
Southern Internal Audit Partnership

Assurance through excellence
and innovation

NEW FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL

Internal Audit Report & Opinion 2023-24

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May 2024

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1. Role of Internal Audit

The Council is required by the Accounts and Audit (England) Regulations 2015, to

‘undertake an effective internal audit to evaluate the effectiveness of their risk management, control and governance processes, taking into account public sector internal auditing standards or guidance.’

In fulfilling this requirement, the Council should have regard to the Public Sector Internal Audit Standards (PSIAS), as the internal audit standards set for local government. In addition, the Statement on the Role of the Head of Internal Audit in Public Service Organisations issued by CIPFA sets out best practice and should be used to assess arrangements to drive up audit quality and governance arrangements.

The role of internal audit is best summarised through its definition within the Standards, as an:

‘Independent, objective assurance and consulting activity designed to add value and improve an organisation’s operations. It helps an organisation accomplish its objectives by bringing a systematic, disciplined approach to evaluate and improve the effectiveness of risk management, control and governance processes’.

The Council is responsible for establishing and maintaining appropriate risk management processes, control systems, accounting records and governance arrangements. Internal audit plays a vital role in advising the Council that these arrangements are in place and operating effectively.

The Council’s response to internal audit activity should lead to the strengthening of the control environment and, therefore, contribute to the achievement of the organisation’s objectives.



2. Internal Audit Approach

To enable effective outcomes, internal audit provides a combination of assurance and consulting activities. Assurance work involves assessing how well the systems and processes are designed and working, with consulting activities available to help to improve those systems and processes where necessary. A full range of internal audit services is provided in forming the annual opinion.

As the Chief Internal Auditor, I review the approach to each audit, considering the following key points:

- Level of assurance required.
- Significance of the objectives under review to the organisation's success.
- Risks inherent in the achievement of objectives.
- Level of confidence required that controls are well designed and operating as intended.

All formal internal audit assignments will result in a published report. The primary purpose of the audit report is to provide an independent and objective opinion to the Council on the framework of internal control, risk management and governance in operation and to stimulate improvement.



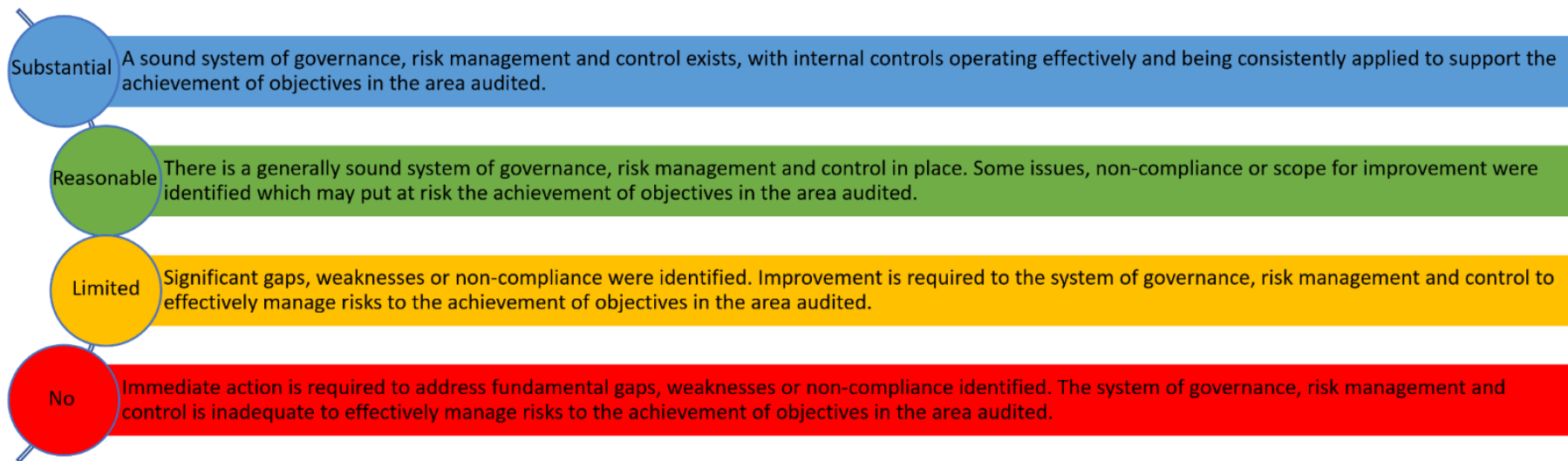
The Southern Internal Audit Partnership (SIAP) maintain an agile approach to audit, seeking to maximise efficiencies and effectiveness in balancing the time and resource commitments of our clients, with the necessity to provide comprehensive, compliant and value adding assurance.

Working practices have been reviewed, modified and agreed with all partners seeking to optimise the use of virtual technologies to communicate with key contacts and in completion of our fieldwork. However, the need for site visits to complete elements of testing continues to be assessed and agreed on a case-by-case basis.

3. Internal Audit Coverage

The annual internal audit plan was prepared to take account of the characteristics and relative risks of the Council activities and to support the preparation of the Annual Governance Statement. Work has been planned and performed to obtain sufficient evidence to provide reasonable assurance that the internal control system is operating effectively.

Internal audit reviews culminate in an opinion on the assurance that can be placed on the effectiveness of the framework of risk management, control and governance designed to support the achievement of management objectives of the service area under review. The assurance opinions are categorised as follows:



The 2023-24 internal audit plan was considered by the Audit Committee in March 2023. It was informed by internal audit's own assessment of risk and materiality in addition to consultation with management to ensure it aligned to key risks facing the organisation. When presenting the audit plan to the Audit Committee, it was acknowledged that *'the audit plan amounted to in excess of 500 days of work per annum, against an annual provisional allocation of 400 days. This would be accommodated through a number of means, including combining reviews wherever possible'*.

The initial schedule of audit reviews was weighted towards the second half of 2023-24. During the year, engagement to scope and commence audits when our resources were available proved to be a challenge in some areas, resulting in multiple requests to defer the timing of audits. This placed increasing pressure on delivery during the second half of the year, which coincided with SIAP experiencing pressure on our existing capacity. Unfortunately, this has prevented us from delivering all audit reviews through to at least 'draft report' stage at the time of writing this report.

Despite a number of reviews remaining in progress, I am satisfied that sufficient assurance work has been carried out to allow me to form a reasonable conclusion on the adequacy and effectiveness of the internal control environment.

We will continue to progress the audits that have yet to reach report stage which will contribute towards the 2024/25 annual audit report and opinion. As a result, some reprioritisation of the 2024/25 audit plan may be required.

4. Internal Audit Opinion

As Chief Internal Auditor, I am responsible for the delivery of an annual audit opinion and report that can be used by the Council to inform their annual governance statement. The annual opinion concludes on the overall adequacy and effectiveness of the organisation's framework of governance, risk management and control.

In giving this opinion, assurance can never be absolute and therefore, only reasonable assurance can be provided that there are no major weaknesses in the processes reviewed. In assessing the level of assurance to be given, I have based my opinion on:

- written reports on all internal audit work completed during the course of the year (assurance & consultancy);
- results of any follow up exercises undertaken in respect of previous years' internal audit work;
- the results of work of other review bodies where appropriate;
- the extent of resources available to deliver the internal audit work;
- the quality and performance of the internal audit service and the extent of compliance with the Standards; and
- the proportion of the Council's audit need that has been covered within the period.

We enjoy an open, honest and mature working relationship with the Council which promotes the effective use of internal audit. Our planning discussions and risk-based approach to internal audit ensure that the internal audit plan includes areas of significance raised by management to ensure that ongoing organisational improvements can be achieved.

Annual Internal Audit Opinion 2023-24

I am satisfied that sufficient assurance work has been carried out to allow me to form a reasonable conclusion on the adequacy and effectiveness of the internal control environment.

In my opinion frameworks of governance, risk management and management control are **reasonable** and audit testing has demonstrated controls to be working in practice.

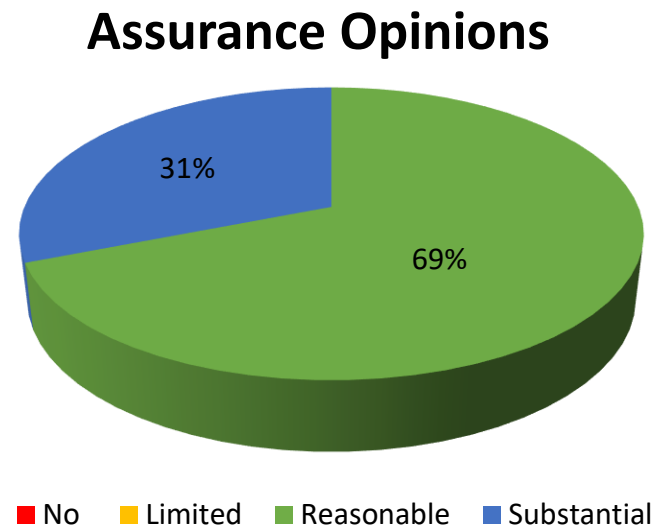
Where weaknesses have been identified through internal audit review, we have worked with management to agree appropriate corrective actions and a timescale for improvement.

5. Governance, Risk Management & Control – Overview & Key Observations

Assurance opinions for 2023-24 reviews

The findings from our reviews have been reported to the Audit Committee throughout the year and a summary of the assurance opinions is outlined below, with further information provided in Annex 1. Whilst not resulting in an assurance opinion, the outcomes of other audit activity is considered when forming my overall assessment of the Council’s frameworks of Governance, Risk Management and Control, such as follow-up audits, mandatory grant certifications and those areas where outcomes culminated in a Position Statement, which are also listed in Annex 1.

We are pleased to report that no audits concluded with a ‘Limited’ or ‘No’ assurance opinion and there are no significant issues to report, following our assessments.



Governance

Governance arrangements are considered during the planning and scoping of each review and in most cases, the scope of our work includes an overview of:

- the governance structure in place, including respective roles, responsibilities and reporting arrangements
- relevant policies and procedures to ensure that they are in line with requirements, regularly reviewed, approved and appropriately publicised and accessible to officers and staff.

Based on the work completed during the year, in our opinion the governance frameworks in place across the Council are generally robust and fit for purpose although common opportunities for improvement include documenting or updating policies and procedures to increase resilience and help ensure consistent practice and developing or enhancing performance measures and associated reporting arrangements.

Risk management

We reviewed risk management arrangements in the Council during 2021-22 which resulted in a limited assurance opinion. Following this review, a new risk management policy was approved by Full Council in October 2022. There has been regular reporting of the strategic risk register to EMT the Audit Committee during 2023-24. The current audit of risk management remains in progress and will be reported to the Audit Committee once concluded.

Control

In general, internal audit work found there to be a sound control environment in place across the majority of review areas concluded from the 2023-24 audit plan that were working effectively to support the delivery of corporate objectives.

We generally found officers and staff to be well aware of the importance of effective control frameworks and compliance, and also open to our suggestion for improvements or enhancements where needed. Where our work identified risks that we considered fell outside the parameters acceptable to the Council, we agreed appropriate corrective actions and a timescale for improvement with the responsible officers. Progress with implementing agreed actions is reported to the Audit Committee throughout the year through the regular internal audit progress reports.

6. Quality Assurance and Improvement

The Standards require the Head of the Southern Internal Audit Partnership to develop and maintain a Quality Assurance and Improvement Programme (QAIP) to enable the internal audit service to be assessed against the Standards and the Local Government Application Note (LGAN) for conformance.

The QAIP must include provision for both internal and external assessments: internal assessments are both on-going and periodical and external assessment must be undertaken at least once every five years. In addition to evaluating compliance with the Standards, the QAIP also assesses the efficiency and effectiveness of the internal audit activity, identifying areas for improvement.

An 'External Quality Assessment' of the Southern Internal Audit Partnership was undertaken by the Institute of Internal Auditors (IIA) in September 2020.

In considering all sources of evidence the external assessment team concluded:

'The mandatory elements of the IPPF include the Definition of Internal Auditing, Code of Ethics, Core Principles and International Standards. There are 64 fundamental principles to achieve with 118 points of recommended practice. We assess against the principles. It is our view that the Southern Internal Audit Partnership conforms to all 64 of these principles. We have also reviewed SIAP conformance with the Public Sector Internal Audit Standards (PSIAS) and Local Government Application Note (LGAN). We are pleased to report that SIAP conform with all relevant, associated elements.'

7. Disclosure of Non-Conformance

In accordance with Public Sector Internal Audit Standard 1312 [External Assessments], I can confirm through endorsement from the Institute of Internal Auditors that:

'the Southern Internal Audit Partnership conforms to the Definition of Internal Auditing; the Code of Ethics; and the Standards'.

There are no disclosures of Non-Conformance to report.

8. Quality Control

Our aim is to provide a service that remains responsive to the needs of the Council and maintains consistently high standards. Complementing the QAIP this was achieved in 2023-24 through the following internal processes:

- On-going liaison with management to ascertain the risk management, control and governance arrangements, key to corporate success.
- A tailored audit approach using a defined methodology and assignment control documentation.
- Review and quality control of all internal audit work by professional qualified senior staff members.
- An internal quality assessment against the IPPF, PSIAS & LGAN.

9. Internal Audit Performance

The following performance indicators are maintained to monitor effective service delivery:

Performance Indicator	Target	Actual
Percentage of internal audit plan delivered (to draft report)	95%	65%
Positive customer survey response - SIAP – all Partners*	90%	98%
Public Sector Internal Audit Standards	Compliant	Compliant

**Customer satisfaction is an assessment of responses to questionnaires issued to a wide range of stakeholders including members, senior officers and key contacts involved in the audit process (survey 2024).*

10. Acknowledgement

I would like to take this opportunity to thank all those staff throughout the Council with whom we have made contact in the year. Our relationship has been positive, and management were responsive to the comments we made both informally and through our formal reporting.

Antony Harvey
Deputy Head of Southern Internal Audit Partnership

May 2024

Annex 1 - Summary of Audit Assurance Reviews Completed 2023-24

Substantial

A sound system of governance, risk management and control exists, with internal controls operating effectively and being consistently applied to support the achievement of objectives in the area audited.

Commercial Activities – Appletree Holdings

Council Tax- Debt Management and Resident Support

Income Collection and Banking

Disabled Facilities Grants

Reasonable

There is a generally sound system of governance, risk management and control in place. Some issues, non-compliance or scope for improvement were identified which may put at risk the achievement of objectives in the area audited.

Transformation Programme – Governance Arrangements

Business Continuity

Procurement (Draft)

Employee Benefits/Salary Sacrifice Scheme

National Non-Domestic Rates (NNDR)

Accounts Payable (Draft)

Homelessness – Prevention and Relief (Draft Final)

Housing Asset Management – Electrical Safety Checks

Animal Welfare Licencing (Draft)

Whilst not resulting in an assurance opinion, other planned internal audit activity for the year included:-

Emergency Planning – Position Statement.

Keyhaven – Inspection and Enforcement – Position Statement.

Changing Places Grant – Grant certified.

Telecare – External assurance mapping.

IT Asset Management – Follow-up – all actions implemented.

Advisory/critical friend to two Service Areas.