



WALES **AUDIT** OFFICE  
SWYDDFA **ARCHWILIO** CYMRU

# Annual Improvement Report

## **Brecon Beacons National Park Authority**

January 2011



## Annual Improvement Report by the Auditor General for Wales

This report is written by the Wales Audit Office on behalf of the Auditor General for Wales. (An explanation of what the Auditor General does is at Appendix 1). It is a new report that he is required to publish about how well Welsh councils, national parks, and fire and rescue authorities are improving their services. We have brought together a picture of what the Authority is trying to achieve; how it is going about it; and what it needs to do to improve its approach to improving services.

This Annual Improvement Report sets out that picture and each year we will produce a report to let you know what progress Brecon Beacons National Park Authority (the Authority) has made. We have not covered all the services the Authority provides. We have focused on a small number of things, especially those things that the Authority has said are its priorities for improvement.

We want to find out what you think of the services the Authority is providing in your area and will be giving you an opportunity to comment in the future. In the meantime we would like to know whether this report gives you the information you need, and whether it is easy to understand. You can let us know your views by emailing us at [info@wao.gov.uk](mailto:info@wao.gov.uk) or writing to us at 24, Cathedral Road, Cardiff CF11 9LJ.

The Wales Audit Office study team that assisted in preparing this report comprised John Roberts, Richard Harries and John Dwight under the direction of Alan Morris.

This report has been prepared by the Wales Audit Office on behalf of the Auditor General for Wales as required by the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2009. The Auditor General for Wales assesses the compliance of Welsh improvement authorities (county councils, county borough councils, national park authorities and fire and rescue authorities) with the improvement requirements of Part 1 of the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2009.

The Auditor General for Wales and his staff together comprise the Wales Audit Office. For further information about the Wales Audit Office please write to the Auditor General at 24 Cathedral Road, Cardiff, CF11 9LJ. Telephone 029 2032 0500, email: [info@wao.gov.uk](mailto:info@wao.gov.uk), or see website [www.wao.gov.uk](http://www.wao.gov.uk).

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# What kind of area is Brecon Beacons National Park?

1 The Brecon Beacons National Park (the Park) was established in 1957, the last of the three national parks in Wales to be created. It has the largest area of open hill common in Wales, four of the five longest cave systems in the United Kingdom and 268 scheduled ancient monuments. The Park's 1,346 square kilometres cover four distinct mountain ranges and stretch from Llandeilo in the west to Hay-on-Wye in the east.

geographic area  
1,346 km<sup>2</sup>  
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2 The largest town is Brecon but other settlements in the Park include Crickhowell, Gilwern and Hay. In the central and eastern part, the population is mainly concentrated in the Usk Valley, the Clydach Gorge and the Hay/Talgarth and Hirwaun/Penderyn areas.

population  
approx 35,000  
//////////

3 The Authority is the organisation that manages the Park. The Authority has about 130 staff that work towards conserving the Park, encouraging people to use the Park and enhancing the wellbeing of local people and communities. Approximately 35 per cent of staff are part-time or seasonal. There are over 5,300 kilometres of hedgerows and nearly 1,800 rights of way within the Park, with a total length of nearly 2,000 kilometres.

visitors a year  
3.8 million  
//////////

4 There are approximately 35,000 people living within the Park and about 70 per cent of the land within the Park is privately owned. Each year the Park is visited by 3.8 million people, spending over 4.2 million visitor days in the Park.

# Is the Brecon Beacons National Park Authority well managed?

- 5 In July of 2010, the Auditor General produced a report that gives some detail on how the Authority is organised and managed. Our findings are set out in [Appendix 3](#). The whole Corporate Assessment Report can be found on the Authority's website or on the Wales Audit Office website at [www.wao.gov.uk](http://www.wao.gov.uk).
- 6 The overall conclusion of that report was that effective leadership has laid firm foundations for improvement and the Authority recognises that more work is required; although sustaining the momentum that will lead to further improvement remains a challenge.
- 7 In other words, the Authority's new structure gives a stronger role for members and a clearer direction from senior staff. These have led to improvements in the way the Authority can operate. The Authority does a lot of its work by joining forces with others and it has an effective way of managing its staff. It has done well in focusing on its finances, making sure it controls the money it spends. However it is only now starting to work out how it will respond to likely cuts in its funding.
- 8 The Authority's senior officer team is relatively small, making it difficult to deliver further planned improvements quickly enough.
- 9 Since we produced the Corporate Assessment the pressure has grown on all public services to make the very best use of all their resources. The auditor appointed by the Auditor General has given his opinion on the Authority's accounts. His Annual Audit Letter, which provides information regarding the accounts, use of resources and the Authority's Improvement Plan is included in this report as [Appendix 4](#).
- 10 The Authority keeps a close eye on its spending and anticipates being able to maintain its level of reserves at the end of 2010-11. Based on the draft settlement received from the Assembly Government, the Authority has identified that it will need to reduce expenditure by £118,000 per year for the next three years. The Authority has however recently agreed an emerging budget strategy that will address this through:
  - cost savings from operational efficiency;
  - savings from natural wastage and voluntary early release of staff; and
  - additional income generation.
- 11 A balanced budget for the period 2013-14 has been developed for presentation to the Authority in February 2011.
- 12 There is more information about people's rights in relation to local government accounts in the Wales Audit Office leaflet, *Council accounts: your rights*, which you can find on our website at [www.wao.gov.uk](http://www.wao.gov.uk).

## Does the Brecon Beacons National Park Authority know what it needs to do to improve?

- 13 The Assembly Government requires all authorities to publish their plans for improving what they do and how they do it. They must also publish a list of the main priorities that they are aiming to improve each year – their improvement objectives. For 2010-11, for the purposes of the Local Government Measure, the Authority has decided to concentrate on eight objectives, which we have set out below:
- deliver an excellent planning service which inspires public and business confidence through the delivery of the Further Improvement Plan;
  - ensure that the Local Development Plan (LDP) is produced in accordance with an agreed timetable with Assembly Government;
  - review enforcement and plan for a quality service to support development planning;
  - deliver year 2 of the three-year improvement plan for Finance;
  - deliver year 2 of the three-year improvement plan for Performance;
  - deliver year 2 of the three-year improvement plan for Information and Governance;
  - reduction of the Authority's environmental impact including CO<sub>2</sub>; and
  - develop citizen centred governance<sup>1</sup> principles at the heart of all we do including the development and implementation of a Charter with Community Councils.
- 14 Under the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2009. The Authority is required to publish its improvement objectives, and its plans to achieve them, as soon 'as practical after the beginning of April each year'. In the past, the Authority has published its improvement plan in April or May. However, in 2010, it was published on its website on 22 October as part of its annual review for the period between April 2009 and March 2010. Because of the need to gather and audit the information, this annual review is not normally published until October. The decision to delay publication of the improvement plan until the annual review falls short of the requirement to publish 'as soon as practical after the beginning of April'.
- 15 The Authority is aware of this issue and, although it plans to take the same approach this coming year, it is aiming to approve this combined document and publish it before the end of May. However, it will be difficult for the Authority to gather and confirm the information it needs early enough in order to meet this challenging deadline. It is also unlikely to have access to information from the other national park authorities, making it difficult to compare its performance. We also consider that there are options for the Authority to publish its improvement objectives more widely, for example by including them in its key publications.
- 16 The Authority's improvement objectives do not focus to a great extent on the Park or on local people and those who visit the Park; concentrating more on the Authority itself. Most of the objectives relate to the changes it will make to its arrangements, rather than on what differences the Park and people could expect to experience. As the objective about the LDP is a legal requirement, we do not consider it to be an objective that is about improvement.
- 17 However, the objective about inspiring public and business confidence in its planning service does focus more on outcomes for people and the objectives about reducing environmental impact and developing governance principles are both consistent with the Assembly Government's priority areas, linked to the grant funding for the Authority.

<sup>1</sup> The process of making decisions and ensuring they are carried out.

- 18 We also examined how well the Authority involved the public and those that work with and for it, in deciding what it should make a priority. The Authority sensibly used responses from previous and current consultations to help arrive at these objectives, rather than carrying out specific consultation on its improvement objectives. An example of the consultation that was already available is the work carried out by the Authority as part of drafting its National Park Management Plan. This consultation was supplemented by running workshops with staff and members. For a relatively small organisation, this approach makes effective use of limited resources while ensuring a degree of stakeholder involvement. However, the Authority recognises that more can be done, especially in aligning its objectives to its available resources, and, to that end, a joint management team meeting was held by the Authority during December in order to begin to address this aspect.
- 19 We examined whether the Authority is clear about how the Park and people will be better off if it improves in the ways that it intends to. To achieve that clarity, the Authority needs to be able to measure and assess its progress. We think that most of the Authority's objectives are framed in such a way as to enable measurement and assessment. For example, energy usage and public and business confidence could be readily measured, as could delivering the second year of its three-year plans, producing the LDP and reviewing enforcement.
- 20 The Authority has set out the type of performance information it will use to measure progress but these indicators could be strengthened. For example, we do not consider a focus on how quickly planning applications are dealt with will help demonstrate that the Authority has an 'excellent planning service.' Similarly, we are unclear about what tests could be applied to effectively assess whether the Authority has 'citizen centred governance principles'. However, even if the Authority could measure and assess progress against its improvement objectives, because the Authority's improvement objectives are generally about its internal arrangements, it would not give the Authority information about how these improvements had benefited the Park and people living in, and visiting, the Park.
- 21 Finally we wanted to examine how well the Authority's plans support its efforts to improve and if it could afford to pay for these improvements. However, its improvement plan is not required to include detailed information about how it will achieve its objectives. It is therefore difficult, at this stage, to comment on how effective its plans might be, or about whether it can fund them. The links between the Authority's Improvement Plan and the business plans that teams and individual staff will work to on a daily basis are clearly important. We have not yet looked at this area in detail and it is something we plan to do over the coming months.
- 22 Every authority needs to have good information on how it is performing and about customers' and users' experiences and use it well if it is to provide good services and to improve them further. As we suggested in our July report, use of performance information is an area that the Authority knows it needs to improve on.
- 23 Despite these reservations, we are encouraged by the Authority's continuing efforts to improve in the areas of setting its objectives, planning for their delivery, and measuring its success at doing so. It has teamed up with the other two national park authorities in Wales to commission a report on how it can make better use of information and will be taking part in workshops that we are arranging that are aimed at improving the use of information and the development of more useful improvement plans.

# Is Brecon Beacons National Park Authority serving the Park and people well?

- 24 Through the Auditor General's Improvement Assessment, we hope to gradually build a picture of how well the Authority is serving the Park, local people and those who visit the Park. In order to do that, each year we will examine the Authority's services and some of their objectives for improvement as they relate to two important aspects of life in the Brecon Beacons National Park. We think that together, these aspects cover most of the services that national park authorities provide. They are:
- looking after the National Park; and
  - helping people enjoy and understand the National Park.
- 25 In this year's assessment we examined how the Authority is doing so far on two of its objectives. The objectives we have chosen are:
- delivery of an excellent planning service which inspires public and business confidence; and
  - reduction of the Authority's environmental impact including CO<sub>2</sub>.
- 26 We chose these objectives because, of those available, we considered that these were the ones that most concentrated on results, rather than activities. Overall, if the Authority has chosen to make things a priority, then it should be able to measure them in terms of how they affect the Park, local people and visitors to the Park.
- 27 We will look at other improvement objectives the Authority is setting itself in our report later this year.
- 28 The Welsh Language Board works with authorities to help them develop their statutory Welsh language schemes that outline the way in which they provide services to the public in Welsh. The primary responsibility for the range and standard of services rests with the authorities who provide them, working in accordance with the statutory framework and guidelines of the Welsh Language Board. Every authority is expected to provide the Welsh Language Board with an Annual Monitoring Report that explains how its scheme has been implemented. This allows the Board to offer advice as to how an authority might improve its local arrangements. The Board also undertakes its own reviews to assess the provision of Welsh language services and to promote improvement.
- 29 The Welsh Language Board has praised the Authority for establishing its Welsh Language Committee, and identifying a Member Champion to support the duties of the Welsh Language Officer. The Authority holds information on the language skills of its staff, and is able to provide a Welsh language service at its main reception. Although the majority of the Authority's publications are produced in Welsh and English or bilingually, its main publication, the Visitor Guide, is available only in English. The Authority recently launched the English version of its website with the Welsh version to follow at a later date. This is a breach of the Welsh Language Scheme and the Authority is currently taking action to rectify the situation.



## Is the Authority looking after the Brecon Beacons National Park?

- 30 The Authority's planning service uses a significant proportion of the Authority's budget and is also important in its role in looking after the Park. For example, making the right decisions on planning matters, and winning any appeals that might result, probably helps to protect the Park from unwanted developments.
- 31 Generally the Authority wins over 80 per cent of planning appeals, but in 2009-10 this dropped to 47 per cent. Although the period between January and November 2010 saw a marked improvement, with the Authority winning over 70 per cent, adverse publicity about some of the cases it lost is in danger of damaging the Authority's reputation. The responsiveness of the service to complaints about the planning regulations is poor in all three national parks in Wales, but is even worse for this Authority with only 23 per cent of enforcement cases resolved within 12 weeks during 2009-10. The Authority is aware of the issue but, because of other priorities, has yet to focus on this area. However, the enforcement service is being reviewed and members of the Authority will consider the implications of that review.
- 32 The percentage of planning applications approved has varied between 66 and 86 per cent over the last three years. In the past, the Authority's responsiveness in determining these applications has been one of the lowest for all local planning authorities in Wales. However, in 2009-10, performance improved (to 67 per cent in eight weeks) which was above the Welsh average of 63 per cent. This improvement has been maintained in the first three months of 2010-11. A recently introduced local scheme of validation, setting out what needs to be submitted as part of a planning application, makes it more likely that applications can be approved on first being submitted.
- 33 Every planning authority in Wales has to produce a Local Development Plan (LDP) for its area. The LDP provides guidance for individuals, businesses and developers about what can be built and where. Production of the Authority's LDP has been delayed by 12 months, partly because of the complexities of consulting the seven constituent local authorities about changes that members of the Authority have requested. The agreement about the delivery of the LDP has, as a consequence, been updated in consultation with the Assembly Government.
- 34 We did not find any information about affordable housing provision, either as a percentage of all new housing or as a percentage of all new housing on previously developed land. Although the Authority has limited influence on how many applications of this type are made, we think it is important that it monitors these issues, particularly since it has a duty to 'seek to foster the social and economic well being of local communities'<sup>2</sup>.
- 35 We did not find any information about the level of public or business confidence in the planning service. This is an aspect that the Authority will need to measure in order to know whether its meeting its objective about its planning service.
- 36 Although the information available from the Authority shows its planning service improving in many areas, much of this information is about how quickly it is providing a service, rather than how well. We recognise that legislation requires much of this information to be collected, but the Authority has not been collecting additional information about what the service has achieved, rather than what activities it has carried out. There is too much focus on delivering actions, rather than on whether those actions are actually making a difference.

<sup>2</sup> See Appendix 2.

However, the Authority has begun to address this issue and is starting to collect more meaningful information.

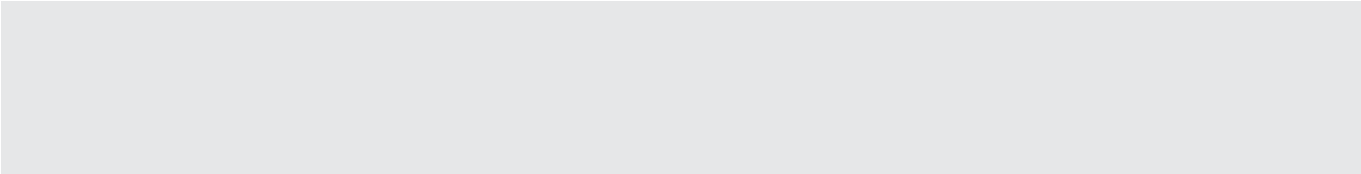
- 37 The objective of reducing the Authority's environmental impact is the most relevant in relation to how it is looking after the Park. The Authority reached its target of reducing the amount of electricity it consumed by 10 per cent in 2009-10. In total, the Authority reduced its CO<sub>2</sub> footprint by 13.5 per cent between 2008-09 and 2009-10. This reduction equates to over 60 fewer tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub>. A significant part of this reduction was as a result of staff changing the way they travelled to and from work. The Authority's increased use of low emission vehicles also made a valuable contribution.
- 38 The building of 10 hydroelectric systems, as part of the Green Valleys project, helped to cut carbon emissions. The project won a prestigious award and went on to be used as a case study at a United Nations climate change conference. The requirement that all new planning applications need to comply with the Authority's recently adopted sustainable design is another step that helps to minimise environmental impact.
- 39 Taken together, these initiatives all help to demonstrate that the Authority is making good progress towards achieving its environmental impact objective.
- 40 There is more to looking after the Park than just the activities of the planning service or the extent of environmental impact. We therefore looked at what other information was available, even though it might not link closely to the Authority's specific improvement objectives.
- 41 The Authority's 'Black to Green' project has helped to revitalise parts of a valley within the Park that contained a large area of exposed peat. The Authority has responded to concerns about illegal offroading<sup>3</sup> by working with partners to produce a form on its website which allows reports about offroading to be sent directly to the police. Some of these reports have already resulted in prosecutions.
- 42 Overall, apart from the information about environmental impact, we do not think there is sufficient information for us, or the Authority, to form a clear view on whether the Authority is looking after the Park. Some of their activities are clearly intended to help, but we do not know whether those activities have actually made much difference.

<sup>3</sup> A term used for driving a specialized vehicle on unpaved roads.

## Is the Authority helping people enjoy and understand the National Park?

- 43 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 we have set some of it out in the following paragraphs.
- 44 Access is clearly important to the public's enjoyment of the Park. Some of the information we found about access opportunities that the Authority provides include:
- Graded walks:
    - Access for All – suitable for wheelchairs and pushchairs;
    - Easy Walks – suitable for novice walkers; and
    - Moderate, Energetic and Strenuous walks.
  - Easier Access Guide, including a map showing the location of 55 routes and attractions with easier access;
  - a form to gather feedback from people who go on its guided walks; and
  - the percentage of total lengths of footpaths and other rights of way which are easy to use by members of the public has increased from 61 per cent in 2007-08 to 63 per cent in 2009-10.
- 45 Other users of the Park are also catered for, with bike and trailer hire available and access to 15 graded mountain bike routes. The Authority has a dedicated site for horse-riders and, in 2005, the Authority received the British Horse Society's Access Award for the National Park most active in opening up equestrian routes. The Authority's website includes information and links to useful sites on a wide range of activities such as caving, fishing, gliding, and canoeing. In establishing its interactive Facebook site and using 'a Tweeting Warden' on Twitter, the Authority shows that it is aware of new opportunities.
- 46 Some of the work that the Authority is involved with, that tries to encourage wider access to the Park, includes:
- building on existing relationships with one of the Black and Minority Ethnic Community Champions;
  - co-ordinated meetings of the Disabled Access Action Group;
  - delivering a series of pilot activities for Life Map Planners<sup>4</sup>; and
  - arranging group visits by, and outreach talks to, socially excluded groups as part of the jointly funded Crossing Park Boundaries scheme.
- 47 An important part of ensuring wider access to the Park is the availability of public transport. Beacons Buses are specially commissioned by the Authority to bring people into Brecon and then on various routes around the Park. People from all over South Wales and Herefordshire can make use of Brecon Bus. These buses run every Sunday and bank holiday throughout the summer and, in 2009-10, there were over 11,000 passenger journeys, exceeding the Authority's target of 7,500. 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.
- 48 As the Authority has a statutory duty to promote people's understanding of the Park, we think it is important to examine the Authority's performance in relation to that aspect. The Authority's education team is an important part of its 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

<sup>4</sup> Life Map Planners is an organisation that works with children and young people from disadvantaged communities.



schools and local communities, the team produces factsheets, issues a schools newsletter and provides lesson plans and other resources on the Authority's website. The Authority's work experience programme also promotes understanding through the annual two week placements it offers students.

- 49 For those walking the Park, the Authority has developed audio trails, allowing people to download recorded audio guides that can be listened to while walking particular routes. The Authority's programme of activities and events includes information about guided walks, where groups of people are accompanied by expert guides. A community walking and interpretation toolkit is available on its website, together with a wildlife walk booklet. The Authority runs five information centres, and services a number of village information points.
- 50 The Authority has also worked with the tourist industry, training those involved so as to improve their knowledge of the Park and what is available for visitors. A 'National Park Knowledge' pilot scheme run by the Authority encouraged local taxi drivers to offer helpful information about the Park to those using their services.
- 51 All these activities are designed to increase people's understanding and enjoyment of the Park. However, the Authority has no information about how much people's understanding and enjoyment have actually increased as a consequence of the work it is carrying out. We recognise that the impact of these activities is difficult to measure, but if the Authority does not know whether its activities are making a difference, how can it be sure that it does not need to change its approach?

# What should the Authority do?

- 52 Given 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 Assembly 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 Council/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 them to do something about them and we will follow up what happens.
- 53 We think the Authority needs to consider our proposals to help it improve.

## Proposals we made in our earlier work

- without delay, explore ways to ensure the Authority has sufficient capacity to deliver planned improvements;
- develop a corporate approach to workforce planning that supports the Authority's ability to deliver its priorities;
- use data more effectively to manage performance, particularly ensuring a greater focus on outcomes; and
- ensure that medium-term financial planning is clearly informed by the Authority's priorities.

## New proposals for improvement

- in future, develop improvement objectives that are:
  - more focused on what will be achieved, rather than on what will be done;
  - measurable;
  - matched to available resources; and
  - explicit about the level of improvement being aimed at.
- publish plans for improvement earlier in the year, in line with the requirements of the Measure; also exploring the possibility of publishing its improvement objectives more widely; and
- ensure that progress on adopting the LDP becomes a matter of priority and is not allowed to slip further.

# Appendix 1

## About the Auditor General and this report

### The Auditor General

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 Wales Audit Office helps the Auditor General by examining various aspects of how Welsh public bodies work. It was created in 2005 when the National Audit Office in Wales and the Audit Commission in Wales merged.

The Auditor General is the external auditor of the Assembly Government and its sponsored and related public bodies; the National Assembly for Wales Commission and National Health Service (NHS) 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.

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 law which created the Wales Audit Office also expanded the powers of the Auditor General to follow the 'public pound' wherever it goes.

### This report

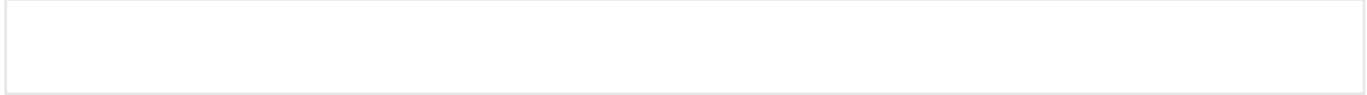
The Measure introduced new responsibilities for the Auditor General, including a responsibility to publish his assessment of each council's/authority's arrangements to secure continuous improvement.

This report has been produced by the Auditor General for Wales to discharge his duties under section 24 of the Measure. The report also discharges duties under section 19, namely; to issue a report certifying that he has carried out an audit under section 17 and an improvement assessment under section 18.

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 authorities, national parks, and fire and rescue authorities.

The main piece of work for the Wales Audit Office, to enable the Auditor General to fulfil his duties, is an annual Improvement Assessment<sup>5</sup>.

<sup>5</sup> This assessment will be conducted for each improvement authority, under section 18 of the Measure. For each authority, it will determine whether the authority is likely to comply with the requirements of Part 1 of the Measure. The WAO will also undertake an improvement information and planning audit, as required under section 17 of the Measure, in order to ascertain whether the authority has discharged its duties under section 15(1) to (7).



This will be informed by a:

- Corporate Assessment – a forward-looking assessment of an authority’s likelihood to comply with its duty to make arrangements to secure continuous improvement; and
- Performance Assessment – 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.

The output(s) from these assessments will be issued by the Auditor General as Audit and Assessment Report(s), under section 19 of the Measure. In publishing this report under section 19, the Auditor General for Wales is certifying that we have undertaken a section 17 audit and a section 18 improvement assessment.

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 will also take account of information shared by relevant regulators (under section 33) in his assessments and this report will summarise any work undertaken by them.

The Auditor General sets out the fee for performance audit work undertaken to discharge his duties under the Measure at each local authority in a Regulatory Programme agreed each year with the authority. The fee for November 2009 until March 2011 is currently expected to be in line with that set out in the Regulatory Programme.

## Appendix 2

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

Brecon Beacons National Park Authority spends approximately £6.4 million per year (2009-10). This equates to about £183 per resident. In 2009-10 the Authority also spent a net of £41,000 on capital items.

The Authority consists of 24 members. Eight appointed by the Assembly 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.

The Authority is required by the Assembly 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.

#### Corporate Management Team<sup>6</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>6</sup> Chief Officers at the Authority.



# Appendix 3

## The Auditor General's Corporate Assessment

The main conclusions of the Auditor General's Corporate Assessment which was issued to the Authority in July 2010 are set out below:

- Effective leadership has laid firm foundations for improvement and the Authority recognises that more work is required; although sustaining the momentum that will lead to further improvement remains a challenge.

### How the Authority has approached improvement over time

The Authority's positive response to identified weaknesses has led to significant improvements in its arrangements but limited capacity is impairing prospects for future improvement:

- serious problems highlighted by the Authority's planning function contributed to a major overhaul of the corporate management team and to improved arrangements across the organisation;
- the introduction of significant improvements in areas such as governance allows the Authority to be better placed to secure future improvement; and
- further changes are planned but limited capacity means that some initiatives are either falling behind schedule or will take a long time to complete, affecting the Authority's ability to deliver future improvement.

### Analysis of the Authority's arrangements to help it improve

Effective leadership and improved governance are the Authority's particular strengths, supported by its approach to people management and aspects of partnership working, but some important areas are still being developed:

- leadership and governance are playing a significant role in supporting improvement;
- people management, joint working and the day-to-day management and control of the Authority's financial resources are positively supporting improvement;
- a range of policies and aspects of the Authority's business processes, together with a clearer and developing strategy, are partly supporting improvement; and
- although the Authority has started to develop a new approach to medium-term financial planning, this aspect is not yet supporting improvement.

For the full report see our website at [www.wao.gov.uk](http://www.wao.gov.uk) or contact us at the address on the inside cover of this report.

## Appendix 4

### The Appointed Auditor's Annual Audit Letter to the Members of Brecon Beacons National Park Authority

#### **Brecon Beacons National Park Authority complied with financial and performance improvement reporting requirements but there is still scope for it to strengthen its performance information and reporting arrangements**

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;
- establish and keep under review appropriate arrangements to secure economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its use of resources; and
- publish its Improvement Plan by 31 October.

The Code of Audit Practice issued by the Auditor General (the Code) requires me to:

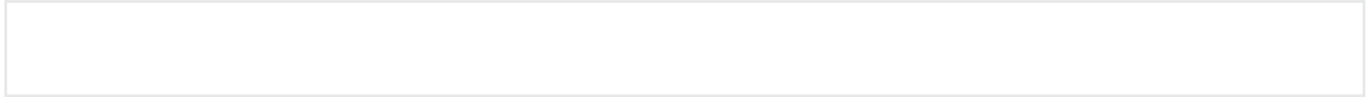
- provide an audit opinion on the accounting statements;
- review the Authority's arrangements to secure economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its use of resources;
- consider whether the Improvement Plan is prepared and published in accordance with statutory requirements; and
- issue a certificate confirming that I have completed the audit of the accounts.

On 29 September 2010 I issued an unqualified audit opinion on the accounting statements, confirming that they present a true and fair view of the Authority's financial transactions. My report is contained within the Statement of Accounts.

My review of the Authority's arrangements to secure economy, efficiency and effectiveness has included the financial audit work set out above as well as placing reliance on the work completed as part of the LG Measure. The main findings from this latter work are those set out on page 11 of this report.

The Authority's Improvement Plan 2010-11 meets statutory requirements and provides a balanced view of its performance in 2009-10 but there is still scope for it to strengthen its performance information and reporting arrangements, as highlighted on page 12 of this report.

I also issued a certificate confirming that the audit of the accounts has been completed on 29 September 2009.



During the audit I identified the following good practices:

- the adoption of a Code of Corporate Governance, which will contribute significantly to overall governance arrangements and the expectation that Annual Governance Statements will be required for 2010-11; and
- the continued work of the Audit and Scrutiny Committee provides a clear focus on both governance and performance matters and will assist the Authority to manage change within the financial pressures it faces.

The financial audit fee for 2009-10 is currently expected to be in line with that set out in the Financial Audit Strategy.

Ceri Stradling  
Appointed Auditor

November 2010

# Appendix 5

## References

All the data referred to within the report is drawn from one of the following sources:

- Welsh Assembly Government, StatsWales
- Welsh Assembly Government, local area summary statistics
- Improvement Authority's own websites and improvement plans
- The Wales Yearbook
- The Home Office
- Members' Research Service
- Office for National Statistics