

National Assembly for Wales
Public Accounts Committee

Annual Report 2014-15

June 2015

Cynulliad
Cenedlaethol
Cymru

National
Assembly for
Wales



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Public Accounts Committee

The Committee was established on 22 June 2011. The role of the Public Accounts Committee is to ensure that proper and thorough scrutiny is given to Welsh Government expenditure. The specific functions of the Committee are set out in Standing Order 18. The Committee will consider reports prepared by the Auditor General for Wales on the accounts of the Welsh Government and other public bodies, and on the economy, efficiency and effectiveness with which resources were employed in the discharge of public functions.

Current Committee membership:



Darren Millar (Chair)
Welsh Conservatives
Clwyd West



Mohammad Asghar
Welsh Conservatives
South Wales East



Jocelyn Davies
Plaid Cymru
South Wales East



Mike Hedges
Welsh Labour
Swansea East



Sandy Mewies
Welsh Labour
Delyn



Julie Morgan
Welsh Labour
Cardiff North



Jenny Rathbone
Welsh Labour
Cardiff Central



Aled Roberts
Welsh Liberal Democrats
North Wales

The following Members were also Members of the Committee during this period:



William Graham
Welsh Conservatives
South Wales East



Alun Ffred Jones
Plaid Cymru
Arfon

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Chair's Foreword

I am pleased to introduce the second Annual Report of the Public Accounts Committee, the final one of the Fourth Assembly. This report covers the Committee's reports for 2014-15, and demonstrates yet again the variety of the Committee's work. Our reports this year covered topics including health, education, transport, agriculture and public sector pay. Our work explored cross-cutting themes in monitoring the use of public money – such as the quality of governance, the use of data and performance management.

While the majority of the Committee's work stems from value for money studies published by the Auditor General for Wales, this report incorporates three reports on work initiated by the Committee itself – reflecting member interests and a commitment to continuing with our reformed ways of working. It is clear from discussions with counterpart committees in other jurisdictions that there is a great deal of interest in this aspect of our work and that it is pioneering a novel approach to the work of public audit.

These discussions have allowed the Committee to exchange ideas and good practice which has assisted the Committee to further refine the way it operates. We will continue to engage with other jurisdictions to allow us to develop ongoing relationships which are beneficial to those we represent.

The Committee values highly the relationship it has with the Auditor General, and is grateful to him and the staff of the Wales Audit Office for the contribution they make to the Committee's work.

We also value the engagement we have with the Welsh Government, which is based on mutual respect and a desire to work together and achieve the greatest value for money for the Welsh taxpayer. While the relationship is not cosy, and nor should it be, it is encouraging that the Welsh Government continues to respond to our reports and recommendations constructively.

Next year, the Committee will produce a legacy report that will look back at our work since 2011, reflect on how we operate and set out what we believe will be the key issues for the Committee's successor in the Fifth Assembly.

Darren Millar AM

1. Introduction

Background: The Public Accounts Committee

1. The Committee is a cross-party committee of the National Assembly for Wales, made up of eight Members representing all four political parties at the Assembly. The Committee is not part of the Welsh Government.
2. The role of the Committee is to ensure that proper and thorough scrutiny is given to devolved expenditure. The specific functions of the Committee are set out in Standing Order 18 of the National Assembly for Wales. The Committee largely considers studies prepared by the Auditor General for Wales on the economy, efficiency and effectiveness with which resources were employed in the discharge of public functions. It is prohibited under Standing Orders from considering the merits of policy objectives of the Welsh Government or of any public body it scrutinises.
3. We are advised by, and receive briefings from, the Auditor General and Wales Audit Office staff. We are independent from that office, and also have our own team of officials to support us in our work.
4. Over the last two years, the Committee has also undertaken inquiries on its own initiative where it believed there would be merit and public interest in doing so. These inquiries initiated by the Committee have been supported by Wales Audit Office staff and the staff of the National Assembly Commission.
5. In undertaking inquiries, the Committee considers value for money, probity and governance arrangements. It is the aim of the Committee to ensure that public money is being spent effectively and efficiently. We also aim to bring salient issues into focus, stimulate change and drive improvement in service delivery and the use of public money.
6. Once again, the Committee's annual report reflects the variety of work undertaken by the Committee over the course of the year. It reflects the efforts of the Committee to continuously improve its ways of working, including developing the number of reports it has undertaken on its own initiative and making links with other jurisdictions to explore how equivalent Committees undertake their role.

7. This is the second annual report of the present Public Accounts Committee, and will be the last to be produced during the Fourth Assembly. Next year we will produce a legacy report setting out the Committee's activities over the course of this Assembly and the impact of our work.

2. The Committee's Work 2014-15

Unscheduled Care

Background

8. Unscheduled care relates to medical attention that is unexpected, and therefore presents particular challenges to the health service. The Auditor General's for Wales published his report "Unscheduled Care - An update on progress" in September 2013. This aimed to track how public services in Wales had addressed issues raised by previous reports on the subject, in particular the Auditor General's report of December 2009, and the key remaining challenges and opportunities for improvement.

9. The report concluded that the overall deterioration of performance since 2009 had prompted considerable focus on unscheduled care and that early signs of improved performance had been seen recently that needed to be secured. However, transformational changes that are required for sustained improvement had not been fully implemented.

10. The Public Accounts Committee agreed in October 2013 to undertake an inquiry into the issues raised in the report, focusing particularly on primary care.

11. The Committee's inquiry focussed on:

- unscheduled care performance and pressures on service;
- primary care services, including out-of-hours services, pressures caused by non-attendance and issues of general practitioner recruitment and retention;
- the management of demand to ensure a good balance between scheduled and unscheduled care and that patients understood and exercised their options better;
- the particular difficulties of frail older people; and
- ensuring a stable model of care provision for the future.

12. In addition to a number of written submissions received, the Committee held [five] evidence sessions, scrutinising the British Medical Association, Health Boards, experts on emergency and end-of-life-care, as well as the Welsh Government.

Key Findings

13. Pressures around unscheduled care were difficult to gauge given the absence of robust data around key activities – such as reasons for and time taken in emergency departments admissions.

14. There was concern that the National Health Service’s frontline workforce were particularly at risk from communicable illnesses during an outbreak among the general population such as measles or influenza, and this workforce was also more likely to be absent from work due to stress. Absences would then cause further pressure at busy periods and possibly further contribute to other staff absences.

15. The availability of primary care was a key issue, including the availability of appointments from 08.00 to 18.30 required by the General Medical Services contract, the recruitment and retention of general practitioners and efforts to mitigate the problems caused by non-attendance at appointments.

16. The Committee heard of efforts to enable the public to make informed decisions about the unscheduled healthcare they required. This included awareness of the right to access urgent same-day primary care appointments, co-locating GP out-of-hours services in emergency departments and encouraging better patient choices by strengthening the Choose Well campaign.

17. The Committee made 19 recommendations. These included:

- that the Welsh Government undertake further work with NHS bodies to increase immunisation rates amongst the population, including increasing its targets for vaccinating NHS staff against influenza;
- that the Welsh Government introduce clear, consistent guidelines on how ambulance handovers are recorded;
- that health boards promote clinically-led telephone triage in GP practices, with patients able to take telephone advice on the most appropriate action when requesting an urgent GP appointment;
- that the Welsh Government undertake a detailed evaluation of the current GP workforce across Wales and develop a strategy to ensure capacity meets needs; and
- enhancing the Choose Well campaign through better promotion of other opportunities for accessing healthcare, such as through community pharmacists and optometrists.

Main Outcomes

18. The Welsh Government accepted all 19 of the Committee's recommendations, three of which were partial acceptances.

19. The Welsh Government was reluctant to accept the Committee's recommendation regarding a higher target for the immunisation of frontline NHS staff against influenza. It was felt a higher target was unlikely to significantly increase uptake and could demoralise staff who had worked toward the existing target over previous years. The Committee pursued this issue further in correspondence, and the Welsh Government undertook to consider the target further following the 2014-15 influenza season.

20. The Committee sought an update on the Welsh Government's progress in January, and received confirmation that progress could be reported against a number of measures, and that a further update can be provided on the health service's performance during the 2014-15 winter season. The Committee intend to return to this subject during the 2015 summer term.

Covering Teachers' Absence

Background

21. The Auditor General published his report "Covering Teachers' Absence" in September 2013. The report considered whether learners, schools and the public purse were well served by arrangements to cover teachers' absence. His work was undertaken in partnership with Estyn, who also published a report on the impact of teachers' absence in the same month.

22. The Auditor General's report set out that expenditure on supply cover was rising and not always managed effectively, that cover arrangements are not managed well enough to safeguard learners' progress and well-being, and that teachers' absence was not considered sufficiently by the Welsh Government or local authorities in efforts to help schools improve learning outcomes.

23. The Committee agreed to undertake a short inquiry in October 2013. The inquiry focussed on:

- how teachers' absence could be reduced;
- how the impact of absence on learners could be reduced; and
- how cover arrangements could be made more cost effective and ensure the safety of learners.

24. In addition to a briefing from the Auditor General and Estyn, the Committee took evidence from the Welsh Government to discuss the Auditor General's findings and the Committee's views. The Committee reported in May 2014 on its findings.

Key Findings

25. The Committee heard that staff absence was not effectively monitored, nor was the impact on learners of lessons covered evaluated routinely.

26. The Committee was concerned whether school governors had sufficient information to monitor teachers' absence, and whether it was given due consideration as part of the training of heads.

27. Teachers' absence was often as a consequence of their participation in Welsh Government initiatives, with possible longer-term ambitions for improving learner outcomes coming at the short-term cost of inadequate cover for lessons missed.

28. There was great potential to develop the quality of supply teachers, which would require the Welsh Government, local authorities and schools being able to accommodate them on relevant training courses.

29. The Committee made 14 recommendations, including:

- that relevant and reliable data on teachers' absence be captured and disseminated to enable better monitoring;
- that head teachers' training be reviewed to ensure a greater emphasis on managing teachers' absence;
- that supply teachers have greater access to Continuing Professional Development offered by schools and Local Authorities; and
- that further information on the cost and extent of covering teachers' absence be collected by the Welsh Government.

Main Outcomes

30. Many of the concerns discussed with the Welsh Government were acknowledged during the course of the inquiry. Thirteen recommendations were accepted by the Welsh Government, seven of which were acceptances in principle.

31. The Committee's recommendation that regulations be amended to ensure that at least one member of a school governing body lead on human resources matters was rejected. The Welsh Government argued that amending regulations would not be appropriate for this purpose and guidance would be produced to support governing bodies' oversight of staffing issues. The Committee has exchanged further correspondence with the Welsh Government on this matter, to clarify its intention behind this recommendation and to ask the Welsh Government to reconsider its rejection of this recommendation.

32. As requested in the Committee's report, the Welsh Government provided an update in January 2015 on progress in implementing the action required in response to the Committee's recommendations.

33. The Children, Young People and Education Committee undertook an inquiry into Supply Teaching from December 2014 and we have ensured that they are able to draw from the findings of the Public Accounts Committee.

The Intra-Wales Cardiff to Anglesey Air Service

Background

34. As part of its new ways of working, the Committee has been keen to initiate its own inquiries, in addition to those that are prompted by reports from the Auditor General for Wales. The first Committee-led inquiry undertaken was on the Intra-Wales Cardiff to Anglesey Air Service in January 2014, reporting in July 2014.

35. The Air Service has operated since 2007 and provides twice-daily weekday flights between Anglesey Airport and Cardiff-Wales Airport. It is supported by the Welsh Government through a subsidy known as a PSO (Public Service Obligation), permitted under European State Aids rules to allow Member States to support flights that are important for economic development but are not commercially viable. The cost of this PSO was capped at £1.2m per annum.

36. Initially, the service was operated by Highland Airways from May 2007 until March 2010, after which time the Air Service was operated through a contract between the Welsh Government and two companies. These companies were joint signatories to the contract, with Manx2, and later Citywing, providing the ticketing and marketing functions and FLM Aviation, later Links Air, operating the flights. This arrangement was due to expire in December 2014.

37. The report produced by the Committee in July 2014 was expedited to allow the Welsh Government to take the Committee's findings into account in the determination of any successor franchise.

38. The Auditor General provided a memorandum on the operation of the Air Service, and the Committee took oral evidence from Welsh Government Officials and Martin Evans, an aviation industry expert based at the University of South Wales.

39. The Committee's inquiry focussed on:

- the costs, performance (including passenger numbers), and benefits of the service;
- the procurement and contracting of the service; and
- the future of the air service.

Key Findings

40. The Committee found the use of the air service had declined over the period of operation, and that it was largely used by public sector workers – though there appeared to be a lack of rigorous customer profiling or effective marketing of the service. The Air Service's benefits had not been recently evaluated, although the Welsh Government had commissioned some research from ARUP consulting on the future of the air service.

41. The split of the service between two operators was of some concern, and the Committee heard questions as to whether separate companies could operate as joint signatories to a PSO. A particular issue was clarity around the operators' liabilities. The Committee also heard concerns regarding the robustness of the tendering process for the air service in the past and whether it had attracted sufficient interest for the Welsh Government to find the best arrangement. This had implications for the imminent re-tendering.

42. The Committee also gave consideration to how the service could be operated to ensure best value-for-money, including the optimum size of the aircraft, the frequency of the service and the route served.

43. The Committee made nine recommendations in its interim report, including:

- that the Welsh Government use an independent source to verify data on passenger numbers using the Air Service and that data on passenger numbers be published on a regular basis in the future;

- that the Welsh Government commission independent research into the longer-term trend of a decline in passenger numbers;
- that any future tender include an explicit requirement for a marketing programme for the provider of the service;
- that information be collected and published on passengers' reasons for travel, and to help identify taxpayer-funded journeys;
- that the ARUP survey's scope, methodology and timescale – and eventually the full review of their report – be published; and
- that any re-tendering exercise seek to increase the number of bidders without compromising the timetable or value for money.

Main Outcomes

44. In its response to the Committee's interim report, the Welsh Government accepted all nine recommendations, one of which was an acceptance in principle to release the ARUP report, which would be redacted according to the exceptions under freedom of information legislation.

45. The Welsh Government awarded the new contract from December 2014 to Links Air, who would also provide the ticketing and marketing functions.

46. The Committee returned to this issue in January 2014, when it took evidence from Welsh Government officials on the re-tendering exercise and how it had taken account of the issues raised by the Committee's report.

47. In April 2014 the Committee received the ARUP report commissioned by the Welsh Government and will soon produce a further report to conclude its consideration of the Air Service.

Senior Management Pay

Background

48. The second inquiry initiated by the Committee was into Senior Management Pay in November 2013. The Committee did not consider individual pay awards within the public sector, but looked comprehensively at issues around decision-making and transparency of taxpayer-funded posts in Wales. It focussed on:

- the decision-making processes for the setting of pay – including how value-for-money was achieved;
- the method for deciding pay increases;

- the transparency of pay packages;
- the quality and level of comparative data; and
- whether there was a need for a body to take an overview of public sector pay.

49. To support its work, the Committee received memoranda from the Auditor General providing an analysis of senior management pay in NHS bodies, local government, bodies funded directly from the Welsh Consolidated Fund, Welsh Government Sponsored Bodies, further and higher education institutions, and Registered Social Landlords. These memoranda were welcomed by witnesses, as well as the Committee, as providing a comprehensive overview of pay arrangements that was previously absent.

50. The Committee held eight evidence sessions, hearing from witnesses in the public sector as well as organisations such as the Hay Group and The TaxPayers' Alliance. The Committee also held a short consultation, and received seven pieces of written evidence. It published its report in November 2014.

Key Findings

51. The Committee found that arrangements for senior management pay were not well understood and varied widely within and between different parts of the public sector in Wales. This included pay levels, what constituted a senior manager, and the arrangements for setting and reporting pay.

52. The Committee were struck by the difficulty in accessing data on senior management pay that was clear and enabled comparisons to be made. This inhibited the ability to properly understand and scrutinise arrangements.

53. Contrary to expectations, the Welsh Government did not take a particularly close interest in the pay arrangements of public sector bodies that it supported. The Committee found examples where the transparency requirements in the Welsh Government's Account Directions, such as on-line publication of pay information, were not being met.

54. The Committee heard that there were difficulties in using comparisons to set pay, given the number of variables involved and that the use of average pay 'benchmarking' often led to the 'ratcheting up' of pay.

55. The Committee made 23 recommendations in its report, which included:

- the Welsh Government should produce and disseminate a clear definition of what is meant by a senior post, and also produce a glossary to support understandable pay disclosures;
- the Welsh Government should take the opportunity presented by local government reform to increase consistency around senior management pay;
- that guidance be produced by the Welsh Government in relation to remuneration committees, the use of consultants and the publication of pay information; and
- that public sector organisations publish more information - including on the number of employees earning more than £100 000, the remuneration of staff with a breakdown of different aspects of the pay award and demographic information, and a pay policy statement.

Main Outcomes

56. The Welsh Government accepted all 23 of the Committee's recommendations, and responded positively to the Committee's report in a plenary debate on it on 14 January 2015. Both the Welsh Government's response and the Minister for Public Services, in his response to the plenary debate, noted that the Committee's report was timely given pressures on the public purse and the agenda of public service reform.

57. The Committee noted the potential for the Public Service Staff Commission, which was being consulted on at the time of reporting, to take account of the report's recommendations. The Welsh Government's response acknowledged that potential, and announced in a written statement in March 2015 that the Commission would be established on a non-statutory basis in autumn 2015, and ultimately on a statutory basis through the Local Government Mergers and Reform Bill. The Committee will reflect on the further detail on arrangements for the Commission as and when it is provided by the Welsh Government.

58. The Committee sent this report to the Welsh Local Government Association for dissemination among local authorities in Wales, and Community Housing Cymru for the attention of Registered Social Landlords.

Scrutiny of 2013-14 Accounts

Background

59. While the Public Accounts Committee often considers aspects of a public sector organisation's performance, it had not previously scrutinised their annual accounts to take an overview of performance. As part of its reformed ways of working, the Committee scrutinised the 2013-14 accounts of seven taxpayer-funded organisations to consider their use of public money and how that expenditure was overseen. The Committee produced its report in March 2015 to help public bodies in their preparation of 2014-15 accounts.

60. The organisations whose accounts were scrutinised were the Welsh Government, the National Assembly for Wales Commission, the Older People's Commissioner for Wales, the Children's Commissioner for Wales, the Welsh Language Commissioner, the Public Services Ombudsman for Wales and the Arts Council for Wales. The Committee focussed on these organisations as they reflected wide variations in the level of their budgets, and variety range of governance arrangements in place.

61. Particular issues the Committee considered were:

- how reducing levels of public expenditure were being absorbed to ensure maintained performance;
- the relationship between the independent Commissioners and the Welsh Government, which they held to account and were funded by;
- The responsibilities of individuals acting as corporations sole;
- the potential of smaller organisations to cooperate and make savings in their administration; and
- how cash, and reserves of cash, were managed

Key Findings

62. Unlike the other bodies scrutinized, the National Assembly for Wales's Commission had received an increased budget for 2013-14. The Committee was informed that the increased budget had been invested to enable savings in future years.

63. The Committee heard that the three independent Commissioners and the Ombudsman were already engaging on potential collaboration in their administrative support services. There were some doubts expressed about

the scale of savings that could be generated, but the Committee was keen for any savings to be realised.

64. There were strong arguments made in favour of the National Assembly funding the three Commissioners directly, rather than the Welsh Government, to provide greater transparency and independence from the organisation they are tasked to hold to account. While the Committee considered the accounts of these organisations, a review of the role and functions of the office of the Children's Commissioner was underway, which recommended the office be funded directly by the National Assembly.

65. While the accounts met their required standards, the Committee felt that organisations could do more to explain clearly how their expenditure contributed to their objectives. In addition, there was some discussion that organisations should be clear in their policy regarding the use of reserves, which would enable these policies to be properly scrutinised.

66. The Committee made nine recommendations in its report, some of which were specific to individual organisations considered. These included:

- the National Assembly's Commission accounts for 2014-15 set out savings from investment in information technology and translation in 2013-14;
- the independent Commissioners and Ombudsman continue their efforts to realise efficiencies and greater productivity through collaboration and report on it in their 2014-15 annual reports and accounts;
- the Commissioners and Ombudsman set out clearly the responsibilities they have delegated to their staff; and
- that organisations funded by the public purse ensure that their accounts are readily understandable and, where relevant, set out any policy on cash management and use of underspends.

Main Outcomes

67. The organisations whose accounts were scrutinised received a copy of the Committee's report. For its part, the Welsh Government accepted the three recommendations that related specifically to it, one of which was accepted in principle.

68. The Committee raised the question of the funding of the independent Commissioners in correspondence with the Welsh Government, not taking a view on a policy decision. The Welsh Government indicated by return that that it would look to ensure consistent funding arrangements for the Commissioners, and it may therefore indicate future arrangements in its response to the review of the Children's Commissioner's role and functions.

69. The Committee intends to revisit the findings of its scrutiny in the summer 2015 term, and will consider the impact of its recommendations on the organisations concerned, as reflected in their 2014-15 accounts, during autumn 2015. We also intend to invite further organisations to the Committee to widen our focus and air issues raised with the Committee throughout the year.

Glastir

Background

70. The Auditor General published his report into Glastir, the Welsh Government's agri-environment scheme, in September 2014. It considered whether the development and implementation of the scheme would promote the changes needed to achieve the scheme's objectives and whether lessons learnt from Tir Gofal (a predecessor scheme) and evidence from other agri-environment schemes had been incorporated. It found that:

- Glastir's aims align with key environmental policies but, although the scheme's design draws on the learning from previous agri-environment schemes, it also retains some of the flaws;
- the Welsh Government has strengthened its arrangements to administer Glastir, but there remains scope for improvement in some areas; and
- participation in Glastir is significantly below the Welsh Government's targets, some of which were unrealistic, and measures to evaluate the scheme's success have yet to be adequately developed.

71. On consideration of the Auditor General's report and the Welsh Government's response to it, the Committee agreed to undertake a short inquiry into Glastir, inviting evidence from key organisations with an interest in the scheme.

72. The Committee's consideration focused on:

- how the scheme could demonstrate improvement in addition to maintaining good practice;
- how it could help tackle poor practice – particularly in relation to water quality;
- how the scheme was administered, including application and inspection; and
- how the scheme was designed in terms of target-setting and evaluation.

73. The Committee took oral evidence from the Welsh Government, and received written evidence from the National Farmers' Union Cymru, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, and the Wye and Usk Foundation. It published its report in March 2015.

Key Findings

74. The Committee heard that the scheme as currently designed would not deliver a marked change in environmental practice. The Committee felt that there were opportunities to use the scheme to target and tackle poor environmental practice and invited the Welsh Government's consideration of alongside regulation as a carrot-and-stick approach.

75. As the Welsh Government intended to phase in online-only applications for the scheme, the Committee were keen that the challenges applicants may face in applying online be captured and acted upon before the whole scheme would be online-only.

76. The Committee concluded that the Welsh Government and its sponsored bodies should better share data and better align monitoring-and-inspection regimes to increase efficiency and reduce disruption to farmers.

77. The Committee made eight recommendations in its report, including:

- the Welsh Government considering how it identifies and tackles poor practice in relation to water quality using a range of interventions including regulation and the use or withdrawal of public funding;
- the Welsh Government formally evaluating customer experiences of the online application process and making any changes necessary to remove barriers or disincentives;

- the Welsh Government disaggregating the scheme's administrative costs to allow a better appraisal of value-for-money of the scheme; and
- the Welsh Government report back to the Committee by autumn 2015 on the targets it sets for the scheme's uptake, which should be challenging but realistic.

Main Outcomes

78. The Welsh Government accepted all of the Committee's recommendations, with two of the recommendations accepted partially. The partial acceptances related to continuing to support maintained good practice through Glastir Advanced and a recommendation that the Welsh Government report to the Committee by May 2016 on its monitoring and evaluation work, which would instead be available in autumn 2016.

79. The RSPB wrote to congratulate the Committee for its consideration of this matter, believing that the Committee's "recommendations, if fully implemented, will make a significant contribution towards improving the effectiveness of the scheme in securing greater change in management at participating farms, tackling poor practice and securing better value for money for taxpayers".

Implementation of the National Framework for Continuing NHS Healthcare: Follow-up report

Background

80. The Committee first reported in December 2013 on the Framework for Continuing NHS Healthcare, which followed the Auditor General's report of June 2013. Both the Committee's report and that of the Auditor General focussed on the National Framework which set out how individuals could receive on-going physical, mental and personal care due to a primary health need. The Committee found that equitable and timely access to continuing healthcare was not always available.

81. The Auditor General returned to this issue in his January 2015 report, which found that:

- the revised CHC National Framework addressed many of the weaknesses in the previous version, and leadership and oversight were being strengthened;

- there were more outstanding retrospective claims than ever before, and the response from some health boards had been unsatisfactory; and
- public information on CHC had been expanded but needed to be more accessible; there were weaknesses in the publicity of the July 2014 cut-off for some retrospective claims; and access to advocacy services remained a concern for some health boards.

82. Noting that the Welsh Government had accepted the Auditor General's recommendations, the Committee agreed to hold a short inquiry into specific aspects of the Framework and published a report on our findings in March 2015. The report focussed on:

- The implementation of the revised continuing healthcare Framework, in particular the use of the Decision Support Tool;
- The handling of retrospective claims by the Powys Project, and how that was overseen; and
- The availability and quality of information for patients and their family in relation to continuing healthcare.

Key Findings

83. While the Committee heard that the Welsh Government were confident the new Framework would not disadvantage individuals processed under the previous system, Members had concerns about the size of the sample of cases audited. This was a particular concern for cases involving individuals with learning difficulties.

84. It was noted that the new Framework went further than the Committee's recommendation in its previous report that retrospective claims for continuing healthcare should be dealt with within two years. The Committee was keen to understand whether the Welsh Government was confident such a deadline could be met, given some health boards were carrying vacancies and participation in the Powys Project, which dealt with Boards' retrospective claims, was not mandatory. In addition, this could mean claims received under the new Framework may be dealt with before those relating to the previous Framework.

85. The Committee discussed its concerns that patients and their families were often unaware of the options available to them, and how decisions would be made in relation to their continuing healthcare needs. There was further concern that the standard of advocacy services was not well monitored or assessed.

86. The Committee made nine recommendations in its report, including:
- the Welsh Government provide the Committee with findings from its review of cases of individuals with learning difficulties;
 - that Health Boards be monitored to ensure the shorter processing deadline does not result in unintended consequences of longer resolution times for long-standing, unresolved claims;
 - that Health Boards be given mandatory guidance on the provision of information for individuals and their family on what care is available and how claims would be assessed, and that the Welsh Government update the Committee on how it intends to improve the consistency, quality and awareness of advocacy services.

Main Outcomes

87. The Welsh Government accepted all of the Committee's recommendations. In the coming months the Welsh Government will provide further information to the Committee on cases involving individuals with learning difficulties, and on its efforts to improve advocacy services.

Looking Ahead

88. In the remaining year of the present Assembly, the Public Accounts Committee will continue to explore issues raised in the Auditor General's studies, and hold public bodies to account for their use of resources. The Committee will also look back at its activities over the course of this Assembly, revisiting any topics that which merit further consideration and preparing a report for its successor Committee in the next Assembly.

89. In the coming weeks, the Committee will look to conclude its consideration of the financial challenges facing local government; governance arrangements in health boards in Wales; and its inquiry on Wales's trunk road network.

90. The Committee is reviewing how it undertakes its functions through further engagement with counterpart Committees in other jurisdictions. In June we meet the Scottish Parliament's Public Audit Committee to discuss its recent consideration of how the administration of new devolved fiscal responsibilities will be held to account. This could relate well to the priorities of our successor Committee.