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Press release

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Commission highlights importance of clear roles and effective working relationships

The Accounts Commission has launched the first in a new series of publications intended to help councils steer through the tough financial pressures they are facing. *Roles and working relationships: are you getting it right?* builds on the lessons learned from audits to show how clarity about roles and effective working relationships are essential to improving performance and achieving value for money.

John Baillie, Chair of the Accounts Commission, said: "Councillors and officers are at the heart of local government policy and delivery and how they work together is fundamental to success. Councils are rising to the challenge and working hard to keep delivering quality services that meet people's needs, despite reduced funding and other pressures. As they face increasingly difficult choices it is vital that they have good working arrangements and relationships in place to support their activity."

Today's publication says councils have taken action to improve understanding of roles and responsibilities and the processes and systems that underpin good governance. However the economic, social and political context is changing quickly and the report provides checklists, examples and other information to help councils assess their current working practices and identify how they might better equip themselves to deal with the challenges ahead.

John Baillie continued: "Delivering best value to local people is more important and challenging than ever. A key part of this is for councils to ensure they keep their working practices and arrangements under regular review, and take action on any areas for improvement."

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Notes to editors

1. Articles on various themes from today's publication are available on request. These cover: councillor and officer roles and responsibilities, governance arrangements, the roles of statutory officers, councillors' role on external bodies (arms-length organizations), and action points from the report. Podcast interviews will also be available.

Key aspects of good leadership and governance are good working relationships, clearly understood political and managerial structures, professional and constructive relationships between councillors and councillors and officers, a shared commitment to council priorities and constructive debate leading to clear decision making.

2. In addition to competing demands on finances, councils have also had to deal with substantial changes affecting how they operate, with most in political coalition and all having multi member wards. Overall there is more emphasis on partnership working and new ways of delivering services. Councillor and officer roles continue to evolve and there are also new chief executives and senior officers at many councils. Political activity is set to heighten ahead of local and national elections in the next two years, and is likely to increase any existing tensions.

3. The new series of *'How councils work'* publications draws on existing audit work to produce material designed to stimulate change and improve performance. The next report in the series will focus on key issues for councils when delivering services through ALEOs (Arms-Length and External Organisations).

3. Audit Scotland has prepared this report for the Accounts Commission for Scotland. All Audit Scotland reports published since 2000 are available at www.audit-scotland.gov.uk

4. The Accounts Commission for Scotland checks whether local authorities, fire and police boards spend public money properly and effectively.

5. Audit Scotland is a statutory body set up in April 2000, under the Public Finance and Accountability (Scotland) Act, 2000. It provides services to the Accounts Commission for Scotland.