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FINANCE CONTROLLER

Full time: 37 Hours per Week, Permanent Contract
Salary: Cognus Band 4, £51,542 - £55,387 per annum (dependent on experience and qualifications)
Location: Cognus Office, First Floor, Cantium House, Wallington, SM6 0DZ

Cognus Limited is a Local Authority Traded Company, which is commissioned by the London Borough of Sutton to provide education services to early years providers, mainstream schools and specialist education settings in Sutton. Wholly owned by the local authority, we deliver a wide range of high-quality services to deliver excellent practice that improve the lives of children, young people, and families in Sutton and beyond.

Cognus Limited is the parent company within a group structure, which includes Sutton Music Trust (SMT), a subsidiary charity. The finance function supports group-level financial reporting, intercompany transactions, and consolidation requirements across both entities. The Finance Controller will work across both organisations to ensure accurate, compliant financial management at both entity and group level.

Role Overview

Cognus is seeking to appoint a Finance Controller. This is a strategically important technical role for an expert in financial accuracy, control excellence, process improvement, and the efficient use of automation and emerging technology.

As Finance Controller, you will act as the senior technical finance specialist responsible for the day-to-day delivery, accuracy, compliance and continuous improvement of the financial operations of Cognus and Sutton Music Trust. Working under delegated authority from the Director of Finance and alongside two Finance Officers, you will oversee the day-to-day operation of the financial controls' framework, ensuring agreed controls operate effectively and exceptions are appropriately escalated. You will also produce monthly management accounts, perform complex reconciliations, particularly payroll-to-GL, and drive finance system and process improvement.

This is a hands-on technical role involving detailed spreadsheet analysis, review of transaction logic, investigation of payroll variances, quality assurance of Finance Officer outputs, resolution of discrepancies and development of improved reporting and control processes using Excel, Xero functionality, automation and emerging tools.

Ultimate accountability for financial governance, statutory and management reporting, the external audit and the effectiveness of the control environment remain with the Director of Finance. The Finance Controller operates under delegated authority from the Director and provides technical leadership to the finance team.

The role has no formal line-management responsibility. It provides technical leadership and day-to-day professional guidance to the Finance Officers, including coordinating finance-process activities where delegated, reviewing outputs, coaching colleagues, and monitoring adherence to agreed procedures. Formal supervision, performance management, appraisal, and employee-management decisions remain with the Director of Finance.

This role is suited to someone committed to financial accuracy, effective controls, practical process improvement, and working collaboratively in a small, hands-on team.

You will give us great commitment and in return we offer an excellent package including:

i) Salary: £51,542 - £55,387 per annum, depending on experience and qualifications (Cognus Band 4)
ii) Workplace pension scheme 4% to 8% matched contributions
iii) 28 days annual leave pro rata (plus Bank Holidays)
iv) Regular manager support and supervision
v) Hybrid and flexible working
vi) Staff benefits package; currently including Employee Assistance Programme, life insurance, employee benefits platform and (upon completion of probation) health care *[Cognus reserves the right to adjust these additional discretionary benefits to improve quality of their services provided, maintain affordability for the Company and to ensure benefits remain fit for purpose with staff needs.]*
vii) Staff EDI group
viii) Cognus Coaching Programmes
ix) An ambitious culture with friendly and supportive colleagues

Read more - Why work for us? Cognus Recruitment Information

If you are interested and would like to be considered for this role, please apply to recruitment@cognus.org.uk with the completed application form, which can be downloaded from our website, outlining your suitability.

The deadline for receipt is **3rd September 2026**. Shortlisted candidates will be contacted re. interview dates.

For an informal conversation about the role, please contact Jon Mills, Director of Finance at jon.mills@cognus.org.uk.

All offers of employment are subject to successful completion of recruitment formalities which includes an enhanced DBS check. These checks must have been completed before the commencement of employment. We expect our staff to have due regard for safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children and young people and to follow the child protection procedures adopted by the Company and Sutton's Local Safeguarding Partnership.

We are an equal opportunity employer and value diversity at our company. We do not discriminate on the basis of race, religion, colour, national origin, gender, sexual orientation, age, marital status, veteran status, or disability status.

JOB DESCRIPTION

POSITION:	**Finance Controller**
DIVISION:	**Finance Team**
REPORTS TO:	**Director of Finance**
GRADE/PAY:	**Cognus Band 4, £51,542 - £55,387 per annum (dependent on experience and qualifications)**
LOCATION:	**Cognus Office, First Floor, Cantium House, Wallington, SM6 0DZ**

JOB SUMMARY

The Finance Controller is the senior technical finance specialist responsible for the day-to-day delivery, accuracy, compliance and continuous improvement of Cognus and Sutton Music Trust's financial operations.

The postholder will lead the operation and maintenance of the financial control framework under delegated authority from the Director of Finance, ensuring transactions meet agreed quality standards, reconciliations are completed and processes operate reliably and efficiently. Ultimate accountability for financial governance, statutory and management reporting, the external audit and the effectiveness of the control environment remain with the Director of Finance.

The role has no formal line-management responsibility. It provides technical leadership and day-to-day professional guidance to the Finance Officers, including coordinating finance-process activities where delegated, reviewing outputs, coaching colleagues, and monitoring adherence to agreed procedures.

The postholder will combine hands-on technical delivery with quality assurance across management accounts, balance-sheet control, payroll reconciliation, grant and donation tracking for SMT, VAT, group reporting, audit support and process improvement. Approval and sign-off responsibilities may only be exercised within the approved Finance Delegation of Authority Matrix.

The postholder is expected to exercise professional judgement within approved delegated authorities and to escalate significant issues, risks, control failures or accounting matters requiring management intervention to the Director of Finance in a timely manner.

PRINCIPLE ACCOUNTABILITIES:

Financial Controls & Quality Assurance

- Act as the senior technical lead for financial operations, ensuring financial data meets Cognus and Sutton Music Trust's agreed control standards and compliance requirements under the direction of the Director of Finance.
- Review the daily transactional work of the 2 Finance Officers (invoicing, bank reconciliations, payments, accruals) for accuracy, completeness, and compliance with Cognus and SMT procedures and best practice.
- Identify errors, discrepancies, control weaknesses, and compliance gaps in the Finance Officers' work. Provide clear feedback, coach them on corrections and root cause prevention, and ensure they understand the control principle behind each procedure.

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- Review and sign off financial transactions, journals, reconciliations and month-end outputs in accordance with the approved Finance Delegation of Authority Matrix. Escalate material, unusual, high-risk or out-of-scope items to the Director of Finance for approval.
- Maintain detailed audit trails and evidence of your quality review and approval process for external auditors.
- Develop and maintain financial control standards, policies and procedures for approval by the Director of Finance, updating them to reflect changes in systems, regulations and organisational needs.
- Periodically assess and document the design and operating effectiveness of key financial controls, reporting weaknesses, control failures, and recommended corrective actions to the Director of Finance.
- Maintain a financial-controls improvement log, monitor agreed corrective actions and escalate overdue or unresolved matters.
- Provide periodic assurance on the effectiveness of financial controls, highlighting key risks, control weaknesses and progress against agreed corrective actions to the Director of Finance.
- Support the prevention and detection of fraud by monitoring key controls, reviewing unusual or potentially irregular transactions, and escalating concerns in accordance with organisational procedures.
- Identify and escalate significant financial, control and operational risks, and contribute evidence and updates to relevant finance risk-register actions.
- Maintain appropriate segregation of duties. The postholder must not both prepare and finally approve the same material transaction, reconciliation, payment, journal or return unless an approved compensating review is completed by the Director of Finance or another authorised officer.
- Attend leadership, Board, trustee, audit and stakeholder meetings with the Director of Finance, or as a technical representative where specifically delegated.

Management Accounts & Financial Reporting

- Prepare draft monthly management accounts for Cognus and Sutton Music Trust, investigate and explain variances and trends, and submit the accounts to the Director of Finance for review and approval.
- Lead and coordinate the month-end close process for both entities, including Finance Officer inputs, consolidation, adjustments and quality assurance, subject to final review and approval by the Director of Finance.
- Prepare timely, accurate financial reports and supporting schedules for review by the Director of Finance and presentation by, or with the approval of, the Director to the Executive Team, Cognus Board and SMT Trustees.
- Produce management reports highlighting significant variances, trends, and emerging financial issues with recommendations for action.
- Support the Director with complex financial analysis and ad hoc reporting requests for both Cognus and SMT.

Complex Reconciliation & Payroll Control

- Lead the completion and review of complex reconciliations and balance-sheet analysis across Cognus and SMT, including payroll-to-GL, intercompany transactions, clearing accounts, pension liabilities, bank accounts and other balance-sheet reconciliations.
- Investigate and resolve payroll variances, PAYE/NIC mismatches, pensions discrepancies, and other control exceptions with rigour and accuracy.
- Perform line-by-line analysis of gross-to-net payroll reports, pension deductions, statutory payments, and other complex financial data to ensure accuracy and identify anomalies.

- Support the Director with complex employee-related financial calculations and payroll matters, including backdated pay adjustments, TUPE transfers, statutory payments and other specialist payroll-related queries.
- Maintain a monthly reconciliation schedule ensuring all key accounts reconcile to Xero accounting system and all discrepancies are investigated and resolved.
- Lead resolution of complex year-end adjustments and support audit preparation with fully documented, audit-ready evidence and explanations for all balance sheet items.

System Optimisation, Process Improvement & Automation

- Drive continuous improvement in Xero and the finance team's processes. Identify manual, error-prone, or inefficient tasks and implement process improvements and automation solutions.
- Explore how automation and emerging technologies can enhance financial processes. Examples include: using tools to flag unusual transactions in reconciliations; automating routine journal creation; implementing process improvements that reduce manual data entry; using available systems functionality to improve efficiency; and developing automated reporting solutions.
- Design and implement improvements that reduce data entry error, improve the speed and accuracy of financial close processes, and create better audit trails.
- Develop, maintain, and update Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) for all finance processes. Ensure the team follows them consistently and update SOPs as systems or requirements change.
- Maintain the integrity and structure of Cognus and SMT's chart of accounts, GL codes, and cost centres. Reconcile and clear suspense and clearing accounts to zero monthly.
- Coordinate the operational delivery of external audit schedules, working papers, evidence requests and responses to routine auditor queries under the direction of the Director of Finance. Overall accountability for the external audit, formal management representations and responses remains with the Director of Finance.
- Prepare or review VAT returns and supporting reconciliations, resolve routine VAT queries and submit returns to the Director of Finance for final approval in accordance with the Finance Delegation of Authority Matrix.
- Support the Director of Finance in maintaining balance-sheet integrity across the group by ensuring every material account is reconciled monthly, intercompany transactions are cleared correctly and control-account balances are fully explained.

Grant Management & Charitable Reporting

- Maintain comprehensive records of all grants, donations, and restricted income received by Sutton Music Trust, including conditions, reporting requirements, and spending restrictions.
- Track grant expenditure against approved budgets and conditions. Reconcile grant income to spending to ensure accurate reporting to funders and compliance with grant requirements.
- Prepare grant utilisation reports for SMT Trustees, demonstrating that restricted funds have been applied in accordance with approved purposes, funding conditions and agreed budgets.
- Support funder reporting requirements and maintain audit-ready evidence of grant compliance and expenditure.
- Maintain proper fund coding in Xero to enable accurate tracking and reporting of restricted versus unrestricted income and expenditure.
- Where needed, manage intercompany transactions between Cognus and SMT, ensuring accurate recording and clear documentation.

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- Support the preparation of SMT's statutory financial statements and charity-accounting disclosures, including appropriate fund accounting and Charity Commission reporting requirements. Approval of accounting judgements, statutory financial statements and formal regulatory submissions remains with the Director of Finance and the relevant governing body.

Operational Resilience & Support

- Maintain sufficient knowledge and capability across all finance processes to ensure business continuity during periods of absence, peak workload or operational disruption, including purchase orders and invoices, accounts payable and receivable, banking, payment runs, month-end accruals and close support.
- Support the Director of Finance operationally and strategically, including ad hoc financial analysis, complex queries, troubleshooting, and project work.
- Provide technical coaching and professional support to the Finance Officers on accounting principles, Xero functionality, process best practice, control standards and technical skills. Formal responsibility for development and performance remains with the Director of Finance.
- Act as the escalation point for complex financial or procedural questions from internal stakeholders.

Other Responsibilities

- Undertake specific complex project work as requested by the Director (options appraisals, financial modelling, feasibility analysis, system reviews).
- Contribute to finance function transformation and continuous improvement initiatives.
- Participate in training and professional development to maintain expertise in accounting standards, systems, processes, and controls.
- Contribute to Cognus Limited and Sutton Music Trust's business objectives, including safeguarding, health & safety, equal opportunities, data protection, and outstanding customer care.

GENERIC OBJECTIVES:

Contribute to Cognus Limited’s business objectives at the appropriate level by ensuring every child matters and has access to education and learning opportunities, including:

a) Health and safety
b) Safeguarding and protection of children
c) Equal opportunities and management of diversity
d) Data protection
e) Outstanding Customer care

GENERAL:

SAFER RECRUITMENT:

Cognus is committed to safeguarding and protecting the children and young people that it works with. An offer of employment is subject to safer recruitment practices which include an enhanced DBS check, two professional references acceptable to Cognus Limited, proof of qualifications, proof of right to work in the UK, proof of personal address and employment history covering 5 years and, fitness to work with children (occupational health assessment). These checks must have been completed prior to commencement of employment. We have a range of policies and procedures in place which promote safeguarding and safer working practices across the organisation.

PROCESSING OF DATA:

a) You ("the employee") consent to the holding and processing of personal data provided by you to the Company ("the Company") for all purposes relating to your employment, but not limited to administering and maintaining personnel records, paying and reviewing salary and other remuneration and benefits, undertaking performance appraisals and reviews, the compulsory Disclosure and Baring Services check (DBS) details in line with its statutory responsibility to safeguard and protect children and vulnerable service users; maintaining sickness and other absence records and taking decisions as to your fitness for work.

b) You hereby acknowledge and agree that the Company may, in the course of its general and statutory duties as an employer be required to disclose personal data relating to you for legislative purposes during or after the end of your employment. This does not affect your statutory rights under the General Data Protection Regulation 2018.

CONFIDENTIALITY AGREEMENT:

a) During the course of your employment, you will have access to and knowledge of Company confidential information and trade secrets.

b) Disclosure of any of this confidential information and/or trade secrets could have serious financial consequences and/or create serious competitive disadvantages for the Company. There may be material damage, financial or otherwise, deliberate or otherwise, to the Company's legitimate business interest.

c) Under the terms of this confidentiality agreement, you agree to keep secret and shall not at any time, either during employment or post-employment, use, communicate or reveal to any person any trade secret or confidential information relating to the Company or any Associated Company.

d) You are aware of the Company's policies in relation to compliance with the General Data Protection Regulation and undertake to act in accordance with these at all times. Any breach of these policies will be dealt with under the Company's disciplinary procedure and action taken can include dismissal without notice.

This job description and person specification outlines the summary of key accountabilities and is not an exhaustive list of duties and, is subject to periodical review and changes in line with the business needs.

PERSON SPECIFICATION

The main duties and responsibilities of the post holder are indicated below although other duties of an appropriate level and nature will also be required as necessary.

Description
ESSENTIAL
Qualifications & Technical Knowledge
• Fully qualified professional (ACCA, CIMA, CIPFA) or AAT Level 4 with substantial senior-level finance experience (7+ years). Equivalent professional experience will be considered. • Strong knowledge of UK accounting standards (FRS 102 preferred for public sector/charity context), VAT compliance, payroll processing, and financial controls. • Advanced proficiency in Xero or similar cloud-based accounting systems. • Advanced Excel skills, including pivot tables, lookup functions, data validation, reconciliation techniques, formulas and analysis of large datasets. • Willingness to learn emerging technologies and process automation tools relevant to finance operations.
Experience
• Substantial relevant experience, normally gained through at least 7 years working across transactional finance, management accounts, financial controls and month-end reporting, including experience operating at senior accountant, finance manager or controller level. • Proven experience building month-end management accounts from scratch: taking a trial balance through to final P&L and Balance Sheet. • Demonstrable experience taking operational responsibility for a month-end close, balance-sheet-control framework and audit-ready reporting across multiple entities or business areas. • Deep, hands-on experience with complex payroll reconciliations: unpicking variances across gross-to-net reports, pensions, HMRC liabilities, GL postings, and statutory deadlines. • Demonstrated experience reviewing, quality-checking, and providing feedback on the transactional work of junior finance team members. Evidence of improving accuracy and standards. • Experience in process improvement, system maintenance, controls design, documentation, and working within Xero or similar accounting systems. • Knowledge of bank account reconciliation processes and cash management principles. • Evidence of successfully implementing process improvements or system enhancements that have reduced manual effort or improved accuracy.
Skills & Behaviours
• Exceptional attention to detail and a strong commitment to financial accuracy, timely resolution of errors, and continuous improvement. • Strong analytical and problem-solving skills. You are comfortable investigating complex discrepancies and working methodically through ambiguity to resolution.

- Excellent communication: you can explain technical accounting concepts to non-finance colleagues and coach junior staff on the "why" and "how" behind procedures.
- Self-motivated and proactive, with the ability to identify inefficiencies, control gaps and improvement opportunities and progress solutions within agreed authority.
- Collaborative and solution-focused, able to work well with colleagues at all levels and provide constructive feedback without creating defensiveness.
- Comfortable working across detailed technical delivery and wider operational improvement, including hands-on spreadsheet work and transactional cover when required.
- Passion for financial controls and process excellence. You care about "why" controls exist and take pride in implementing them reliably.
- Willingness to learn: you embrace new tools and approaches, eager to experiment with automation solutions to improve efficiency and accuracy.
- Ability to work under pressure and meet tight deadlines, particularly during month-end and year-end close periods.
- Strong written communication skills: comfortable producing clear, accurate reports and supporting audit documentation.

DESIRABLE

- Experience in local government, public sector, LATC, or charity finance.
- Knowledge of FRS 102 (charity accounting) and grant tracking/fund accounting.
- Experience with grant management, restricted fund accounting, or funder compliance reporting.
- Familiarity with Public Sector Internal Audit Standards (PSIAS) or similar audit frameworks.
- Experience with PAYE Settlement Agreements, complex backdated payroll processing, or settlement calculations.
- Experience working in a small, hands-on finance team where all team members "muck in" and support each other.
- Experience or interest in automation tools, process improvement platforms, or emerging finance technologies.
- Experience with consolidation of multi-entity accounts or intercompany eliminations.