



WALES AUDIT OFFICE
SWYDDFA ARCHWILIO CYMRU

Annual Improvement Report

Snowdonia National Park Authority

Issued: May 2014

Document reference: 214A2014



About the Auditor General for Wales

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, 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.

Together with appointed auditors, 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.

This Annual Improvement Report has been prepared on behalf of the Auditor General for Wales by John Roberts and Andy Bruce under the direction of Jane Holownia.

Contents

Summary report, recommendations and proposals for improvement	4
Detailed report	
Introduction	5
The Authority made good progress in delivering improvements in those areas it had identified as being of high priority	6
The Authority published a comprehensive assessment of the extent to which it delivered its improvement objectives for 2012-13	11
The Authority's plans for improvement are well established and are supported by effective asset management arrangements and a constructive approach to evaluating its governance arrangements	12
The Authority faces a number of significant challenges over the next two years but it is too early to say to what extent these will affect the Authority's ability to deliver improvements	15
Appendices	
Appendix 1 Status of this report	18
Appendix 2 Useful information about the Snowdonia National Park Authority	19
Appendix 3 Appointed Auditor's Annual Audit Letter	20
Appendix 4 Snowdonia National Park Authority's improvement objectives and self-assessment	22

Summary report, recommendations and proposals for improvement

- 1 Each year, the Auditor General must report on how well Welsh councils, fire and rescue authorities, and national park authorities are planning for improvement in delivering their services. The report covers Snowdonia National Park Authority's (the Authority) delivery and evaluation of services in relation to 2012-13 and its planning of improvement for 2013-14.
- 2 We found that, in 2012-13, the Authority made good progress in delivering improvements in those areas it had identified as being of high priority, in particular:
 - although fewer visitors made use of its visitor centres, the Authority is making effective use of modern technology to engage with its stakeholders;
 - the Authority continued to promote greater understanding of what the Park has to offer and how its work contributes to protecting the Park; and
 - feedback from members and staff suggest that the Authority's performance management arrangements are improving.
- 3 We also found that the Authority published a comprehensive assessment of the extent to which it delivered its improvement objectives for 2012-13.
- 4 Finally, we found that, during 2013-14, the Authority's plans for improvement are well established and are supported by effective asset management arrangements and a constructive approach to evaluating its governance arrangements.
- 5 The Authority faces a number of significant challenges over the next two years but it is too early to say to what extent these will affect the Authority's ability to deliver improvements.
- 6 We have not made any recommendations in this report but one proposal for improvement is set out below.

Recommendations and proposals for improvement

- P1 Having made progress on many of the improvement objectives that remained in place between April 2011 and March 2014, take the opportunity to fundamentally review these in the context of the financial challenges the Authority now faces.

Detailed report

Introduction

- 7 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 park authorities are planning for improvement in delivering their services. [Appendix 1](#) provides more information about the Auditor General's powers and duties under the Measure.
- 8 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 prioritised work undertaken this year.
- 9 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:
- make proposals for improvement – if proposals are made to the Authority, we would expect them to do something about them and we will follow up what happens;
 - make formal recommendations for improvement – if a formal recommendation is made the Authority must prepare a response to that recommendation within 30 working days;
 - conduct a special inspection and publish a report and make recommendations; and
 - recommend to Ministers of the Welsh Government that they intervene in some way.
- 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 or writing to us at 24 Cathedral Road, Cardiff, CF11 9LJ.

The Authority made good progress in delivering improvements in those areas it had identified as being of high priority

11 This section of the report looks at the Authority's performance in the period between 1 April 2012 and 31 March 2013. 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 whether or not these objectives had been delivered.

12 The Authority reviewed its 2011-12 objectives in the context of the feedback it received from consultation and concluded that the same improvement objectives should be adopted for 2012-13. This was partly because, for some improvement objectives, 2011-12 was the first year in which new baseline figures had been collected and partly because the Authority felt that there was further improvement that needed to be made in some areas.

Although fewer visitors made use of its visitor centres, the Authority is making effective use of modern technology to engage with its stakeholders

13 The Authority set itself targets to increase the number of visitors to each of its five information centres during 2012-13. However, the figures for 2012-13 show that not only did it fail to reach any of those targets, but visitors to each information centre were lower than in 2011-12¹. In total, visitor numbers fell by over 48,000 to just over 255,000 – a reduction of nearly 16 per cent. Visitor numbers in 2012-13 were also 13.5 per cent lower than in

2010-11. Anecdotal evidence suggests that this may be linked to weather conditions.

14 An increase in the average spend per visitor at its information centres was another target the Authority had set itself. Once again, the results were below target and, for four out of the five information centres, they were lower than the average spend in 2011-12, with the remaining information centre experiencing the same average spend as in the previous year. Using the figures across all five information centres, the average reduction was in the region of 3.5 per cent. While the financial situation in the UK may have meant that visitors tended to spend less, this might have been expected to be partly balanced by inflation.

15 The Authority's information centres have, for many years, played an important role in helping people enjoy and understand the Park. Developments in technology, particularly the significant increase in the use of the internet, are increasingly changing the way that people access information. These developments may well have contributed to the Authority's inability to achieve some of the targets it set itself during 2012-13 and for results being below those in the previous year.

16 This hypothesis may partly be supported by the Authority's performance in terms of the use of its website. In 2012-13, the Authority recorded over 379,000 unique visitors. Although, on face value, this is a decrease on the 392,000 recorded in 2011-12, in the interim period Google changed the way it carried this measurement. Applying the new

¹ The particularly large decrease in visitors to the Betws y Coed information centre was as a result of the centre being closed for part of the autumn period.

accounting system to the 2011-12 figures, the Authority calculated that the visits in 2011-12 were in the region of 270,000. On this basis, and using the actual figures recorded, there was an increase of over 40 per cent unique visitors to the Authority's website.

17 While average spend in, and visitor numbers to, the information centres were down, the Authority's own survey results show that the percentage of visitors to those centres who were very satisfied rose marginally from 72.5 per cent in 2011-12 to 73 per cent, although below the Authority's target of 75 per cent. As in previous years, the Authority received no complaints about the information centres.

18 In recognising the importance of electronic services, the Authority established baseline information in 2011-12 for some relevant areas, against which it could measure progress in 2012-13. This report has already set out the results for the Authority's objective in terms of visits to its website. Additional information collected by the Authority suggests that the way it uses electronic service continues to improve. For example:

- the results of a survey carried out by the Authority resulted in all those surveyed being satisfied with the quality and range of electronic services provided by the Authority, compared with 85 per cent being satisfied in 2011-12; and
- the number of people reporting technical problems decreased from 17 in 2011-12 to ten in 2012-13.

19 The Authority's performance in relation to electronic services may well be of increasing importance in the future if the Authority intends to explore the options available to respond to the decreasing number of visitors to its information centres.

The Authority continued to promote greater understanding of what the Park has to offer and how its work contributes to protecting the Park

20 Better understanding by a range of stakeholders and Authority staff and members was a theme that ran through many of the Authority's improvement objectives in 2012-13, either as improvement objectives in themselves or as measures that helped demonstrate whether or not improvement objectives had been achieved. Having established baseline figures in 2011-12, the results for 2012-13 suggest that initiatives undertaken during that period have been effective. Examples include:

- the percentage of staff and members who had a good understanding of how what they did contributed to the delivery of the Authority's service priorities and improvement objectives rose from a baseline of 89 per cent in 2011-12 to 91 per cent in 2012-13;
- the percentage of disabled people, people from minority ethnic groups and people from community first areas attending Authority organised events who said that they had a good understanding of what the Authority does and the special qualities of the Park rose from

70 per cent in 2011-12 to 85 per cent in 2012-13; and

- users of the Authority's planning service who had a better understanding of its planning policies rose from 80 per cent in the previous year to 83 per cent in 2012-13.

21 The better understanding suggested by the last bullet point above is consistent with the increase in the percentage of valid planning applications received by the Authority from a baseline figure of 57.5 per cent to 62 per cent in 2012-13.

22 Planning decisions at all planning authorities sometimes give rise to a certain amount of controversy. Much of this can be because of insufficient understanding about why and how planning and enforcement decisions are taken. The Authority aimed to ensure that people had a better understanding of why and when enforcement action is taken. Having established baseline information in 2011-12, the Authority ran a number of workshops and training sessions and went on to evaluate, during 2012-13, whether the understanding of planning issues had improved. The Authority found that the percentage of those who had dealings with planning enforcement who had a good understanding of why and when enforcement action is taken rose from 43 per cent in 2011-12 to 60 per cent in 2012-13, significantly above the Authority's target of 50 per cent.

23 However, some aspects of understanding did not improve. For example:

- the percentage of Community Councils and the Authority's key stakeholders who said they had a good understanding of what the Authority does and the special qualities of the Park fell from 100 per cent to 97 per cent; and
- the percentage of members reporting a better understanding of planning policies fell from 100 per cent to 96 per cent, with the understanding by agents and community council members remaining unchanged at 93 per cent.

24 While the levels of understanding referred to in the above paragraph did not improve, they remained at a high level, suggesting that they are not areas that need to be identified in future years by the Authority as requiring significant focus.

Feedback from members and staff suggest that the Authority's performance management arrangements are improving

25 Performance management arrangements are key to ensuring delivery of planned actions that can lead to outcomes for stakeholders. The Authority's improvement objectives for 2012-13 included a desire to ensure that performance management arrangements become more effective and, in 2011-12 the Authority selected some baseline measures which it felt could be used as indicators of performance. Information on these is set out in the following paragraphs.

- 26 The percentage of staff who felt that they had opportunities to develop their skills increased from 74 per cent in 2011-12 to 76 per cent in 2012-13. While this was below the Authority's target of 78 per cent, it does show gradual improvement². The Authority recognises that more could be done to improve this aspect and intends to discuss the issues with those staff who feel that there are insufficient opportunities. Additional analysis by the Authority did not reveal a discernible pattern or a problem in any particular part of the organisation.
- 27 One area that we referred to in last year's Annual Improvement Report was that only just over 33 per cent of staff were very satisfied with the level of guidance and support they received from their line managers. However, an additional 53 per cent of staff were satisfied with this aspect, making 86 per cent either satisfied or very satisfied. In 2012-13 a similar issue has emerged. Only 31 per cent of staff were very satisfied with the level of guidance from their line managers, compared with a target of 40 per cent. Further analysis shows that a further 65.5 per cent were satisfied. In total, this suggests that over 96 per cent of staff were either satisfied or very satisfied. This shows a significant improvement over the same result in 2011-12.
- 28 Reporting on performance is an important aspect of monitoring progress. As with the other measures referred to above, reporting helps to promote better understanding of how staff and members contribute to the delivery of the Authority's service priorities and improvement objectives. In 2012-13, all of the members who responded to a survey carried out by the Authority considered the reports they received on progress on improvement objectives as being timely and effective. This compares to 89 per cent in 2011-12 and a target of 90 per cent.
- 29 A specific aspect of performance that the Authority adopted for 2012-13 was to take less time to resolve cases of unauthorised development. Although the percentage of cases resolved within 12 weeks was slightly below the Authority's target of 60 per cent, the Authority improved its performance on this measure from 53 per cent to 58 per cent. The Welsh Government is currently exploring options for developing new performance measures for planning services across Wales. These may well be informed by the outcome of the Welsh Government's consultation on a draft Planning Bill and its proposals to modernise the planning system in Wales.

² A subsequent staff survey carried out during 2013-14 which covered the same issue resulted in an increase to over 83 per cent.

The Authority promotes the use of the Welsh language by its staff and has some evidence to show that the public are satisfied with its Welsh language scheme

- 30 The role of the Welsh Language Commissioner was created by the Welsh Language (Wales) Measure 2011. It is expected that new powers to impose standards on organisations will come into force through subordinate legislation by the end of 2014. Until that time, the Commissioner will continue to review Welsh language schemes by virtue of powers inherited under the Welsh Language Act 1993.
- 31 The Commissioner works with all local authorities in Wales to inspect and advise on the implementation of language schemes. It is the responsibility of local authorities to provide services to the public in Welsh in accordance with the commitments in their language schemes. Every local 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.
- 32 The Authority conducted a public opinion survey on implementation of the Welsh language scheme during 2012-13, and response was low. The Commissioner's recommendation to draw the public's attention to the survey was not implemented. However, the evidence suggests that the public is satisfied with the quality of the service provided. The majority of the Authority's staff are fluent Welsh speakers. The ability to communicate in Welsh was essential for all posts advertised during 2012-13, and a Welsh speaker was appointed in all instances where an appointment was made.

The Authority published a comprehensive assessment of the extent to which it delivered its improvement objectives for 2012-13

33 In January 2014 we wrote to the Authority's Chief Executive to advise him that the Authority had discharged its improvement reporting duties under the Measure. We reached this conclusion because:

- the Authority published an assessment of its performance during 2012-13 in its *Annual Report and Improvement Plan for 2012/13* (the Report) before 31 October 2013;
- the Report assessed the Authority's performance in the preceding financial year (2012-13) and set out how the Authority had sought to discharge its duties under the Measure;
- the Report included performance indicators for a number of areas and, where appropriate and available, compared its performance with its performance in the previous year and with the performance of other national park authorities;
- the Report evaluated the Authority's success in achieving its improvement objectives;
- the Report included a short section for citizens who want to provide feedback or make comments on the review; and
- the Report included information on the ways in which the Authority had sought to collaborate.

34 The auditor appointed by the Auditor General recently gave his opinion on the Authority's accounts and based on this the Appointed Auditor's view is that the financial statements were satisfactory. [Appendix 3](#) gives more detail.

The Authority's plans for improvement are well established and are supported by effective asset management arrangements and a constructive approach to evaluating its governance arrangements

- 35 We wrote to the Authority's Chief Executive in September 2013 to advise him of our views about the arrangements the Authority had put in place to secure improvements during 2013-14. Our opinion was that the Authority had discharged its improvement planning duties under the Measure and had acted in accordance with Welsh Government guidance. We reached this conclusion because:
- The Authority's improvement objectives for 2013-14:
 - were developed in the context of consultation with stakeholders that was at an appropriate level for a relatively small organisation and subsequently formally approved by the Authority;
 - support delivery of the outcomes set out in the Authority's longer term corporate goals;
 - were generally focused on outcomes, rather than actions; and
 - were subject to an equalities impact assessment when first adopted in 2011.
 - The Authority's improvement plan for 2013-14:
 - used a format that sets out how it proposed to achieve its objectives and how it would know whether it had succeeded;
 - included measures and targets, where appropriate, for its improvement objectives;
 - contained information on how communities or stakeholders may propose new improvement objectives during the year; and
 - was formally approved by the Authority and was published in its final form on 26 April, which was as soon as practical after the start of the financial year.
- 36 The Authority's 2013-14 improvement objectives are a continuation of those it approved for 2011-12 and subsequently endorsed and carried forward into 2012-13. They were in the final year of the Authority's three year programme of improvement, designed around the requirements set out in the Local Government Measure. They have been subject to an annual review by the Authority, carried out in the context of progress to date and of the results of consultation with stakeholders.
- 37 The Authority's improvement plan included, for each improvement objective, sections headed 'We Will Achieve This By' and 'We Will Know We Are Succeeding In Delivering The Improvement Objective When...'. These sections are useful as they clearly set out how the Authority planned to deliver and the tests it has put in place to assess whether objectives have been achieved.

38 As we noted in our earlier Improvement Assessment Letters, for some performance indicators in the Authority's improvement plan, the targets set were not very challenging. While, on first impressions, this might suggest a lack of ambition, the Authority included these as a 'check' to ensure that, while performance in some areas may improve, this should not adversely affect performance in other areas.

39 In that same letter we expressed our view that the Authority was likely to comply with the requirement to make arrangements to secure continuous improvement during 2013-14. We reached this conclusion because the Authority had:

- agreed an improvement plan that set out the authority's plans for delivering improvements;
- reviewed, where appropriate, measures and targets for its improvement objectives;
- updated its corporate work programme, which set out the day to day activities that staff would deliver throughout the year that were designed to achieve its 2013-14 improvement objectives; and
- been actively involved in initiatives designed to improve the quality of its Annual Governance Statement (AGS).

40 The Authority's *Improvement Plan* for 2013-14 was adopted and published on the authority's website at the end of April 2013. Within a few weeks, hard copies had been made available at various locations, including the Authority's Information Centres, local libraries and at the Authority's main reception. Braille versions were not made available but blind and partially sighted people can use a free software application which allows the Authority's website version to be read out to them.

41 In our *Improvement Assessment Letter* to the Authority, dated 26 October 2012, we noted that the potential benefits of the Authority's AGS would not be fully realised until that statement incorporated greater evaluation of the effectiveness of the Authority's governance arrangements. Since issuing that letter, representatives from the Authority, together with the other two National Park Authorities in Wales, attended a workshop run by the Wales Audit Office designed to assist those authorities in developing more evaluative AGSs in future years. All three national park authorities in Wales are now working together to improve the way they report annually on their governance arrangements, exploring an option of developing an identical reporting structure.

42 During January 2014, we carried out a short review of the Authority's asset management arrangements. That review resulted in a separate report to the authority. We concluded that the Authority has a clear vision for the management of its assets and is working with internal and external stakeholders to maximise the positive impact of those assets. We reached that conclusion because:

- the Authority has a comprehensive asset management plan, which is based on good practice and fully involves external stakeholders;
- roles and responsibility for asset management are clearly defined and support effective asset management;
- the Authority works well with internal and external stakeholders, establishing effective lines of communication and identifying people and organisations that could contribute to, or be affected by, the management of its assets; and
- the Authority is managing the performance of its assets effectively in some areas and actively considers sustainability issues.

43 As a result of our review of asset management we made one proposal for improvement.

The Authority faces a number of significant challenges over the next two years but it is too early to say to what extent these will affect the Authority's ability to deliver improvements

- 44 All three national park authorities in Wales face some significant changes in the future. These include the Welsh Government's response to the Commission on Public Service Governance and Delivery ('Williams Commission Report') and the outcome of consultation on a proposed new Planning Bill. A governance review of national park authorities is also planned.
- 45 Overall, the changes proposed by the Williams Commission that could affect the national park authorities in Wales are less sweeping than might have been anticipated. The Williams Commission did not recommend that the planning function should be taken away from national park authorities but did suggest that options for creating one national park authority should be looked into. The Authority, along with the other two national park authorities in Wales, has submitted its response to the consultation on the proposed Planning Bill.
- 46 While the Authority is mindful of significant changes that might fundamentally affect the way it operates and, indeed, its very existence, these are very much in the future and, for now, its focus is primarily in relation to the budgetary cuts it faces over the next two years, and possibly beyond.
- 47 The Chancellor of the Exchequer announced the 2010 spending review to parliament on 20 October 2010. This formed a central part of the coalition government's response to reducing the national deficit, with the intention to bring public finances into balance. These savings represent the largest reduction in public spending since the 1920s and come at a time when demographic changes and recession-based economic pressures are increasing demand for some services. To effectively plan finances authorities should analyse details of financial trends, appropriate benchmarking information, possible scenarios and their likely impact over the short, medium and long term. The current financial climate and the recent tough settlement for authorities mean that good financial planning is critical to sustaining financial resilience.
- 48 The Wales Audit Office is currently examining authorities' financial health, their approach to budgeting and delivering on required savings, to provide assurance that authorities are financially resilient. This work will consider whether authorities have robust approaches in place to manage the budget reductions that they are facing to secure a stable financial position that enable them to continue to operate for the foreseeable future. The focus of the work is on the 2014-15 financial planning period and the delivery of 2013-14 budgets. This review will be completed early in 2014-15 and we will publish the findings in our next cycle of improvement assessment work.

- 49 All three national park authorities in Wales face significant budgetary cuts during the 2014-15 and 2015-16 financial years. These cuts have been imposed by the Welsh Government, with no guarantee that further cuts will not be required in future years. The cuts equate to a reduction of 8.75 per cent in 2014-15 and a further four per cent in 2015-16. For this Authority, this equates to over £870k over two years. With a significant percentage of the Authority's budget comprising of staff costs, the savings will inevitably affect staffing levels, with a consequential impact on service delivery.
- 50 In exploring the options available for making savings, the Authority, understandably, ensured that some of the proposals being discussed were kept confidential. This confidentiality primarily related to those elements of the budgetary cuts that would personally affect some individuals employed by the Authority. The Authority's redundancy policy will clearly play an important role in how it addresses any resulting job losses. This policy was recently reviewed and approved by members. Although this did not lead to any significant changes, selection criteria have now been incorporated within the Authority's policy framework.
- 51 At the time of drafting this report, the definitive approach to delivering the budgetary cuts had not been finalised and shared with relevant staff. As such, it would be inappropriate to set them out in this report. However, in working towards a final decision, the Authority has involved staff, members and trade unions in drawing up a number of options for finding the required savings. Since budgetary cuts will take time to be implemented the Authority has earmarked its special risk reserves to assist in managing the process.
- 52 At the end of April 2014, Aneurin Phillips will step down from his role as chief executive after more than 10 years in office. The Authority advertised the upcoming vacant post externally but eventually appointed its Director of Land Management, Emyr Williams, to the post. Currently the new chief executive is undecided about whether to fill the resulting vacant post. One option being considered is to leave it vacant and to review the position in the autumn of 2014. It would be a significant challenge to try and cover both roles at a time when the Authority has to deliver significant savings.
- 53 The Authority's three year programme of delivering improvement objectives under the local government measure ended at the beginning of April 2014. These were reviewed annually by the Authority. As has been set out earlier in this report, the Authority has made steady progress in delivering these objectives. Given the financial challenges facing the Authority, this is a timely opportunity for the Authority to focus on those priority areas that need improving or which are most vulnerable in a period of budgetary constraints.

54 Members of the Authority will ultimately make the decision about which improvement objectives to pursue in any year. Member involvement and understanding of the issues facing the Authority are therefore crucial. Member attendance at various meetings has continued to improve and is no longer an issue that requires significant focus. In June 2013, members agreed that the head of personnel should take over responsibility for carrying out personal development reviews (PDR) with members. This was partly to address delays in carrying out these annual meetings. However, PDRs are still well behind schedule, although this may be understandable given the budgetary cuts facing the Authority and the head of personnel's involvement in exploring options involving job losses.

55 The focus on addressing the budgetary cuts, together with other recent and planned changes affecting partner organisations, has also had some impact on the Authority's recently adopted recreation strategy. This strategy is an ambitious attempt to facilitate and develop actions to promote recreation. Progress has been made in relation to some aspects, such as incorporating actions in the Authority's service work programmes and into the annual appraisal process for relevant staff section heads. However, the budgetary cuts are likely to have an impact on speed of progress, as will any cuts planned for partner organisations.

56 Ffynnon is a nationally procured software solution designed to meet the performance management requirements of local authorities, fire and rescue services, national park authorities and their partners. It has been used by all three national park authorities in Wales for a number of years. However, the Welsh Government's contract with Coactiva Aspiren Ltd for the supply of the Ffynnon software performance management system comes to an end on 30 June 2014. Unless the Authority can negotiate its own contract directly with the supplying company at a reasonable cost, this could have a significant effect on the Authority's ability to monitor and report on its performance. All three national park authorities have explored the option of a bridging contract that could secure the performance management system over the next two years. We understand that this has now been secured for a period of 12 months.

57 The three National Park Authorities in Wales commissioned a study into the joint working opportunities for the planning departments of the three Welsh National Parks³. The final report was published in August 2013. The report sets out a number of recommendations and 'quick wins'. The report's findings have been generally welcomed by all three national park authorities in Wales and they have begun to jointly explore how some of the recommendations could be implemented, with each of the three national park authorities taking a lead on different elements. These include options for joint approaches to reviewing Local Development Plans, consultation and options for sharing services and staff.

³ Carried out by Land Use Consultants.

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 park authorities, and fire and rescue authorities.

This report has been produced by the 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

Useful information about the Snowdonia National Park Authority

The Authority

The Authority spends approximately £6.9 million per year (2013-14). This equates to about £270 per resident. In the same year, the Authority also planned to spend £0.88 million on capital items.⁴

The Authority is made up of 18 members. Twelve are elected members appointed by local councils that fall either fully or partly within the Authority's area and six appointees are made by the Welsh Government. These members make decisions about priorities and use of resources. The make-up of the Authority is as follows:

- Nine appointed by Gwynedd Council
- Three appointed by Conwy County Borough Council
- Six appointed by the Welsh Government

The Authority's Chief Executive is Aneurin Phillips who will retire in April 2014 and be replaced by Emyr Williams, the Authority's current Director of Land Management. Iwan Jones is the Director of Corporate Services. Jonathan Cawley is the Director of Planning and Cultural Heritage.

For more information see the Authority's own website at www.eryri-npa.gov.uk or contact the Authority at Snowdonia National Park Authority, National Park Office, Penrhyndeudraeth, Gwynedd LL48 6LF.

⁴ Financial and population data extracted from the Welsh Government's StatsWales website.

Appendix 3

Appointed Auditor's Annual Audit Letter

Mr A Phillips
Chief Executive
Snowdonia National Park Authority
National Park Office
Penrhyndeudraeth
Gwynedd
LL48 6LF

Dear Mr Phillips

Annual Audit Letter

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

The Park Authority complied with its responsibilities relating to financial reporting and its 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.

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.

I issued an unqualified audit opinion on 30 September 2013 on the accounting statements confirming that they presented 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 at the Full Authority meeting on 18 September 2013 in my Audit of Financial Statements (ISA260) report. The main issues arising were as follows:

- There were no 'uncorrected misstatements' and only a small number of 'corrected misstatements'.
- We received information in a timely and helpful manner and were not restricted in our work. The effective working arrangements previously established with finance staff have continued for this year.

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. Overall, I am satisfied that the Authority has appropriate arrangements in place. The Auditor General will highlight areas where the effectiveness of these arrangements has yet to be demonstrated or where improvements could be made when he publishes his Annual Improvement Report.

I issued a certificate confirming that the audit of the accounts had been completed on 11 October 2013. During the course of the year there have been no formal challenge or objection issues that I have had to deal with. The financial audit fee for 2012-13 will be in line with the agreed fee that was set out in my Annual Audit Outline.

I would like to express my appreciation to all the Authority staff that assisted with the completion of my audit.

Yours sincerely

Richard Harries, Engagement Lead

For and on behalf of the Appointed Auditor
6 December 2013

cc. Emyr Roberts, Finance Manager

Appendix 4

Snowdonia 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 2013-14 in its *Business and Improvement Plan 2013/14* which can be found on the Authority website at www.eryri-npa.gov.uk. They are:

Improvement Objectives for both 2012-13 and 2013-14
Planning enforcement <ul style="list-style-type: none">• People will have a better understanding of why and when enforcement action is taken.• Cases of alleged unauthorised development will take less time to be resolved.
Communities <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Community councils and our key stakeholders will have a better understanding of what the Authority does and the special qualities of the Park.
Performance <ul style="list-style-type: none">• The performance management arrangements will be more effective to ensure we maintain service standards during a period of diminishing resources.• 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.
Information centres <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Most visitors to the Information Centres will be very satisfied with what the centres offer in terms of choice and quality of goods, information and customer service.
Electronic services <ul style="list-style-type: none">• The range and type of services available electronically is in line with the needs of the public.• Users of the electronic service will be very satisfied with their experience.
Planning policy <ul style="list-style-type: none">• People will have a better understanding of the planning policies in the Local Development Plan.

The Authority's self-assessment of performance

The Authority's self-assessment of its performance during 2012-13 can be found in its *Annual Report and Improvement Plan for 2012/13* which can be found on the Authority website at www.eryri-npa.gov.uk.

Wales Audit Office
24 Cathedral Road
Cardiff CF11 9LJ

Tel: 029 2032 0500

Fax: 029 2032 0600

Textphone: 029 2032 0660

E-mail: info@wao.gov.uk

Website: www.wao.gov.uk

Swyddfa Archwilio Cymru
24 Heol y Gadeirlan
Caerdydd CF11 9LJ

Ffôn: 029 2032 0500

Ffacs: 029 2032 0600

Ffôn Testun: 029 2032 0660

E-bost: info@wao.gov.uk

Gwefan: www.wao.gov.uk