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AUDIT COMMITTEE REPORT ON PUBLIC ACCESS TO THE COUNTRYSIDE

The Clerk's letter of 4 July 2007 requested my advice on the Welsh Assembly Government's response to the recommendations made by the Audit Committee in its report *Public access to the countryside*.

The response of the Assembly Government is a positive one and it fully accepts seven of the Committee's eight recommendations while giving, ostensibly, partial acceptance to one of them. In particular, the Assembly Government has reinforced its commitment to working closely with the Countryside Council for Wales, the Welsh Local Government Association and local access authorities in taking forward the Coastal Access Improvement Programme, where close collaboration will be as important as it was in planning and managing the implementation of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000.

The Committee's second recommendation was that the Countryside Council for Wales should include a sufficiently wide range of different types of coastal land within the pilots for the extension of access to coastal land. The Assembly Government's response states that it has only partially accepted this recommendation on the basis that the Countryside Council for Wales has now completed its main pilots for the Coastal Access Improvement Programme. However, to all intents and purposes, the detail of the Assembly Government's response amounts to a full acceptance of the Committee's recommendation. This is because the Countryside Council for Wales had chosen three different and representative coastal areas for its pilots. The Assembly Government also plans to

draw on the existing experience of the National Trust and of coastal local access authorities in taking the Coastal Access Improvement Programme forward. In all material senses, therefore, the Assembly Government's response is in line with the Committee's recommendation.

The Assembly Government's response to the Committee's first and sixth recommendations relates to resources to support improved access to, and use of, the Welsh countryside. The Assembly Government's budget for 2007-08 includes £1.5 million for the Coastal Access Improvement Programme, which will be allocated on the basis of bids submitted by local access authorities. The Committee should note the emphasis in evaluating the bids that is being placed on improving access for those with mobility problems. The Government response to the sixth recommendation recognises the relationship between available resources and the pace of implementation of Rights of Way Improvement Plans. The Assembly Government is working with the Welsh Local Government Association and the Countryside Council for Wales on available funding options from 2008-09. The Wales Audit Office will monitor progress to ensure the robust implementation of the Rights of Way Improvement Plans.

The Committee's third recommendation was that the Assembly Government, in consultation with key stakeholders, should disseminate good practice about countryside access more regularly and effectively than in the past, while the eighth recommendation was that the Assembly Government uses its planned conference to share the Audit Committee's recommendations and its plans to implement them. The Assembly Government's response is positive and refers to improvements to the Countryside Council for Wales' website and the stakeholder conference scheduled for 1 October. The Wales Audit Office has been invited to speak at the stakeholder conference and will take the opportunity to share with delegates the Committee's recommendations and the Assembly Government's response to them. The October conference will also provide the opportunity for the Assembly Government to reinforce the importance of countryside access to communities throughout Wales, in line with its response to the Committee's fifth recommendation.

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The Committee's fourth recommendation relates to measures to encourage disadvantaged groups to visit the countryside more often. The Assembly Government lists a number of encouraging initiatives designed to achieve the objective of increased participation by groups at risk of exclusion, although the response is not explicit about how it will identify the barriers faced by excluded groups. However, the Assembly Government plans to monitor progress through countryside visitor surveys.

The Wales Audit Office will continue to monitor the progress made in implementing the Committee's recommendations and I will draw to the Committee's attention any areas where I consider that further action is merited.

Yours sincerely,



JEREMY COLMAN
AUDITOR GENERAL FOR WALES