

The basic position

By law any interested person has the right to inspect the council's accounts. If you are entitled and registered to vote in local council elections then you (or your representative) also have the right to ask the Auditor General questions about them, or challenge an item of account contained within them.

The right to inspect the accounts

When a local government body has finalised its accounts for the previous financial year it must advertise that they are available for people to look at. Having given reasonable notice of your intentions, you then have 20 working days to look through the accounts and supporting documents. You will be able to make copies of the accounts and most of the relevant documents from the body. You will probably have to pay a copying charge.

The right to ask the auditor questions about the accounts

You can only ask the Auditor General questions about the accounts. The Auditor General does not have to answer questions about the body's policies, finances, procedures or anything else not related to the accounts. Your question must be about the accounts that are subject to audit. The Auditor General does not have to say whether he thinks something the council has done, or an item in its accounts, is lawful or reasonable.

The right to object to the accounts

If you think that the body has spent money that they shouldn't have, or that someone has caused a loss to the body deliberately or by behaving irresponsibly, you can object to the Auditor General by sending a formal 'notice of objection', which must be in writing to the address below. You must tell the Auditor General why you are objecting. The Auditor General must reach a decision on your objection. If you are not happy with that decision, you can appeal to the courts.

You may also object if you think that there is something in the accounts that the Auditor General should discuss with the council or tell the public about in a 'public interest report'. Again, you must give your reasons in writing to the Auditor General at the address below. In this case, the Auditor General must decide whether to take any action. The Auditor General will normally, but does not have to, give reasons for their decision and you cannot appeal to the courts. You may not use this 'right to object' to make a personal complaint or claim against the body.

If you wish to make a personal complaint or claim, you should take these complaints to your local Citizens' Advice Bureau, local Law Centre or your solicitor. You may also be able to complain to the Public Services Ombudsman for Wales if you believe that a Member of the body has broken the Code of Conduct for Members. The Ombudsman can be contacted at: 1 Old Field Rd, Pencoed, Bridgend CF35 5LJ, (1 Ffordd yr Hen Gae, Pencoed, CF35 5LJ) (tel: (01656) 641 150).

What else you can do

Instead of objecting, you can give the Auditor General information that is relevant to their responsibilities. For example, you can simply tell the Auditor General if you think that something is wrong with the accounts or about waste and inefficiency in the way the council runs its services. You do not have to follow any set time limits or procedures. The Auditor General does not have to give you a detailed report of their investigation into the issues you have raised, but they will usually tell you the general outcome.

A final word

Local government bodies, and so local taxpayers, must meet the costs of dealing with questions and objections. When the Auditor General decides whether to take your objection further, one of a series of factors they must take into account includes the costs that will be involved. They will only continue with the objection if it is in the public interest to do so. If you appeal to the courts, you might have to pay for the action yourself.

If you wish to contact the Auditor General please write to: BDO LLP, Arcadia House, Maritime Walk, Ocean Village, Southampton, SO14 3TL