

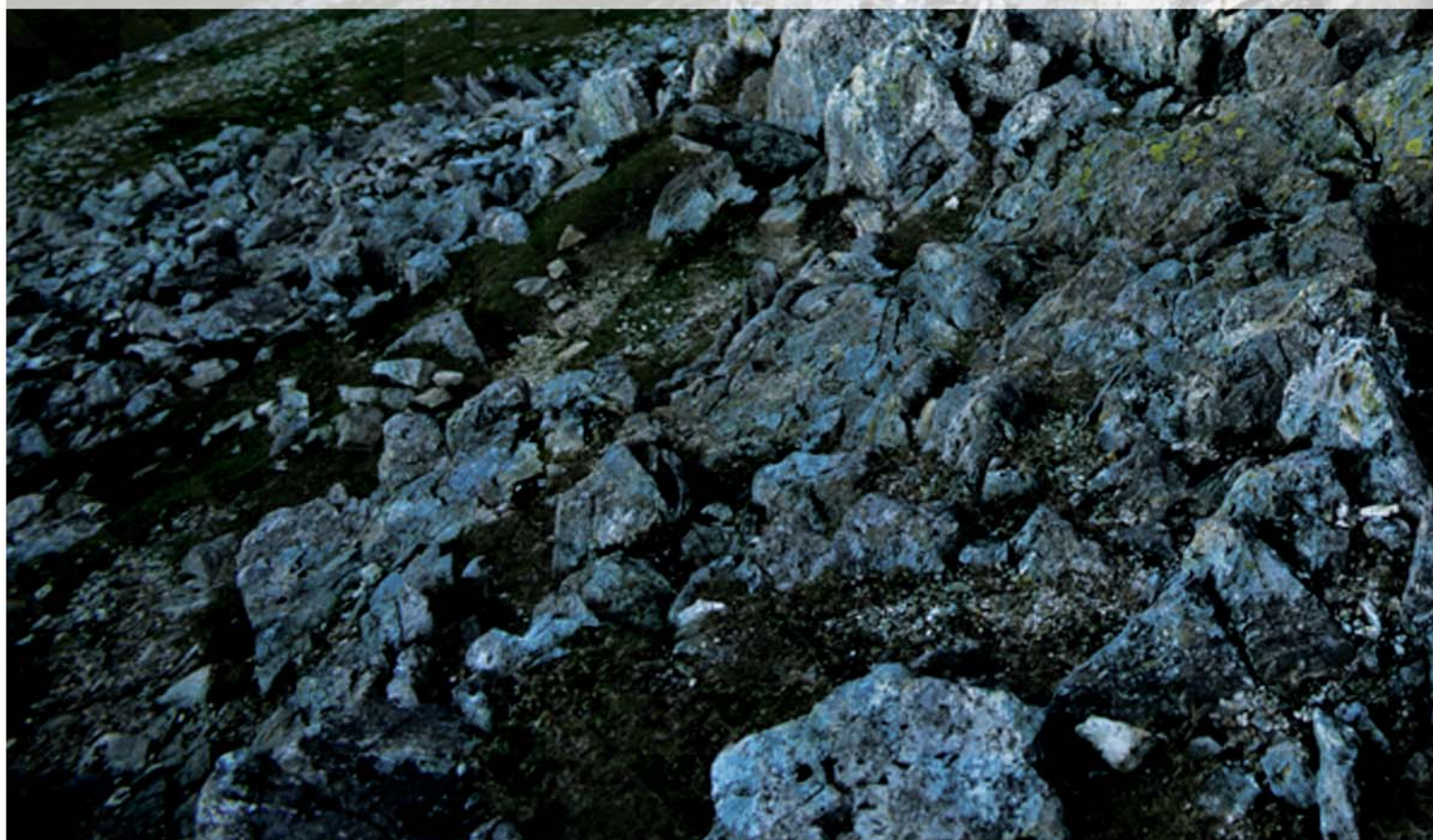


WALES AUDIT OFFICE
SWYDDFA ARCHWILIO CYMRU

Annual Improvement Report

Snowdonia National Park Authority

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About the Auditor General for Wales

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

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

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

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

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Summary Report

- 1 Each year, the Auditor General must report on how well Welsh councils, fire and rescue authorities, and national parks are planning for improvement and delivering their services. Drawing on the work of the Wales Audit Office and relevant Welsh inspectorates, this report presents a picture of improvement over the last year. The report is in three main sections, which cover the planning, delivery and evaluation of improvement by Snowdonia National Park Authority (the Authority).
- 2 Overall the Auditor General has concluded that the Authority's enhanced arrangements, and more meaningful measures of success, are likely to further improve its ability to deliver improvements.
- 3 We found that the Authority has improved its planning framework, increased customer focus and introduced a clearer structure for its directorates.
- 4 We also found that the Authority is improving the way it helps people to enjoy and understand the Park but, in improving the way it looks after the Park, it is not always clearly focusing on those areas that it identified as being important.
 - Although the Authority is improving the way it looks after the Park, there is insufficient clarity about progress on some of its priorities.

Many aspects of the Park have been improved but the Authority hasn't been clear about what is meant by the 'special qualities' of the Park or about what constitutes a 'responsive, consistent and high quality' planning service. Although
- value for money is a key ingredient of the Authority's planning service improvement objective, the Authority has not made use of available information to assess whether this has been achieved.
- The Authority is delivering measureable improvement in the way it helps people to enjoy and understand the Park.

The Authority has worked collaboratively to make access to and within the Park easier, safer and more extensive for people with a wide range of abilities. Feedback to the Authority suggests that people are inspired by the work that the education service carries out and are increasingly satisfied with that service.

- 5 Finally, the report sets out our views on the Authority's own assessment of its performance and arrangements. We concluded that the Authority has improved its approach to evaluating and reporting on its performance and plans to make further improvement. Regular progress reports that focus on its priorities, together with changes to scrutiny, provide the Authority with a valuable approach to evaluating and reporting on its performance. This approach is likely to be strengthened once the Authority collates its baseline information relating to measures of success.

Proposals for Improvement

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

Proposals for Improvement

P1 The Authority should ensure that it:

- minimises potential ambiguity in the way it describes its objectives; and
- reports on progress in achieving those objectives, rather than just on the activities that are put in place to deliver them.

Detailed Report

Introduction

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

The Authority's enhanced arrangements, and more meaningful measures of success, are likely to further improve its ability to deliver improvements

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

The Authority has improved its planning framework, increased customer focus and introduced a clearer structure for its directorates

- 12 In our Corporate Assessment Update letter of 2 August 2011 to the Authority's Chief Executive we concluded that improvements to the Authority's approach to medium-term financial planning and to how it planned for improvement, together with an increased focus on performance, were all examples of how the Authority continued to strengthen its corporate arrangements. However, the absence of both a fully developed corporate approach to workforce planning and of comprehensive baseline data for its newly developed measures of success showed that there was more work to do.
- 13 The letter also noted that the Authority's improvement objectives and its improvement plan (called the *Business and Improvement Plan 2011-12*) met the requirements of the Measure. However, the introduction of new, more outcome-focused measures of success, meant that some baseline figures were currently unavailable, reducing the Authority's ability to monitor progress. The Authority has been actively developing these baseline figures as part of its improvement plan for 2011-12 and should therefore be much better placed to assess its progress in 2012-13.
- 14 Relevant improvement objectives adopted by the Authority for 2010-11 which can strengthen its ability to deliver improvements in the future, are set out below:
- 'the Authority continues to operate effectively and efficiently providing a service for all within the resources it has available'; and
 - 'the Authority has effective citizen centred services for all'
- 15 The Authority has begun to respond positively to some of the proposals for improvement set out in our *2010 Annual Improvement Report*. In particular, its improvement objectives for 2011-12 are more focused on what will be achieved, more clearly supported by the activities that the Authority plans to deliver and more measurable.
- 16 There was an increase in the number of days per full time equivalent (FTE) lost due to staff sickness absence in 2010-11. This rose by 27 per cent to 14 days, from 11 in 2009-10. This is significantly higher than sickness absence levels in the other two Welsh National Park Authorities¹. In a relatively small organisation, unavoidable long term sickness of just a few members of staff does have a disproportionate impact. We understand that sickness absence levels are improving in 2011-12 with short term absence reducing from 33.5 per cent to 22.7 per cent of total absences.
- 17 Sickness absence levels are reported formally to the Authority's Performance and Resources Committee each quarter and monthly reports for some members of staff are sent to line managers. A new managing attendance and sickness absence policy was approved by the Performance and Resources Committee in March 2011 and return to work interviews were implemented soon after. The head of human resources is in discussion with Gwynedd Council to explore further options for reducing overall sickness absences.

¹ 9.1 days per FTE in Brecon Beacons National Park Authority and 6.1 days in Pembrokeshire Coast National Park Authority.

- 18 In May 2011, following the retirement of the director of communications, the Authority restructured with the director of land management and the director of corporate services taking over that directorate's responsibilities and increasing opportunities for better co-ordination across services.
- 19 The Authority, mindful of its 2011-12 improvement objective relating to unauthorised developments and in response to a key member of staff being on long term sickness absence, transferred staff and agreed extra resources to fund an additional post. Similarly, extra legal support was brought in so that the Authority's own legal service could concentrate on issues relating to 2011-12 improvement objectives.
- 20 Although the average number of training days per member of staff fell from 4.4 to 2.8 days in 2010-11, staff we spoke to said that this was not an issue and that relevant training was available when required. The reduction is not seen as being a result of resource constraints but rather that the staff appraisal process has highlighted less need than in 2009-10. Staff appraisals are carried out every 12 months and the process is linked to the Authority's improvement objectives.
- 21 Members of the Authority have also been operating an appraisal system for the last two years. The chair of each National Park Authority is appraised by one of his peers on a rotational basis. The Authority's other members are appraised by a panel of three members from within the Authority. A process for member appraisal is one of the elements that led to the Authority being awarded the Welsh Local Government Member Charter in 2010. The Charter provides a broad framework for local planning, self-assessment, action and review. The appraisal process identifies members' training needs, resulting in an increase in the number of training sessions during 2010-11. However the average percentage of members attending training fell from 68.6 to 60.75 per cent in 2010-11. While not all training is likely to be relevant for all members, anecdotal evidence suggests that some members were sometimes too busy with commitments relating to their council interests.
- 22 As part of its improvement objective of '.....providing a service for all within the resources it has available', the Authority planned to achieve permanent savings over the period 2010-11 to 2012-13. In June 2009, it set targets for reducing expenditure in each of the following three years, based on anticipated Welsh Government grant settlements and other cost reduction plans. Although the actual grant settlements have been lower than originally predicted, the Authority has been able to achieve additional permanent savings to date. This has been through lower than anticipated payroll costs and other measures to reduce expenditure. As a result, the three year savings target has already been exceeded. Further information on the Authority's financial performance is set out in [Appendix 3](#).

- 23 Capacity issues have delayed the preparation, adoption and implementation of the Authority's information and communication technology (ICT) strategy, which was planned for October 2010. The ICT strategy has now been approved and its implementation will be rolled out over coming months.
- 24 The increasingly customer focused approach being taken by the Authority is supported by a number of initiatives. The Authority is developing a consultation strategy, it has identified, grouped and prioritised its customers, intends to retain its Investors in People standard and is redesigning and reissuing a customer satisfaction questionnaire that will align with the new measures of success that it is developing. Many of these are designed to achieve the Authority's aim of reaching the Customer Service Excellence² standard in 2012.
- 25 The Authority is also increasing its dialogue with Community and Town Councils. It has run sessions with representatives from these organisations on the issues facing the Authority's planning service and intends to run further sessions on such issues as the environment.
- 26 The Appointed Auditor issued his *Annual Audit Letter* on 29 November 2011 and this is shown in [Appendix 3](#). In the *Annual Audit Letter*, the Appointed Auditor reports that he issued an unqualified audit opinion on the accounting statements confirming that they present a true and fair view of the Authority's financial position and transactions. He also makes the following comment:
- The Annual Governance Statement was a new requirement for 2010-11. Whilst the Statement was completed in line with the relevant guidance, there is scope to improve on this for future years. In particular, in reporting where the Authority has reviewed the effectiveness of governance arrangements as part of the normal course of its business during the year. My engagement team will discuss this further with officers to build on the first year of this new requirement.
- 27 The Welsh Language Board (the Board) praised the Authority for its continued robust management and administration of the Welsh Language Scheme. The Board commented that the Authority is committed to mainstreaming the Welsh language into all aspects of its work, and will formalise its approach by integrating the Welsh language into its revised Equality Impact Assessment toolkit. A structured programme of policies and strategies for assessment has been introduced. The Authority employs a sufficient number of Welsh speakers to provide a comprehensive bilingual service to the public. Although it experiences some difficulty in appointing Welsh speakers to certain posts, this has not affected the quality of Welsh language service provided.

² An organisation that has established standards for organisations wanting to place the customer at the heart of everything they do.

The Authority is improving the way it helps people to enjoy and understand the Park but, in improving the way it looks after the Park, it is not always clearly focusing on those areas that it identified as being important

28 This part of the report sets out how well the Authority is delivering improvement in priority areas.

Although the Authority is improving the way it looks after the Park, there is insufficient clarity about progress on some of its priorities

29 Improvement objectives for 2010-11 that are relevant to delivering improvements in how the Authority looks after the Park include:

- 'the special qualities of the Park (as defined in the State of the Park report) will be improved'; and
- 'planning delivers a responsive, consistent and high quality service that provides value for money'.

30 Although neither the December 2005 nor the draft spring 2009 Snowdonia State of the Park reports define the special qualities of the Park, the 2009 draft report refers to landscape quality, tranquillity, cultural heritage and biodiversity as examples. The Snowdonia Park Management Plan 2010-2015 does include some detailed definitions of these special qualities and they can be summarised as approximating to the following nine aspects:

- landscape;
- community;
- Welsh language;
- arts and culture;
- understanding and enjoyment, linked to health;
- recreation;

- architectural heritage;
- geology; and
- biodiversity.

31 The Authority continues to deal with invasive plant species in the Park. In 2010-11, 341 hectares of rhododendron and other invasive species were removed or controlled; compared with 121 hectares in 2009-10 and 63 hectares in 2008-09. The area of new native woodland established increased by 46 per cent and the area of unmanaged woodland brought into management increased by 13 per cent.

32 Although a very limited area of the Park is characterised by a hedgerow landscape, planting agreements with landowners resulted in supplementing the 4,145 metre length of hedgerows planted in 2009-10 with a further 2,995 metres in 2010-11. Once mature, hedges can be laid³. Hedge laying agreements resulted in nearly 2,000 metres of hedges being laid in 2010-11 and 19 young residents completed a hedge laying course, helping to revive this tradition and opening up opportunities for employment.

33 During 2008-09 the Authority identified approximately 300 listed buildings at risk within the Park and set itself a target to reduce this figure through its own actions by three per cent during 2010-11. The Authority actually achieved a reduction of 2.3 per cent, representing seven listed buildings, the same percentage reduction as in 2009-10. In both those years the allocated budget for reducing the number of listed buildings at risk was fully used. Continuous surveys carried out by the Authority have resulted in an increased number of buildings included on its buildings at risk register.

³ Cutting and bending, producing thicker bases more suitable for wildlife.

- 34 Some of the collaborative activities carried out by the Authority during 2010-11 that support delivering improvements to the Park include working with:
- the Centre for Alternative Land Use at Bangor University to develop a database of people interested in planting new trees or extending existing woodlands;
 - key stakeholders to agree an action plan and responsibilities to support delivery of the Snowdonia Park Management Plan;
 - other planning authorities across the UK to share good practice from the Authority's bat mitigation pilot project;
 - the Forestry Commission Wales to ensure the management of an area of Welsh Government owned woodland; and
 - Cadw⁴ to produce characterisation studies for two conservation areas.
- 35 The Authority continues to take action to reduce its carbon footprint. Carbon emissions attributable to the Authority were reduced by 30 per cent, compared to a baseline figure established in 2005. Estimated figures made available to the Welsh Government by the Authority suggest that it achieved a reduction of over 16 per cent in CO₂ emissions between 2009-10 and 2010-11.
- 36 We found little or no information about how the Authority had improved the 'special qualities of the Park' in relation to areas such as community, the Welsh language, arts and culture, and biodiversity. Information on performance in relation to the special qualities of the Park linked to understanding, enjoyment and recreation are covered elsewhere in this report.
- 37 The Authority had not specifically defined what it meant by a 'responsive, consistent and high quality planning service'. It set itself a target of determining at least 65 per cent of all planning applications within eight weeks by the end of March 2011, while retaining at least a 90 per cent customer satisfaction rate. The Authority achieved 67 per cent and 95 per cent respectively. However, speed of determination was the same as in 2009-10 and those respondents who were 'very satisfied' with the planning service fell from 69 per cent to 52 per cent, with an increase in those respondents who were 'very dissatisfied'. The number of complaints about the planning service fell from 22 to 17 in the same period. The Authority has already begun to explore the reasons behind the changes in satisfaction levels.
- 38 The Authority's backlog of planning application decisions stood at 92 per cent⁵ at the end of March 2011, although for those applications not determined after more than eight weeks, the figure was 40 per cent. This level was higher than Pembrokeshire Coast NPA but lower than Brecon Beacons NPA and significantly lower than the average across Wales of 124 per cent. Although the adoption of the Authority's Eryri Local Development Plan in July 2011 was four months later than planned, the final stages of adoption are largely out of the Authority's control.
- 39 Making the right decisions on planning applications, and getting the backing of a government appointed planning inspector for those decisions if applications go to appeal, helps to protect the Park from unwanted developments. The Authority's decision was

⁴ The Welsh Government's historic environment service.

⁵ The number of applications carried forward as a percentage of applications received.

upheld in 72 per cent of all planning appeals in 2010-11, maintaining the level established in 2009-10. Decisions on all enforcement notices appeals were upheld, an improvement on the 75 per cent achieved in the previous year.

- 40 The percentage of houses provided within the Park that were built on previously developed land fell in 2010-11 as did the number of Section 106⁶ agreements completed. The percentage of new housing that was classed as affordable increased from 33 per cent in 2009-10 to 43 per cent in 2010-11. The Authority has limited influence over these figures since they will largely depend on the number and types of planning applications received. However, the Authority partly funds two affordable housing facilitator posts with Gwynedd Council (Gwynedd) and Conwy County Borough Council (Conwy).
- 41 Providing value for money is a key ingredient of the Authority's planning service improvement objective. However the Authority's own self assessment of performance in 2010-11 makes no reference to whether or not this has been achieved, nor does it include any financial information linked to the planning service. In 2009, the three National Park Authorities in Wales commissioned PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) to undertake a value for money study of the planning services being provided by all three National Park Authorities. The final report resulting from this work was not published until January 2011. Its overall assessment was that there was evidence that the planning services of all three national park authorities in Wales had improved significantly. Although there are unresolved

issues in terms of whether comparisons of like with like are currently available, the Authority acknowledges that it could have done more to build on the information available in order to try to assess progress towards its aim of achieving value for money.

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

- 42 The only improvement objective for 2010-11 that is directly relevant to delivering improvements in how the Authority helps people enjoy and understand the Park is that 'there are more high quality access opportunities for people of all abilities to land and water in the Park'.
- 43 The Authority, as part of its contribution to the Welsh Government's aim of completing the Wales Coastal Path by 2012, has carried out improvements to rights of way such as the provision of gates and step-over stiles. Examples of other improvements to rights of way include carrying out surveys of routes in three community council areas and preparing and renewing an old path which connects Pen y Pass and Pen y Gwryd. As a result of these and other activities, the length of paths improved and maintained within the Park increased from 19.25 km in 2009-10 to 28.09 km in 2010-11. Compared to 2009-10 there was an 18 per cent increase in the number of visitors on the footpaths of Snowdon in 2010-11. Information collected by Gwynedd and Conwy about the percentage of the total length of footpaths and other rights of way which are easy to use by members of the public is out of date.

⁶ Often referred to as 'planning gains', where an obligation to improve local services or infrastructure becomes a legally binding part of a planning decision.

- 44 Maintaining and improving rights of way necessitates close working relationships between any national park and its associated local authorities. Early in 2010 the Authority signed a service level agreement (SLA) with Conwy to survey, maintain and improve public rights of way within part of the Park. The first surveys were completed in 2010-11 and contracts for resulting improvement work awarded. Similar working arrangements with Gwynedd are taking longer to establish.
- 45 The Authority continued to offer guided walks for the visually impaired, achieving an average attendance of 23 people per walk in 2010-11, compared with an average of 16 in 2009-10. Tours for wheelchair users are funded jointly by the Park, the Countryside Council for Wales, Gwynedd and Conwy and two recumbent bicycles were bought by the Authority for use as part of the Challenge Your Boundaries project⁷ run by Discover Dolgellau. The Authority updated its safety literature and used links to the meteorological office to providing more detailed weather forecasting for visitors, particularly mountain climbers. A warden with the specific role of developing projects linked to safety, preparation and planning was also appointed by the Authority.
- 46 An important part of ensuring wider access to the Park is the ease with which people can be transported into and around the Park itself. The Authority remains a key member of the Snowdonia Green Key partnership⁸ that we referred to in last year's report. In 2010-11 new pamphlets were produced for the partnership's Snowdon Sherpa Bus Service and a new, simplified, pricing structure was introduced, allowing the service to make a small profit. The Authority also has extensive links on its website to timetables and other information about buses and trains. The public toilets at Pen y Pass have been upgraded and parking facilities improved, particularly at Pen y Gwryd.
- 47 Of the five visitor centres run by the Authority, three experienced declining visitor numbers in 2010-11, compared with the previous year. Overall, over the same period, visitor numbers decreased by 6.5 per cent. The Authority is aware of the need to review its visitor centre facilities, particularly in the context of the extensive information available to the public via the internet. It is already carrying out joint training with Cadw with the intention of servicing a visitor centre facility as part of Cadw's recent acquisition of a hotel adjoining Harlech castle.
- 48 Plas Tan y Bwlch is the Authority's Environmental Studies Centre (the Centre) and the base for its education services. The Centre runs both residential and non-residential courses, many of which help people understand and appreciate what the Park has to offer. Participation at the Centre's professional training courses was down by

⁷ Providing equipment and opportunities for the coaching and development of riders with a disability.

⁸ The other members are Conwy County Borough Council, Gwynedd Council, Countryside Council for Wales, the Welsh Government's Department for Enterprise and Transport and Visit Wales.

five per cent, from 856 to 820. However participation at public courses increased by one per cent, from 2,023 to 2,029 and the number of attendees at day sessions increased significantly from 3,538 to 5,385. Of those who used Plas Tan y Bwlch and responded to a questionnaire, 99.8 per cent expressed satisfaction with the facility, an increase over the 98 per cent satisfaction recorded in 2009-10.

- 49 Part of the Authority's education service role is to run walk and talk sessions, respond to requests for information about the Park, service the Authority's 'Here to Help' website for teachers and give lectures that are aimed at specific age groups and educational key stage levels. In 2010-11, for the first time, the Authority attempted to assess the impact of its educational service activity. Those users of the education service that were surveyed by the Authority gave an average level of inspiration score of 10.4⁹.
- 50 The Authority was a lead member of the Bwrlwm Eryri partnership initiative when it was established in 2005 and it has subsequently taken complete control of this project. Its aim is to 'record, gather, conserve and promote awareness of Snowdonia's cultural heritage'. Projects involving local societies, schools, writers, artists and poets continued to be developed and delivered during 2010-11. The Authority recently adopted an awareness strategy and, during 2010-11 over three quarters of the actions had been completed on schedule, with half of those behind schedule having been reviewed and deferred until 2011-12. An example of an

activity supporting this awareness strategy was the replacement and updating of information panels at various footpaths. The Authority also appointed a partnership officer for one of its geographical areas, with a view to developing educational opportunities for all ages.

- 51 The Authority's use of modern technology to help people enjoy, explore and discover the Park continues to be developed, with updated video and audio footage added to its website. The Authority also developed an iPhone application¹⁰ which became one of the most downloaded free applications from the Apple website during 2010-11. The Authority is currently developing an application that can be used on android mobile phones.

⁹ Inspiration scores range from one to 11, with 11 being the highest level of inspiration.

¹⁰ www.itunes.apple.com/gb/app/id445357614?mt=8.

The Authority has improved its approach to evaluating and reporting on its performance and plans to make further improvement

- 52 The Auditor General has determined that the Authority has discharged all of its duties in relation to publishing improvement information. However the Authority should ensure that it acts more in accordance with Welsh Government guidance; specifically in being clearer about the extent to which it has met its improvement objectives, rather than just assessing the success of the individual projects that supported their delivery.
- 53 The Authority published its assessment of its 2010-11 performance on 24 October 2011. Much of the information used to populate the Authority's annual assessment of performance and progress towards achieving its improvement objectives is readily available from the quarterly reports submitted to the Performance and Resources Committee.
- 54 We were pleased to see that quarterly reports to the Performance and Resources Committee are structured around its improvement objectives for that year, focusing on the Authority's corporate work programme, rather than on reporting by service area. This approach helps to ensure a better understanding of progress towards achieving priorities, encourages a move away from traditional silo-working and re-emphasises the importance of these priorities for members and for staff.
- 55 These progress reports use a traffic light system to set out progress on any relevant performance indicators. The information is collated centrally before inviting comments from relevant staff. Quarterly reports include all performance information, not just on those areas where progress is less than planned.
- 56 Directors also monitor progress on a regular basis. The format used places an emphasis on the current improvement objectives, setting out progress on planned activities linked to each objective. Heads of service meet with directors every fortnight. The chief executive has formal arrangements with directors to meet and discuss progress on objectives, placing a special emphasis on ensuring that the new baseline information being collected will be available for 2012-13.
- 57 The three National Park Authorities have established a shared area within Ffynnon¹¹ that will allow each authority to compare its own progress on some performance indicators against the other two authorities. Currently, this area is not kept up to date by all three authorities – an example of the further development that will be required in order to maximise the potential of the Ffynnon system.
- 58 As we reported in this our corporate assessment update letter, the Authority was proposing increasing membership of the Performance and Resources Committee from nine members to include all 18 members of the Authority. This change has now been implemented and although it is too early to fully assess its impact, anecdotal evidence suggests that the new format, together with the appointment of a new chair, has led to a more robust consideration of agenda items.

¹¹ A nationally procured software solution to meet the performance management requirements of local authorities, fire and rescue services, national park authorities and their partners.

Appendices

Appendix 1

Status of this report

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

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

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

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

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

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

Appendix 2

Useful information about Snowdonia National Park and the Authority

The Authority

Snowdonia National Park Authority spends approximately £6.3 million per year (2010-11). This equates to about £248 per resident. In the same year, the Authority also spent £522,000 on capital items.

The Authority consists of 18 members. Six are appointed by the Assembly Government; nine from Gwynedd Council and three from Conwy County Borough Council. These members make decisions about priorities and the use of resources.

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

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

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

Corporate Management Team

- Chief Executive is Aneurin Phillips
- Director of Corporate Services is Iwan Jones
- Director of Planning and Cultural Heritage is Aled Sturkey
- Director of Land Management is Emyr Williams
- Chief Finance Officer is Dafydd Edwards

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.

Appendix 3

Annual Audit Letter to the Members of Snowdonia National Park Authority

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

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

It is the Authority's responsibility to:

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

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

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

On 29 September 2011, I issued an unqualified audit opinion on the accounting statements confirming that they present a true and fair view of the Authority's financial position and transactions. My report is contained within the Statement of Accounts.

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

There were a small number of matters arising from the accounts audit that were reported to members in my Audit of Financial Statements report at the time the Statement of Accounts was approved.

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

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

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

I issued a certificate confirming that the audit of the accounts has been completed on 29 September 2011.

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

Anthony Barrett

Appointed Auditor

Appendix 4

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 2010-11 in its *April Annual Report and Improvement Plan 2010/11* and its improvement objectives for 2011-12 in its *Business and Improvement Plan 2011-12*. These can be found on the Authority website at www.eryri-npa.gov.uk. They are:

2010-11 Improvement Objectives	2011-12 Improvement Objectives
1 The Authority continues to operate effectively and efficiently providing a service for all within the resources it has available.	1 People will have a better understanding of why and when enforcement action is taken.
2 The special qualities of the Park (as defined in the State of the Park report) will be improved.	2 Cases of alleged unauthorised development will take less time to be resolved.
3 The Authority has effective citizen centred services for all.	3 Community councils and our key stakeholders will have a better understanding of what the Authority does and the special qualities of the Park.
4 Planning delivers a responsive, consistent and high quality service that provides value for money.	4 The performance management arrangements will be more effective to ensure we maintain service standards during a period of diminishing resources.
5 There are more high quality access opportunities for people of all abilities to land and water in the Park.	5 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.
	6 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.
	7 The range and type of services available electronically is in line with the needs of the public.
	8 Users of the electronic service will be very satisfied with their experience.
	9 People will have a better understanding of the planning policies in the Local Development Plan.

Snowdonia National Park Authority's self-assessment of performance

The Authority's self-assessment of its performance can be found in the Authority's *Annual Report and Improvement Plan for 2010/11*, which can be found on the Authority's website at www.eryri-npa.gov.uk.

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