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Dear Members of the Committee,

The recent announcement that the Audit Commission is to be abolished is one that causes considerable alarm and as a member of the Communities and Local Government Select Committee you may also have concerns.

By way of introduction Public Concern at Work is the UK's leading authority on whistleblowing and operates a free and confidential helpline that for the last 17 years has advised over 18,000 people on how to raise a concern about malpractice and/or wrongdoing in the workplace.

When advising those who work for local government or the NHS it has until now been clear when and how to approach the Audit Commission. They have a whistleblowing hotline for concerned workers to raise the alarm and have issued guidance. This is a sensible and safe external option for individuals who either cannot raise a concern internally, or have done so only to be ignored.

With the abolition of the Audit Commission the responsible worker who witnesses wrongdoing will have nowhere safe to go outside of their organisation. There is a real risk that worried workers will not feel comfortable approaching a private auditing firm that has a commercial relationship with the local authority or council. Will the commercial incentive override the public interest? A possible consequence of this is that a worker may feel the only option they have is to raise the concern with the media or to leak information anonymously. This is not only risky for the individual but can also make it difficult for the public interest issue to be addressed. The other possible consequence is that the whistleblower may remain silent, an even more undesirable outcome.

The Coalition Government has made a clear commitment to cracking down on Government waste. Included in this was stronger protection for public sector workers who speak up about financial malpractice. As the functions of the Audit Commission are transferred careful thought needs to be given on how to empower and guide workers in a whistleblowing dilemma. What will now happen to people who wish to speak up on issues that would normally be investigated by the Audit Commission? Will an alternative body be prescribed for this purpose? Without proper thought about the alternative options, it is likely that the UK public purse will suffer as financial irregularities and potential frauds will not be picked up.

We would be happy to discuss this issue with you if you think this would be helpful.

Yours sincerely,

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