



WALES AUDIT OFFICE
SWYDDFA ARCHWILIO CYMRU

Annual Improvement Report 2015-16

Snowdonia National Park Authority

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This Annual Improvement Report has been prepared on behalf of the Auditor General for Wales by Huw Rees, John Roberts, Rob Hathaway, and Katherine Simmons under the direction of Jane Holownia.

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The Auditor General is independent of government, and is appointed by Her Majesty the Queen. The Auditor General undertakes his work using staff and other resources provided by the Wales Audit Office Board, which is a statutory board established for that purpose and to monitor and advise the Auditor General. The Wales Audit Office is held to account by the National Assembly.

The Auditor General audits local government bodies in Wales, including unitary authorities, police, probation, fire and rescue authorities, national parks and community councils. He also conducts local government value for money studies and assesses compliance with the requirements of the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2009.

Beyond local government, 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.

The Auditor General and staff of the Wales Audit Office aim to provide public-focused and proportionate reporting on the stewardship of public resources and in the process provide insight and promote improvement.

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Summary report

About this report

- 1 This Annual Improvement Report (AIR) summarises the audit work undertaken at Snowdonia National Park Authority (the Authority) since the last such report was published in July 2015. This report also includes, where appropriate, a summary of the key findings from the Welsh Language Commissioner (the Commissioner) as a 'relevant regulator' under the Local Government (Wales) Measure (the Measure). This report does not represent a comprehensive review of all the Authority's arrangements or services. The conclusions in this report are based on the work carried out at the Authority and by relevant external review bodies and, unless stated otherwise, reflect the situation at the point in time that such work was concluded.
- 2 Taking into consideration the work carried out during 2015-16, the Auditor General will state in this report whether he believes that the Authority is likely to make arrangements to secure continuous improvement for 2016-17.
- 3 This statement should not be seen as a definitive diagnosis of organisational health or as a prediction of future success. Rather, it should be viewed as providing an opinion on the extent to which the arrangements currently in place are reasonably sound insofar as can be ascertained from the work carried out.
- 4 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@audit.wales or writing to us at 24 Cathedral Road, Cardiff, CF11 9LJ.

The Authority is meeting its statutory requirements in relation to continuous improvement

- 5 Based on, and limited to, the work carried out by the Wales Audit Office and relevant regulators, the Auditor General believes that the Authority is likely to comply with the requirements of the Local Government Measure during 2016-17.
- 6 The Auditor General has reached this conclusion because:
 - a We found that, in 2014-15, the Authority largely delivered against its objectives, although performance targets to improve Electronic Services have been missed.
 - b We undertook work at all three National Park Authorities in Wales to assess the extent to which they are delivering efficient planning services with less money. In this Authority, we found that improved leadership of planning services is contributing to good customer satisfaction and the delivery of affordable housing, although the Authority's approach to collaborating with other national park and planning authorities in Wales and achieving value for money is not sufficiently robust.
 - c The Authority evaluated and reported on its performance and published its plans for improvement in accordance with the requirements of the Local Government Measure.

Recommendations and proposals for improvement

- 7 Given the wide range of services provided by the Authority and the challenges it is facing, it would be unusual if we did not find things that can be improved. The Auditor General is able to:
 - a make proposals for improvement – if proposals are made to the Authority, we would expect it to do something about them and we will follow up what happens;
 - b make formal recommendations for improvement – if a formal recommendation is made, the Authority must prepare a response to that recommendation within 30 working days;
 - c conduct a special inspection and publish a report and make recommendations; and
 - d recommend to Ministers of the Welsh Government that they intervene in some way.

- 8 During the course of the year, the Auditor General did not make any formal recommendations. However, lower-priority issues, known as proposals for improvement, were contained in our other reports and are set out below. We will continue to monitor proposals for improvement during the course of our improvement assessment work.

- P1 Work in partnership with other national park authorities and other planning authorities in Wales to develop:
- consistent, robust comparative cost and volume data and use this to demonstrate whether or not it is providing value for money; and
 - relevant outcomes to help measure the contribution towards meeting the goal of sustainable development, especially in relation to longer-term change.
- This work should be undertaken in co-operation with the Planning Officers Society for Wales, Welsh Local Government Association and the Welsh Government, building on the experience of cost measurement and comparison via Heads of Planning Scotland and the Planning Advisory Service England.
- P2 Increase levels of strategic collaboration and partnership working, especially with other national park and planning authorities in Wales, including exploring opportunities for reducing planning service costs and the options for closer workforce planning.
- P3 Review priorities and targets for the Authority's planning services to ensure adequate focus on meeting local community needs.

- 9 In addition, the Commissioner included areas for improvement in its inspection report issued to the Authority during the year; this is available on the [Commissioner's website](#).

Detailed report



The Authority has largely delivered against its objectives, although performance targets to improve Electronic Services have been missed

- 10 This section of the report looks at the Authority's performance for the period 1 April 2014 to 31 March 2015.
- 11 Snowdonia National Park Authority produced two plans relating to 2014-15. The first, 'Business and Improvement Plan 2014/15' sets out their Improvement Objectives and performance measures for 2014-15. The second, 'Annual Report and Improvement Plan for 2014/15' reports on progress against activities and performance during 2014-15. The Authority had five Improvement Objectives for 2014-15. These were supported by specific performance measures and a series of local indicators, which were centred on key work activities.
- 12 We have focused on those areas that the Authority had identified as improvement objectives under the Local Government Measure and on the available evidence collected by the Authority that could demonstrate progress towards these objectives.

Improvement Objective One: Operating effectively with less resources:

The Authority continues to deliver on its priorities providing a service for all within the reduced resources available.

- 13 The Improvement Objective to 'Operate effectively with less resources' was included for the first time in 2014-15. This was in response to anticipated financial challenges facing the Authority and to ensure a mechanism was in place to monitor progress on meeting its Financial Strategy. There were two performance measures for this objective and seven key work activities (related to reducing existing costs or increasing/initiating charges for service provision). Overall progress towards this objective was good, with the Authority meeting its targets to achieve baseline savings of £511,700 and adopt their financial strategy for 2014-15.
- 14 Progress on underpinning activities was more variable, with three projects considered successful or ongoing, two partly successful and two unsuccessful. Where the Authority considered projects to be unsuccessful or only partly successful it provided a narrative explanation in its Annual Report. This outlined the specific circumstances and set out the remedial actions necessary.

Improvement Objective Two: Communities

Community Councils and our key stakeholders will have a better understanding of what the Authority does and the special qualities of the Park.

- 15 The Authority continued to receive positive feedback from Community Councils and stakeholders on their understanding of what the Authority does and the special qualities of the park. One hundred per cent of respondents had a good understanding. The Authority's second performance measure was the percentage of disabled people, people from minority ethnic groups and people from community first areas neighbouring the Park attending Authority organised events such as guided walks, who say that they have a good understanding of what the Authority does and the special qualities of the Park. For this measure, the Authority missed its target of 98 per cent of respondents having a good understanding. However, with 96 per cent of respondents having a good understanding of what the Authority does, it demonstrated a steady improvement on the previous three years' performance.
- 16 Progress against the key activities for the Communities Improvement Objective was also positive, with 10 projects considered successful and two considered partly successful. These local indicators represented a range of joint working initiatives between the National Park Authority and local/national partners. The Authority also implemented the action plan for fulfilling the equality objectives within its Strategic Equality Plan and continued to undertake activity to engage with disabled people, people from minority ethnic groups and people from community first areas neighbouring the Park.

Improvement Objective Three: Performance

- a) The performance management arrangements will be more effective to ensure we maintain service standards during a period of diminishing resources.
- b) Staff and members will have a better understanding of how their work contributes to the delivery of the Authority's service priorities and improvement objectives

- 17 Progress in working towards the Authority's third Improvement Objective was mixed, with the Authority meeting only one of the four performance measure targets. Within the activity, the Authority assessed one project as successfully completed, the other partly successful.
- 18 The Authority continued to meet its 100 per cent target for members who consider the reports they receive on the progress of improvement objectives to be timely and effective. It also completed all staff appraisals, with Line Managers explaining the Performance Management Framework during these sessions. However, only 33 per cent of staff reported that they are very satisfied with the level of guidance and support received from their line managers against a target of 43 per cent. This is only slightly below the average for the last four years, and when combined with the 62 per cent who were 'satisfied' it means 95 per cent of staff were either satisfied or very satisfied with the level of guidance and support received. From 2015-16 onwards the Authority has expanded this indicator to capture staff who are satisfied with the level of guidance and support received, so it reflects the complete picture.

- 19 Ninety-four per cent of staff and members said they have a good understanding of how what they do contributes to the delivery of the Authority's service priorities and improvement objectives. This did not meet the Authority's target of 98 per cent (which they achieved in 2013-14), although the Authority cited continuing uncertainty and changes to the workplace as a possible factor. The Annual Report and Improvement Plan stated the Authority will be monitoring the situation going forward to assess whether further action is required.
- 20 The last performance measure was captured via an anonymous survey to staff. It indicated that only 69 per cent of staff agreed that they have opportunities to develop their skills, against a target of 88 per cent. This was rated 'red' and was five per cent below the Authority's lowest previous result in 2011-12. It also meant the activity to support this improvement objective – to monitor delivery of the Training Plan could only be considered partly successful. The Authority attributed this result to reductions in staff and a slight delay in ensuring appraisals had been completed, impacting on the timescales for approving the training plan.

Improvement Objective Four: Electronic Services

- a) The range and type of services available electronically is in line with the needs of the public.
- b) Users of the electronic service will be very satisfied with their experience.

- 21 The Authority reflects within the Improvement Plan on the development of the website as a resource to convey information, communicate and undertake transactions. As a consequence, the performance measures for this objective focused on: visitors to the website, technical problems reported and satisfaction rates for the quality and range of electronically provided services. Progress against this Improvement Objective was poor, with none of the targets for the three performance measure targets being met.
- 22 Of the eight activities supporting this objective, there were two projects that the Authority considered successful, three partly successful and three not successful. The Authority has identified a number of contributory factors to the shortfalls in these results. These include reduced staff resource and the new website being in the process of redesign.

Improvement Objective Five: Planning Policy

People will have a better understanding of the planning policies in the Local Development Plan.

- 23 The Authority deployed a range of external and internal initiatives in 2014-15 to work towards achieving Improvement Objective five. Its performance measures reflect this inward and outward looking approach. Measures include service user, Agent/Community Council Members, and National Park Authority Members' understanding of planning policies and the percentage of valid applications. Only service users' understanding of planning policies failed to meet its performance target of 85 per cent, with 81 per cent expressing that they have a better understanding. This is a slight improvement from the previous year, but it represents a relatively static trend in performance. The percentage of valid applications as a total of all applications received, however, has steadily increased each year since 2011-12 and in 2014-15 exceeded its target of 68 per cent by 10 per cent.
- 24 There were four activities supporting this Improvement Objective. These included arranging workshops, updating the website, providing CPD training and gathering/analysing monitoring information as appropriate. Most of these were ongoing activities that were undertaken for 2014-15 and therefore were considered successful.
- 25 The Authority is collaborating with the other National Park Authorities in Wales to take a different approach to improvement plan reporting. Their Corporate Plan 2016-17 will integrate new Well-being of Future Generations Act objectives with Corporate and Improvement Objectives. By aligning and revising its improvement objectives with the seven well-being goals, the Authority aims to take a more joined-up approach.

Improved leadership of planning services is contributing to good customer satisfaction, the quality of plans and the delivery of affordable housing, although the Authority's approach to collaborating with other national park and planning authorities in Wales and achieving value for money is not sufficiently robust

- 26 In October 2015, we published our Delivering with Less: Planning Services – Snowdonia National Park Authority Report.
- 27 The Welsh Government has recently reduced funding to all three national park authorities. These reductions came into effect during 2014-15, with further reductions required in 2015-16 and possibly beyond. All national park authorities in Wales are now taking difficult decisions on how they deal with reductions in funding. Given the proportionately high spend on the delivery of planning services in national park authorities in Wales when compared with councils, reductions in overall funding pose particular risks. During 2015-16 we examined how national park authorities are managing this risk, assessing the extent to which they were delivering efficient planning services with less money.
- 28 We concluded that improved leadership of planning services is contributing to good customer satisfaction, the quality of plans and the delivery of affordable housing, although the Authority's approach to collaborating with other national park and planning authorities in Wales and achieving value for money is not sufficiently robust.
- 29 We reached that conclusion because the Authority's clear, shared vision is supported by improved leadership, although the Authority has not clearly set out its local priorities for its planning service. Customer satisfaction is good, development management costs are generally low and some areas of delivery perform well but although collaboration is improving it is not sufficiently strategic. The Authority has improved its approach to performance management although it is not sufficiently focused on reviewing priorities, value for money or outcomes for its planning service.
- 30 The Authority considered this report at the National Park Authority Meeting on 9 December 2015. The Authority welcomed the report and acknowledged both the positive progress made and the areas for improvement. The Authority has asked for a further report or training on the risks in overturning officer recommendations.

The Authority evaluated and reported on its performance and published its plans for improvement in accordance with the requirements of the Local Government Measure

- 31 In November 2015, the Auditor General issued a certificate to the Authority confirming that he had audited the Authority's Improvement Plan in accordance with section 17 of the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2009 (the Measure) and the Wales Audit Office's Code of Audit Practice. As a result of that audit, the certificate also stated the Auditor General's belief that the Authority had discharged its duties under sections 15(2), (3), (8) and (9) of the Measure and had acted in accordance with Welsh Government guidance sufficiently to discharge its duties.
- 32 Under the Measure, the Authority is required to annually publish an assessment which describes its performance:
- a in discharging its duty to make arrangements to secure continuous improvement in the exercise of its functions;
 - b in meeting the improvement objectives it has set itself;
 - c by reference to performance indicators specified by Welsh Ministers, and self imposed performance indicators; and
 - d in meeting any performance standards specified by Welsh Ministers, and self imposed performance standards.
- 33 The Measure requires the Authority to publish its assessment before 31 October in the financial year following that to which the information relates, or by any other such date as Welsh Ministers may specify by order. The Measure requires that the Authority has regard to guidance issued by Welsh Ministers in publishing its assessment.
- 34 In June 2015, the Auditor General issued a certificate to the Authority confirming that the Authority's Improvement Plan had been audited in accordance with section 17 of the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2009 (the Measure) and the Auditor General's Code of Audit Practice. As a result of that audit, the certificate stated the Auditor General's belief that the Authority had discharged its duties under section 15(6) to (9) of the Measure and had acted in accordance with Welsh Government guidance sufficiently to discharge its duties.

- 35 Under the Measure, the Authority is required to prepare and publish an Improvement Plan describing its plans to discharge its duties to:
- a make arrangements to secure continuous improvement in the exercise of its functions;
 - b make arrangements to secure achievement of its improvement objectives; and
 - c make arrangements to exercise its functions so that any performance standard specified by Welsh Ministers is met.
- 36 The Measure requires the Authority to publish its Improvement Plan as soon as is reasonably practicable after the start of the financial year to which it relates, or after such other date as Welsh Ministers may specify by order. The Authority is responsible for preparing the Improvement Plan and for the information set out within it. The Measure requires that the Authority has regard to guidance issued by Welsh Ministers in preparing and publishing its plan.
- 37 The work carried out in order to report and make recommendations in accordance with sections 17 and 19 of the Measure cannot solely be relied upon to identify all weaknesses or opportunities for improvement.

Welsh Language Commissioner's evaluation of Snowdonia National Park Authority

- 38 The role of the Welsh Language Commissioner (the Commissioner) was created by the Welsh Language (Wales) Measure 2011. New powers to impose standards on organisations came into force through subordinate legislation on 31 March 2015. The Commissioner will continue to review Welsh-language schemes by virtue of powers inherited under the Welsh Language Act 1993.
- 39 The Commissioner works with all authorities in Wales to inspect and advise on the implementation of language schemes. It is the responsibility of authorities to provide services to the public in Welsh in accordance with the commitments in their language schemes. Every authority is committed to providing an annual monitoring report to the Commissioner outlining its performance in implementing the language scheme. The Commissioner analyses every monitoring report, provides a formal response and collects further information as required. The Commissioner issued a 'Response to the Annual Monitoring Report 2014/15' to Snowdonia National Park Authority in July 2015. In September 2015 the Commissioner issued a Compliance Notice, which listed the standards that the Authority is required to comply with within six or 12 months.
- 40 Inspection reports and letters issued to the Authority during the year by the Commissioner are available on the Commissioner's [website](#).

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 park authorities, and fire and rescue authorities.

This report has been produced by staff of the Wales Audit Office on behalf of the Auditor General to discharge his duties under section 24 of the Measure. The report also discharges his 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 park authorities, 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 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. The Auditor General will summarise his audit and assessment work in a published annual improvement report for each authority (under section 24).

The Auditor General may also, in some circumstances, carry out special inspections (under section 21), which will be reported to the authority and Ministers, and which he may publish (under section 22). An important ancillary activity for the Auditor General 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 – Annual Audit Letter

Mr E Williams
Chief Executive
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Dear Emyr

Annual Audit Letter – Snowdonia National Park Authority 2014-15

This letter summarises the key messages arising from the Auditor General for Wales' statutory responsibilities under the Public Audit (Wales) Act 2004 and my reporting responsibilities under the Code of Audit Practice.

The Authority complied with its responsibilities relating to financial reporting and use of resources

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 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.

Local authorities in Wales prepare their accounting statements in accordance with the requirements of the CIPFA/LASAAC Code of Practice on Local Authority Accounting in the United Kingdom. This code is based on International Financial Reporting Standards. On 30 September 2015, 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. The key matters arising from the accounts audit were reported to members of the Authority in my Audit of Financial Statements report on 30 September 2015. The audit did not identify any material errors in the draft financial statements, although there were a number of minor amendments that took a significant amount of time to clear and then update in the financial statements.

Following improvements since the 2013-14 accounts closedown, I received information for 2014-15 in a timely and helpful manner and was not restricted in my work. However, further improvements to the accounts closedown and audit process have been discussed with the Finance Manager. The audit team will continue work with key officers this year to develop the areas where these improvements can be made so that the overall process is improved for 2015-16.

I am satisfied that the Authority has appropriate arrangements in place to secure economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its use of resources

My consideration 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 (Wales) Measure 2009. My Annual Improvement Report will highlight areas where the effectiveness of these arrangements has yet to be demonstrated or where improvements could be made.

The Authority continues to improve many aspects of the Park and has responded effectively to cuts in funding, although it could do more to develop some supporting processes.

A certificate confirming that the audit of the accounts has been completed was issued to the Authority on 30 September 2015.

The financial audit fee for 2014-15 is currently expected to be in line with the agreed fee set out in the Annual Audit Outline.

Yours sincerely

Richard Harries
For and on behalf of the Auditor General for Wales

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