

**CIPFA Position Statement: Audit Committees in Local Authorities**

**The Purpose of Audit Committees**

- **Audit committees are a key component of an authority's governance framework.** Their function is to provide an independent and high level resource to support good governance and strong public financial management.
- **The purpose of an audit committee is to provide to those charged with governance independent assurance on the adequacy of the risk management framework, the internal control environment and the integrity of the financial reporting and annual governance processes.** By overseeing internal and external audit it makes an important contribution to ensuring that effective assurance arrangements are in place. For a local authority, CIPFA's judgement is that the audit committee should report directly to council rather than another committee, as the council itself most closely matches the body of 'those charged with governance'.

**The core functions of an audit committee are to:**

- Be satisfied that the authority's assurance statements, including the Annual Governance Statement, properly reflect the risk environment and any actions required to improve it and demonstrate how governance supports the achievements of the authority's objectives.
- In relation to the authority's internal audit functions:
  - oversee its independence, objectivity, performance and professionalism
  - support the effectiveness of the internal audit process
  - Promote the effective use of internal audit within the assurance framework
- Consider the effectiveness of the authority's risk management arrangements and the control environment. Review the risk profile of the organisation and assurances that action is being taken on risk-related issues, including partnerships with other organisations.
- Monitor the effectiveness of the control environment, including arrangements for ensuring value for money and for managing the authority's exposure to the risks of fraud and corruption.
- Consider the reports and recommendations of external audit and inspection agencies and their implications for governance, risk management or control.

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- Support effective relationships between external audit and internal audit, inspection agencies and other relevant bodies, and encourage the active promotion of the value of the audit process.
- Review the financial statements, external auditor's opinion and reports to members, and monitor management action in response to the issues raised by external audit.

#### **Audit committees can also support their authorities by undertaking a wider role in the other areas including:**

- Considering governance, risk or control matters at the request of other committees or statutory officers.
- Working with local standards committees to support ethical values and reviewing the arrangements to achieve those values.
- Reviewing and monitoring treasury management arrangements in accordance with the CIPFA Treasury Management Code of Practice.
- Providing oversight of other public reports, such as the annual report

#### **Although no single model of audit committee is prescribed, all should:**

- Act as the principal non-executive, advisory function supporting those charged with governance.
- Be independent of both the executive and scrutiny functions.
- Have clear rights of access to other committees/ functions, for example scrutiny and service committees, corporate risk management boards and other strategic groups.
- Be properly accountable to the authority's board or equivalent body.
- Meet regularly – at least four times a year, and have a clear policy on those items to be considered in private and those to be considered in public.
- Be able to meet privately and separately with the external auditor and head of internal audit.
- Include, as regular attendees, the chief finance officer or appropriate senior and qualified substitute, the chief executive, head of internal audit and appointed external auditor. Other attendees may include the monitoring officer

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(for standards issues), and the head of resources (where such a post exists). These officers should also be able to have access to the committee, or the chair, as required. The committee should have the right to call any other officers or agencies of the authority as required.

- Report regularly on their work, and at least annually report an assessment of their performance.

#### **Good audit committees are characterised by:**

- A membership that is balanced<sup>1</sup>, objective, independent of mind, knowledgeable and properly trained to fulfil their role.
- A membership that is supportive of good governance principles and their practical application towards the achievement of organisational objectives.
- A strong independently minded chair – displaying a depth of knowledge, skills and interest.<sup>2</sup>
- Unbiased attitudes – treating auditors, the executive and management fairly.
- The ability to challenge the executive and senior managers when required.

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<sup>1</sup> The political balance of a formal committee of an authority will reflect the political balance of the council. However, it is important to achieve the right mix of apolitical expertise.

<sup>2</sup> There are many personal qualities needed to be an effective chair, but key to these are promoting an apolitical open discussion, managing meetings to cover all business and encouraging a candid approach from all participants. An interest in, and knowledge of financial and risk management, audit, accounting concepts and standards and the regulatory regime are also essential. A specialism in one of these areas would be an advantage.