Authority's focus on countryside issues.
- 19 Although the Authority's improvement plan chose to highlight 'a significant reduction in employee sickness absence during the period 2004-2011', there was an increase in the number of days per full-time equivalent (FTE) lost due to sickness absence in 2010-11. This rose by 45 per cent to 9.14 days, from 6.29 in 2009-10. This compares with 14 days per FTE in Snowdonia National Park Authority and 6.1 days in Pembrokeshire Coast National Park Authority. However, while short term sickness rose from 4.77 to 5.6 days, long term sickness rose by 2.3 days, an increase of over 150 per cent. In a relatively small organisation, the unavoidable long-term sickness of just a few members of staff does have a disproportionate impact and we understand that sickness absence levels are improving in 2011-12. Currently, however, sickness absence levels are only
- reported to the Authority annually and do not include an analysis of short-term sickness levels.
- 20 The Authority recognises that its combined improvement plan, published in 2011-12, fell short of expectations. This was largely due to trying to agree an appropriate format, with relevant messages, within a very short timescale. As referred to earlier, this timing issue should not be a problem in 2012-13. However, we also felt that the improvement plan, when setting out a picture of performance, fell short in some respects. The sickness absence assessment quoted in the previous paragraph is an example of this, as is the reporting on planning service questionnaire results, referred to later in this report.
- 21 The Authority is continuing its review of its strategic objectives with workshops for members and officers having been held in December 2011. These workshops are designed to challenge the Authority's own approach to date, using the 'results-based accountability' approach to help ensure that meaningful measures are put in place to demonstrate progress against improvement objectives for 2012-13 that focus more on outcomes.
- 22 There has been some debate within the Authority about how to ensure that members have a greater focus on countryside and land management issues. The option to establish a countryside committee was rejected; the Authority preferring instead to make countryside a standing item at the Authority's meetings. The Authority's members continue to be involved in the Welsh Government-funded scrutiny project. More information on the

- outcomes of this work is set out in [paragraph 64](#). The chair of the Authority and its chief executive have a good working relationship, with the chair encouraging an inclusive approach with members and staff.
- 23 One of the Authority's improvement objectives for 2010-11 was to 'develop citizen centred governance principles at the heart of all we do including the development and implementation of a charter with community councils.' The chief executive and his team have been very active in trying to involve community councils in establishing and adopting this charter. Consultation with town and community councils on a draft charter resulted in changes being made before it was finalised.
- 24 At the time of drafting this report, of the 52 community councils in the Authority's area, 18 had accepted invitations to attend meetings set up by the Authority and eight had signed up to the charter. The Authority plans more meetings over coming months, with a view to encouraging community councils to sign up to the charter. Those that sign up to the charter are committed to delivering on a joint action plan which is still being developed. The Authority hopes that this initiative will promote better understanding, especially about planning issues, as well as identify options for collaborative working and improving relationships between the various organisations involved.
- 25 The chief executive has also been arranging meetings with other organisations, such as the media and local farmers. While some of these meetings related to specific issues, such as developing a *Sustainable Tourism Strategy*, they have helped to improve relationships and promote mutual understanding.
- 26 The Authority continues to manage its financial position effectively. It reported an underspend against its 2010-11 budget of £95,000, due to a number of factors, and, as a result, its general reserves increased to £655,000 as at March 2011. It also has approximately £400,000 in 'earmarked' reserves, set aside to meet specific items of known or anticipated expenditure in future years.
- 27 The Appointed Auditor issued his *Annual Audit Letter* on 29 November 2011 and this is shown in [Appendix 3](#). In the *Annual Audit Letter*, the Appointed Auditor reports that he issued an unqualified audit opinion on the accounting statements confirming that they present a true and fair view of the Authority's financial position and transactions. He also makes the following comment:
- 'The Annual Governance Statement was a new requirement for 2010-11. Whilst the Statement was completed in line with the relevant guidance, there is scope to improve on this for future years. In particular, in reporting where the Authority has reviewed the effectiveness of governance arrangements as part of the normal course of its business during the year. My engagement team will discuss this further with officers to build on the first year of this new requirement.'

28 The Welsh Language Board (the Board) praised the Authority for convening regular meetings of its Welsh Language Committee, and for providing it with sufficient authority to advise and inform the Authority on the content of the draft revised Welsh Language Scheme. The Board remains concerned, however, at the delay in submitting the revised scheme to the Board for statutory approval. The Welsh language content of the Authority's new website remains far from complete, although a target date for completion has now been agreed. The Authority is committed to providing a Welsh language service at its main reception. Although the Authority does make arrangements to provide appropriate cover when necessary, currently only one of two posts designated 'Welsh essential' is occupied by a fluent Welsh speaker. The Authority should therefore provide adequate support to ensure that the linguistic skills of staff meet the requirements of the post.

## In spite of short term setbacks in aspects of its planning services, the Authority is improving the way it looks after the Park and how it helps people to enjoy and understand the Park

29 This part of the report sets out how well the Authority is delivering improvement in priority areas. Inevitably, any assessment is dependent on the quality and relevance of the information made available.

### Despite some temporary setbacks in the longer term trend of improvement in its planning services, the Authority is improving the way it looks after the Park

30 The following three of the Authority's improvement objectives for 2010-11 focus primarily on its planning service and will be considered together:

- 'to deliver an excellent planning service which inspires public and business confidence through the delivery of the Further Improvement Plan';
- 'review enforcement and plan for a quality service to support development planning'; and
- 'to ensure that the Local Development Plan is produced in accordance with an agreed timetable with Welsh Government'.

31 The Authority was clear that 'the performance indicator selected to demonstrate [an excellent planning service] is to review the combined results of the quarterly phone survey and the survey sent out to customers' and set a target of 90 per cent of responses to score the service at three or more<sup>2</sup>. Its improvement plan reported that '75.6 per cent gave a score of three or more, rating their interaction with the Authority positively'. The detailed information in Appendix 3 of the Authority's improvement plan shows that only 50 per cent of respondents rated overall standards

of the service as good or very good, with 32 per cent giving a rating of bad or very bad. Eighteen per cent of respondents rated the overall standards of the service as fair. It would have been useful if a more balanced commentary on these results had been provided in the main body of the improvement plan. On a more positive note, complaints about the planning service continue to fall, from 46 complaints in 2008-09, to 22 in 2009-10, to 14 in 2010-11, a reduction of nearly 70 per cent over three years.

32 The Authority should be congratulated for taking steps to identify satisfaction levels as a component of measuring public and business confidence. However, until it can identify the elements that most affect public and business confidence levels and that define an 'excellent planning service', it will not be in a position to assess the changes that need to be made in order to lead to improvement.

33 Making the right decisions on planning applications, and getting the backing of a government-appointed planning inspector for those decisions if applications go to appeal, helps to protect the Park from unwanted developments. After a disappointing 44 per cent of appeals upholding the Authority's planning decisions in 2009-10, this improved to nearly 67 per cent in 2010-11. Five of the six planning enforcement appeals upheld the Authority's planning enforcement notices in 2010-11, compared to 100 per cent in 2009-10.

34 Though likely to be far from the only factor that defines an 'excellent planning service', speed of processing information is collected by the Authority as part of its statutory responsibilities. The Authority's

2 1 = very bad, 2 = bad, 3 = fair, 4 = good, 5 = very good

performance in 2010-11 is set out below:

- 59.6 per cent of householder applications were processed within eight weeks, below the Welsh Government target of 65 per cent and compared to 82.5 per cent in 2009-10;
- 57.1 per cent of minor applications were processed within eight weeks, compared with 62.5 per cent in 2009-10, and a target of 65 per cent; and
- 49 per cent of all other applications were processed within eight weeks, compared with 53.7 per cent in 2009-10, and a target of 65 per cent.

- 35 While performance in speed of processing planning applications did fall back in 2010-11, this should be looked at in the context of significant improvement from the levels achieved in 2007-08 and 2008-09. For example, for minor applications, only 17 per cent were processed within eight weeks in 2007-08, improving to 25 per cent in 2008-09. So far, in 2011-12, performance is continuing the longer term trend with, for example, 64 per cent of minor applications processed within eight weeks.
- 36 Even though the number of planning applications increased from 465 to 512, the percentage approved increased from 79 per cent to 84 per cent. While the types of applications are likely to be the most important cause of an increased success rate, the Authority's improved pre-planning advice and guidance would also have been a factor.
- 37 The Authority's backlog of planning application decisions stood at 124 per cent<sup>3</sup>

at the end of March 2011, the highest of the three national parks in Wales<sup>4</sup>, although at the same level as the total backlog across all 25 planning authorities across Wales. The situation had improved slightly to 108 per cent at the end of September 2011. A recent additional staffing resource equating to two extra days per week should help to further reduce the Authority's backlog. Dealing with any backlogs becomes increasingly important in the context of the Authority's 2011-12 improvement objective of 'better protection [of] the Park's special qualities from inappropriate development' to be demonstrated by 'a reduction in the backlog of enforcement cases to be resolved'.

- 38 The review of the enforcement function was accepted by the Authority in February 2011. This review resulted in a restructuring of the service, with two new posts created and subsequently filled. Because of the delay in carrying out the review, the aim of reducing enforcement case backlog has now been carried over by the Authority into 2011-12. The Authority has established a joint member and officer group aimed at finding ways of improving performance, making better use of comparative data and meeting with other authorities to identify good practice.
- 39 Working groups, that included member representation, met regularly as part of the development of the Authority's Local Development Plan (LDP). A revised LDP timetable, which was acceptable to the Welsh Government's Planning Inspectorate, was included in the public consultation which took place between November 2010

<sup>3</sup> The number of applications carried forward as a percentage of applications received.

<sup>4</sup> 41 per cent for Pembrokeshire Coast NPA and 92 per cent for Snowdonia NPA.

- and January 2011. We understand that the Planning Inspectorate was complimentary about the Authority's community consultation. The Authority responded to the comments received as part of the consultation and made changes to the LDP. The Authority is continuing to achieve the targets set in the revised timetable and a public hearing is planned for March 2012, with formal adoption envisaged during September 2012.
- 40 The Authority agreed a 'continuous improvement plan' for the planning service with dates for completion running through from the end of 2009 until March 2013. As at May 2011, most of these actions had been completed or were on track. The Authority also introduced some changes in working practices within the planning service.
- 41 The Authority also adopted the following improvement objective for 2010-11:
- 'Reduction of BBNPA environmental impact including CO<sub>2</sub>.'
- 42 Although the Authority's improvement plan refers to various figures relating to CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, none related to the 2010-11 period. Figures subsequently made available to the Welsh Government suggested that the Authority's total emissions had reduced by 2.65 per cent.
- 43 The Authority has encouraged changes in the way staff use their vehicles, including making more use of home working and car sharing. Taking into account results from changes in commute-to-work behaviour, the total decrease in CO<sub>2</sub> emissions equates to 7.87 per cent, equivalent to nearly 32 tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub>.
- 44 Further changes to promote energy savings are envisaged, including replacing four-seater vehicles with more fuel-efficient 'smart' cars. The Authority has also completed feasibility studies for micro hydroelectric schemes on its land, promoted a Brecon Beacons Green Fair and Food Festival and, in collaboration with Powys County Council, held a one-day event to celebrate World Environment, using the theme 'your planet needs you.'
- 45 There are no other improvement objectives for 2010-11 that are directly relevant to how the Authority is improving the way it looks after the Park. Despite not having been selected as specific areas for improvement, the Authority continues to deliver services that help protect the Park. Examples include:
- advising on wildlife and habitat management;
  - direct management of land owned or administered by the Authority;
  - using its online reporting system<sup>5</sup> to plan joint patrols with local police at sites at risk of misuse by off-roaders;
  - processing applications for grant funding to achieve sustainable land management;
  - consulting with the farming community on operations and policy; and
  - working in partnership with conservation organisations, landowners, community groups and individuals to promote and develop biodiversity.
46. As a result of the Authority's direct management of land owned or administered by the Authority, 5.75 hectares of upland in

<sup>5</sup> The system was instrumental in leading to three successful prosecutions of illegal off-road users in 2010-11.

the Black Mountains was restored in 2010-11, compared with 4.25 hectares in 2009-10. Nine hundred metres of the Offa's Dyke Trail were improved in 2010-11, an increase of 300 metres over the previous year. A greater focus on improving areas within the Black Mountains and Offa's Dyke in 2010-11 meant that 1,091 metres of upland path erosion were dealt with at Craig y Fan Ddu and Fan Brycheiniog, compared to 1,875 metres in 2009-10.

- 47 The Authority also processes applications by third parties for grant funding. In 2010-11, the sustainable development fund<sup>6</sup> levered in an additional £6.69 worth of match funding for every pound of grant offered, compared to £2.86 per pound of grant in 2009-10.

### The Authority is delivering measureable improvement in the way it helps people to enjoy and understand the Park

- 48 None of the Authority's improvement objectives focus on people's enjoyment and understanding of the Park but we examined the information that was available and have set some examples out in the following paragraphs.
- 49 Access is clearly important to the public's enjoyment of the Park. The percentage of total length of footpaths and other rights of way which are easy to use by members of the public fell from 63 per cent in 2009-10 to 54 per cent in 2010-11. This was below the Authority's own target of 64 per cent. Because of the method of measurement, this figure can fluctuate from year to year so

it will important for the Authority to monitor the longer-term trend.

- 50 An important part of ensuring wider access to the Park is the availability of public transport. The Authority continues to commission Beacons Buses, designed to bring people from all over South Wales and Herefordshire into Brecon on Sundays and public holidays throughout the summer. Passenger journeys increased from just over 11,000 to over 13,000 in 2010-11. The Authority supplements the availability of public transport with leaflets designed to help people plan walks that begin and end at easily accessible bus stops.
- 51 As well as some of the other access opportunities that we reported in last year's *Annual Improvement Report*, the following examples from 2010-11 illustrate the Authority's continuing focus on promoting enjoyment and understanding:
- holding a star gazing event at the National Park Visitor Centre;
  - combining walks and quizzes and organising an Open Farm Sunday event;
  - making a significant investment in interpretational improvements for the Nant Llech Trail;
  - working with Age Cymru to introduce people to Nordic walking<sup>7</sup>, and with the Dyfed Archaeological Trust to host a series of archaeological and historical themed activities;
  - organising a 'Blessing of the Horse' ceremony to attract horses and their riders into the area; and

<sup>6</sup> Funded by the Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the Welsh Government and run by the national park authorities throughout England and Wales.

<sup>7</sup> Nordic walking, originally known as ski walking, consists of walking with poles similar to ski poles, providing upper-body exercise while walking.

- running a 'splash week' for the first time during school holidays, offering opportunities for 200 children to discover sailing, electric boating and gorge walking.
- 52 Participation in the events that the Authority organised generally increased during 2010-11. For example a Geoparks Festival which involved a programme of 25 walks, talks and other events over 16 days, attracted over 1,700 attendees, compared with less than 1,400 for similar events offered over the same period in 2009-10. The number of visitors to the Authority's centres increased by 2,000 in 2010-11, to 336,700. The Authority also introduced a new customer satisfaction survey across four of its five sites. This survey recorded an average satisfaction level of 9.8, on an 11 point scale.
- 53 The Education Team is an important part of the Authority's approach to promoting understanding. The team delivers a range of courses, some of which are residential, for school groups. These courses are for foundation level and key stages one and two, through to GCSE, A-level and beyond. Courses tie in with the National Curriculum. As well as visiting schools and local communities, the team produces factsheets, issues a schools newsletter, and provides lesson plans and other resources on the Authority's website.
- 54 In 2010-11, the ending of a previously available grant funded project meant that the education service had access to fewer resources. Despite this loss of funding, the education service worked with nearly 5,000 learners, resulting in over 18,000 hours of direct contact time, compared to 6,500 learners and 27,000 hours contact time in 2009-10. Based on a new measure introduced by all three Welsh National Park Authorities, 10 was the value that occurred most frequently when the Authority asked users of the service to score their experience on an 'inspirational' scale<sup>8</sup>.
- 55 The Authority's work experience programme also promotes understanding through the annual two-week placements it offers students. As in the previous year, eight young people, aged between 14 and 15, participated. They spent time with the Authority's different services carrying out visits and getting involved with conservation. Activities are designed to enhance learners' understanding and awareness of the natural environment, sustainability and the protected landscape of the Park.
- 56 Understanding, and indeed, enjoyment, is also likely to be an outcome of the guided walks organised by the Authority. The number of walks increased significantly during 2010-11, to 49, compared to 29 in the previous year. The number of attendees

<sup>8</sup> Inspiration scores range from one to 11, with 11 being the highest level of inspiration

also rose, from 325 in 2009-10 to just over 450 in 2010-11. In order to try and gauge their value, the Authority collects feedback at the time of a walk and follows this up with a telephone survey approximately six weeks later. In 2010-11 the Authority introduced a scoring assessment similar to the 'inspiration' score used for its work with schools. The average scores for enjoyment, interest, and organization were greater than 10. Although 65 per cent remembered a theme or story from a walk when surveyed six weeks later, this was lower than the 74 per cent achieved in 2009-10.

## The Authority's progress with developing meaningful measures of success and its scrutiny arrangements have not yet led to effective monitoring and evaluation of performance on its priorities

- 57 The Auditor General has determined that the Authority has discharged all of its duties in relation to publishing improvement information. However, the Authority should ensure that it acts more in accordance with Welsh Government guidance; specifically in being clearer about the extent to which it has met its improvement objectives.
- 58 The Authority published its assessment of its 2010-11 performance in early July 2011. Some of the weaknesses of that combined improvement plan have already been referred to earlier in this report. The extent to which it provides a meaningful and easily accessible assessment of its progress towards achieving its objectives for 2010-11 is another aspect that could be improved. When planning its approach to delivering its 2010-11 objectives, the Authority had not identified meaningful measures of success in a number of areas. It is therefore understandable that, for 2010-11, it has measured progress primarily through listing actions, rather than by reference to outcomes.
- 59 The situation should improve in coming years as the Authority continues to develop measures and performance data that try to focus on outcomes for each improvement objective. The Authority employs the widely used Ffynnon system to record and monitor performance data and to assist in presenting information to members at the Authority's Audit and Scrutiny Committee (AS Committee).
- 60 The three Welsh national park authorities have established a shared area within Ffynnon that will allow each authority to compare its own progress on some performance indicators against the other two authorities. Currently, this area is not kept up to date by all three authorities – an example of the further development that will be required in order to maximise the potential of the Ffynnon system.
- 61 The Ffynnon system is primarily used by officers. Members have direct access to the Ffynnon system and have been offered the relevant training, although only one member has currently taken advantage of that facility. Information from the system is assessed by the Authority's joint management team<sup>9</sup> every six weeks. Reports on performance are submitted to every meeting of the Authority's AS Committee. Planning service performance is reported in full to both the AS Committee and to the Planning Committee, while most other reports are submitted on an exception<sup>10</sup> basis.
- 62 Performance reports are structured around services, rather than being linked to relevant improvement objectives. This makes it much more difficult for members, and indeed, officers, to monitor progress towards achieving priorities. However, we understand that the Authority has already taken steps to structure future exception reports around its improvement objectives.
- 63 The AS Committee is made up of nine of the 24<sup>11</sup> Authority members. The model for deciding on areas for scrutiny is currently being reviewed by the Authority. However, members are keen to include an option for scrutiny to look at individual improvement objectives, either in retrospect or during the

<sup>9</sup> Made up of senior officers and the Authority's CMT.

<sup>10</sup> Only underperformance is reported.

<sup>11</sup> At the time of drafting this report, two Welsh Government appointee posts were vacant.

year of delivery. Involving the public in some way in scrutiny is another ambition for the Authority.

- 64 As part of the Welsh Government-funded scrutiny project, the Authority has already piloted taking a themed approach to scrutiny, with working groups examining specific areas. Having scrutinised the sustainable development fund, a scrutiny review panel, appointed by the AS Committee, is now looking at 'rights of way'.

# Appendices



## Appendix 1

### Status of this report

The Local Government (Wales) Measure 2009 (the Measure) requires the Auditor General to undertake an annual Improvement Assessment, and to publish an Annual Improvement Report, for each improvement authority in Wales. This requirement covers local councils, national parks, and fire and rescue authorities.

This report has been produced by the Auditor General to discharge his duties under section 24 of the Measure. The report also discharges duties under section 19 to issue a report certifying that he has carried out an Improvement Assessment under section 18 and stating whether, as a result of his improvement plan audit under section 17, he believes that the authority has discharged its improvement planning duties under section 15.

Improvement authorities are under a general duty to 'make arrangements to secure continuous improvement in the exercise of [their] functions'. Improvement authorities are defined as local councils, national parks, and fire and rescue authorities.

The annual Improvement Assessment is the main piece of work that enables the Auditor General to fulfil his duties. The Improvement Assessment is informed by a forward-looking assessment of an authority's likelihood to comply with its duty to make arrangements to secure continuous improvement. It also includes a retrospective assessment of whether an authority has achieved its planned improvements in order to inform a view as to the authority's track record of improvement. This report also summarises the Auditor General's conclusions on the Authority's self-assessment of its performance.

The Auditor General may also in some circumstances carry out special inspections (under section 21), in respect of which he will provide a report to the relevant authorities and Ministers, and which he may publish (under section 22). The Auditor General will summarise audit and assessment reports in this published Annual Improvement Report (under section 24). This will also summarise any reports of special inspections.

An important ancillary activity for the Wales Audit Office is the co-ordination of assessment and regulatory work (required by section 23), which takes into consideration the overall programme of work of all relevant regulators at an improvement authority. The Auditor General may also take account of information shared by relevant regulators (under section 33) in his assessments.

## Appendix 2

### Useful information about Brecon Beacons National Park and the Authority

#### The Authority

Brecon Beacons National Park Authority spends approximately £6.3 million per year (2010 11). This equates to about £180 per resident. In the same year, the Authority also spent £101,000 on capital items.

The Authority consists of 24 members: eight appointed by the Welsh Government; eight from Powys County Council; two from each of Monmouthshire and Carmarthenshire County Councils; and one each from Merthyr Tydfil, Torfaen, Blaenau Gwent and Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Councils. These members make decisions about priorities and the use of resources.

The 1995 Environment Act specifies that the purposes of the Authority are to:

- conserve and enhance the natural beauty, wildlife and cultural heritage of the Park area; and
- promote opportunities for the understanding and enjoyment of the special qualities of the area by the public.

The 1995 Act also states that in pursuing these purposes, the Authority has a duty to seek to foster the social and economic well-being of local communities. The Authority is the statutory planning authority for its area.

#### Corporate Management Team<sup>12</sup>

- Chief Executive and Head of Paid Service is John Cook
- Director of Planning is Christopher Morgan
- Director of Countryside and Land Management is Julian Atkins

For more information see the Authority's own website at [www.breconbeacons.org](http://www.breconbeacons.org) or contact the Authority at Brecon Beacons National Park Authority, Plas y Ffynnon, Cambrian Way, Brecon LD3 7HP.

<sup>12</sup> Chief officers at the Authority.

## Appendix 3

### Annual Audit Letter to the Members of Brecon Beacons National Park Authority

The auditor appointed by the Auditor General issued the following auditor's letter on 29 November 2011.

**Brecon Beacons National Park Authority complied with its responsibilities relating to financial reporting and the use of resources, and there are areas where further improvements can be made for future years**

It is the Authority's responsibility to:

- put systems of internal control in place to ensure the regularity and lawfulness of transactions and to ensure that its assets are secure;
- maintain proper accounting records;
- prepare a Statement of Accounts in accordance with relevant requirements; and
- establish and keep under review appropriate arrangements to secure economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its use of resources.

The Public Audit (Wales) Act 2004 issued by the Auditor General requires me to:

- provide an audit opinion on the accounting statements;
- review the Authority's arrangements to secure economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its use of resources; and
- issue a certificate confirming that I have completed the audit of the accounts.

On 30 September 2011, I issued an unqualified audit opinion on the accounting statements confirming that they present a true and fair view of the Authority's financial position and transactions. My report is contained within the Statement of Accounts.

From 2010-11 local authorities (including national park authorities) in Wales are required to produce their accounts based on International Financial Reporting Standards. The introduction of these new standards imposed significant additional demands on the Authority's finance staff but, despite these additional pressures, the accounts were prepared by the statutory deadline.

There were a small number of matters arising from the accounts audit that were reported to members in my Audit of Financial Statements report at the time the Statement of Accounts was approved. There are also some areas relating to the internal financial controls that will need to be considered for improvement during the coming year and which I have reported to officers.

The majority of the improvements required relate to establishing satisfactory separation of duties, which we recognise is difficult in smaller organisations. However, the Authority needs to identify and understand the risks associated where effective internal control cannot be established due to the size of some of its operations and activities.

My review of the Authority's arrangements to secure economy, efficiency and effectiveness has been based on the audit work undertaken on the accounts as well as placing reliance on the work completed as part of the Improvement Assessment under the Local Government Measure (2009). The main findings from this latter work will be set out in the AIR.

In addition I also bring the following issue to your attention:

- The Annual Governance Statement (as I reported at the time the audit opinion was given) was a new requirement for 2010-11. Whilst the Statement was completed in line with the relevant guidance, there is scope to improve on this for future years. In particular, in reporting where the Authority has reviewed the effectiveness of governance arrangements as part of the normal course of its business during the year. My engagement team will discuss this further with officers to build on the first year of this new requirement.

I issued a certificate confirming that the audit of the accounts has been completed on 30 September 2011.

The financial audit fee for 2010-11 is currently expected to be in line with that set out in the Annual Audit Outline.

Anthony Barrett

Appointed Auditor

## Appendix 4

### Brecon Beacons National Park Authority's improvement objectives and self-assessment

#### The Authority's improvement objectives

The Authority is required by the Welsh Government to make plans to improve its functions and the services it provides. Each year it must publish these plans along with specific 'improvement objectives' that set out the key things that the Authority intends to do to improve. The Authority must do this as soon as possible after 1 April each year.

The Authority published its improvement objectives for 2010-11 in its *Annual review and report for period April 2009-March 2010 and improvement objectives for 2010-11* and its improvement objectives for 2011-12 in its *Annual Report for 2010 to 2011 and improvement objectives for 2011 to 2012*. These can be found on the Authority's website at <http://www.breconbeacons.org>.

They are:

| 2010-11 improvement objectives                                                                                                                               | 2011-12 improvement objectives                                                                                   |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1 To deliver an excellent planning service; which inspires public and business confidence through the delivery of the Further Improvement Plan.              | 1 Strive towards providing an excellent planning service.                                                        |
| 2 To ensure that the Local Development Plan (LDP) is produced in accordance with an agreed timetable with Welsh Government.                                  | 2 Better protect the Park's special qualities from inappropriate development.                                    |
| 3 Review enforcement and plan for a quality service to support development planning.                                                                         | 3 Better conserve the Park's built heritage.                                                                     |
| 4 Deliver year 2 of the 3 year improvement plan for Finance.                                                                                                 | 4 Produce more renewable energy, bringing income and improved resilience to increasing fuel costs in the locale. |
| 5 Deliver year 2 of the 3 year improvement plan for Performance.                                                                                             | 5 Minimise damage to the Park's environment.                                                                     |
| 6 Deliver year 2 of the 3 year improvement plan for Information Governance.                                                                                  |                                                                                                                  |
| 7 Reduction of the Authority's environmental impact including a reduction in CO <sub>2</sub> emissions.                                                      |                                                                                                                  |
| 8 Develop Citizen centred governance principles at the heart of all we do including the development and implementation of a Charter with Community Councils. |                                                                                                                  |

#### Brecon Beacons National Park Authority's self-assessment of performance

The Authority's self-assessment of its performance can be found in the Authority's *Annual Report for 2010 to 2011 and improvement objectives for 2011 to 2012*, which can be found on the Authority's website at [www.breconbeacons.org](http://www.breconbeacons.org).

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