



ANNUAL REPORT OF THE HEAD OF AUDIT RISK ASSURANCE 2023-24

JULY 2024

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1. Introduction

- 1.1 The Chartered Institute for Public Finance Accountants (CIPFA) and the Chartered Institute of Internal Auditors – UK and Ireland (CIIA) issued The Public Sector Internal Audit Standards (PSIAS).
- 1.2 The PSIAS define Internal Audit as “an independent, objective, assurance and consulting activity designed to add value and improve the Council’s operations. Internal Audit helps the Council to accomplish its objectives by bringing a systematic, disciplined approach to evaluate and improve the effectiveness of risk management, control and governance processes”.
- 1.3 Internal Audit is a statutory service required by section 5 of the Accounts and Audit Regulations 2015 (the Regulations). The Internal Audit service for Gloucestershire County Council (the Council) is provided by Audit Risk Assurance (ARA) and complies with the above definition.
- 1.4 Internal Audit helps the Council to manage its risks and achieve its objectives. This includes reviewing processes and governance arrangements involved in producing the Council’s Statutory Accounts and the Annual Governance Statement (AGS). We report on these to management and the Audit and Governance Committee (the Committee).
- 1.5 The PSIAS require the Head of ARA to report annually to those charged with governance, Internal Audit’s opinion on the Council’s overall internal control, governance and risk environment arrangements. The opinion is based on the work undertaken by Internal Audit.
- 1.6 This report’s contents are prescribed by the PSIAS which requires Internal Audit to:
 - i. Provide an opinion on the overall adequacy and effectiveness of the organisation’s internal control environment and disclose any qualifications to that opinion, together with the reasons for the qualification;
 - ii. Compare planned work to that delivered and present a summary of the audit activity from which the opinion was derived, drawing attention to any issues of particular relevance;
 - iii. Summarise the performance of the Internal Audit service against its performance measures and targets; and
 - iv. Comment on compliance with the PSIAS.
- 1.7 By accepting the Annual Report of the Head of ARA, the Committee contributes to the fulfilment of its corporate governance responsibilities through the following:
 - i. Recognition of the overall adequacy and effectiveness of the management arrangements which safeguard the Council from significant business risks;
 - ii. Providing a source of assurance for those charged with governance to produce a fair and representative AGS and the Statutory Accounts; and

iii. Ensuring Internal Audit assists the Council to maintain and develop its internal control and governance environment and improve the management of its risks.

1.8 Internal Audit in local government is required to operate in accordance with the PSIAS. In 2020 Internal Audit were externally assessed as being in “General Compliance” with the PSIAS. This is the highest level of compliance possible. We can confirm that Internal Audit has complied with the PSIAS during 2023-24.

1.9 This Annual Report is produced in accordance with, and conforms to, the core principles of the PSIAS.

2. Overall Opinion

2.1 My opinion is that overall, an Acceptable Level of assurance can be provided in connection with the Council’s internal control, governance and risk environment. The findings that have contributed to the level of assurance are those that have been reported to the Committee during 2023-24.

2.2 This opinion can be assessed using the following scale:

- i. “Substantial” assurance – all key controls are in place and working effectively with no exceptions or reservations. The Council has a low exposure to business risk;
- ii. “Acceptable” assurance – all key controls in place and working effectively. There are reservations in connection with the operational effectiveness of some key controls. The Council has a low to medium exposure to business risk;
- iii. “Limited” assurance – not all key controls are in place or are working effectively. The Council has a medium to high exposure to business risk; and
- iv. “No” assurance – key controls are either not in place or are not working effectively. The Council has a high exposure to business risk.

2.3 In providing this opinion it should be noted that assurance can never be absolute. We provide a reasonable level of assurance that there are no major weaknesses in risk management, control or governance arrangements. The matters raised in this report and our quarterly progress reports, are only those that were identified during our work. They are not necessarily a comprehensive statement of all the weaknesses that may exist or represent all the improvements required.

2.4 In arriving at this opinion, account has been taken of:

- i. The results of all Internal Audit work undertaken during 2023-24;
- ii. Matters arising from the quarterly Internal Audit Progress Reports or other assurance providers to the Audit and Governance Committee;
- iii. The effects of any material changes in the Council’s risk profile, objectives or activities;
- iv. Whether any limitations have been placed on the scope of our work; and

v. Whether there have been any resource constraints which may have impacted on our ability to meet the needs of the Council.

2.5 In all cases, Internal Audit and officers develop actions to improve the management of risk and internal control. The effective implementation of these actions will be assessed as part of our follow-up work in 2024-25 and reported to the Committee.

2.6 We can confirm that there has been no actual or potential impairment to our independence and objectivity during the year. Our independence is safeguarded by the Head of ARA having full and unfettered access to the Chief Executive and the Chair of the Committee.

2.7 Internal Audit has been free from interference in determining the scope of our work, performing it or communicating the results.

2.8 Internal Audit have had unfettered access to all of the Council's systems, operations, records and officers.

2.9 Internal Audit officers do not have any other roles in the Council.

2.10 The overall opinion on the internal control, governance and risk environment is based on our assessment of the key management arrangements and internal controls. This is the framework of internal controls required to provide management with confidence that the processes to achieve business objectives are:

i. Adequate and effective for their purpose; and

ii. Minimise material business risk, both financial and non-financial.

3. **Code of Ethics**

3.1 The PSIAS requires Internal Auditors in local government to conform to the CIIA's Code of Ethics as set out below. If individual Internal Auditors have membership of another professional body, then they must also comply with the relevant requirements of that organisation.

3.2 The purpose of the CIIA's Code of Ethics is to promote an ethical culture in the profession of Internal Auditing. This is necessary and appropriate for the profession of Internal Auditing, founded as it is, on the trust placed in its objective assurance about risk management, control and governance.

3.3 The CIIA's Code of Ethics includes two essential components:

i. Principles that are relevant to the profession and practice of Internal Auditing; and

ii. Rules of Conduct that describe behavioural standards expected of Internal Auditors. These rules are an aid to interpreting the principles into practical applications and are intended to guide the ethical conduct of Internal Auditors.

3.4 The components of the Code of Ethics are:

- i. Integrity – this establishes trust and thus provides the basis for reliance on the judgement of Internal Auditors;
- ii. Objectivity – Internal Auditors exhibit the highest level of professional objectivity in gathering, evaluating and communicating information about the activity or process being examined. Internal Auditors make a balanced assessment of all the relevant circumstances and are not unduly influenced by their own interests or by others in forming judgements;
- iii. Confidentiality – Internal Auditors respect the value and ownership of information they receive and do not disclose information without appropriate authority unless there is a legal or professional obligation to do so; and
- iv. Competency – Internal Auditors apply the knowledge, skills and experience needed in the performance of Internal Auditing services.

3.5 Internal Audit complied with the Code of Ethics and the Seven Principles of Public Life as defined by the Nolan Committee, at all times during 2023-24. The principles are:

- i. Selflessness – holders of public office should act solely in terms of the public interest;
- ii. Integrity – holders of public office must avoid placing themselves under any obligation to people or organisations that might try inappropriately to influence them in their work. They should not act or take decisions in order to gain financial or other material benefits for themselves, their family, or their friends. They must declare and resolve any interests and relationships;
- iii. Objectivity – holders of public office must act and take decisions impartially, fairly and on merit, using the best evidence and without discrimination or bias;
- iv. Accountability – holders of public office are accountable to the public for their decisions and actions and must submit themselves to the scrutiny necessary to ensure this;
- v. Openness – holders of public office should act and take decisions in an open and transparent manner. Information should not be withheld from the public unless there are clear and lawful reasons for so doing;
- vi. Honesty – holders of public office should be truthful; and
- vii. Leadership – holders of public office should exhibit these principles in their own behaviour. They should actively promote and robustly support the principles and be willing to challenge poor behaviour wherever it occurs.

4. **2023-24**

- 4.1 Our work during 2023-24 identified areas which the Council should be aware of. These are explored in the paragraphs below.
- 4.2 The Council should ensure that its procedures for managing contracts are effective and enable value for money to be obtained.
- 4.3 Cyber security risks are ever prevalent. The Council is making a significant investment in updating its ICT infrastructure. Once fully implemented this will enhance the Council's ICT capabilities. ICT is an area that is audited on a regular basis throughout the year by ARA.
- 4.4 ARA issued a "No Assurance" report in 2022-23. This was highlighted by the External Auditor in their 2022-23 Annual Auditor's Report presented to the Committee in March 2024
- 4.5 Recruitment and retention is still an important issue for all councils including GCC. This results in an additional workload on remaining officers and an increased reliance on temporary staff.
- 4.6 This can manifest itself in an increase in sickness absence related to stress. Management should ensure that internal controls are maintained when there are staff changes, for example sickness, annual leave or when staff depart.
- 4.7 Management should regularly review and update their succession plans in case an officer with knowledge of business-critical processes or systems suddenly became unavailable or left their post. This would help to minimise the risks to the delivery of the Council's services, by ensuring there is a competent replacement.
- 4.8 Our schools' audits found that, generally, their processes were sound.
- 4.9 Adult Services continues to face increasing demands for its services allied with more pressure from providers who are facing increased costs. Adult Services will also be subject to CQC review
- 4.10 Whilst interest rates and inflation have or are expected to decrease, it will influence the cost borrowing and planned expenditure, for example, on key projects. The Council will need to ensure that financial and governance controls over expenditure are maintained to ensure that key outcomes are successfully delivered.
- 4.11 We undertook a great deal of work in the area of grants during 2023-24. No major control issues with any grants were identified by ARA.
- 4.12 The risk of fraud is ever prevalent and nationally councils remain a target. Management should ensure that risk registers continue to address this risk for their departments and services. To this end, Internal Audit regularly refresh counter fraud policies and maintain a web page to provide advice and assistance to anyone who wishes to report suspected fraud.

- 4.13 Internal Audit has a dedicated Counter Fraud Team (CFT) that enhances the Council's resilience against fraud. The CFT Annual Report is included elsewhere in the agenda.
- 4.14 Risk registers should be updated with risks as they are identified, and internal controls should be developed to minimise these. Risk registers should be reviewed following the issue of an Internal Audit report. This is to ensure that any pertinent risks identified in the report are reflected in the risk register.
- 4.15 It should be noted that for all of the issues reported to the Committee in Internal Audit Reports, management agreed actions to address concerns raised.
- 4.16 The Corporate Leadership Team (CLT) is proactive in monitoring the Council's risks on a regular basis. Risk management and health and safety are standing items on (CLT) agenda. Any emerging risks and health and safety issues can be raised here enabling management to formulate appropriate and timely actions to manage these.

5. Conclusion

- 5.1 This report provides an independent opinion on the adequacy and effectiveness of the internal control, governance and risk management processes.
- 5.2 Management are responsible for establishing, maintaining and owning appropriate risk management, internal control and governance arrangements.
- 5.3 Internal Audit plays a key role in providing independent assurance and challenge, advising the Council whether satisfactory arrangements are operating effectively.
- 5.4 Internal Audit is not the only source of assurance for the Council. There are a range of external audit, inspection agencies and management processes which also provide assurance. These are set out in the Council's Local Code of Corporate Governance and its AGS.
- 5.5 ARA are delighted to report that 85% of the Internal Audit Plan for 2023-24 was delivered, which meets our target of 85%.
- 5.6 Following each Internal Audit, a customer satisfaction questionnaire is sent to the Corporate Director, Head of Service or nominated officer. This is to gauge satisfaction of the service provided such as timeliness, quality and professionalism. Officers are asked to rate the service between Excellent, Good, Fair and Poor.
- 5.7 Internal Audit have a target that 80% of questionnaire responses returned should be assessed as "Good" or better. In 2023-24, 84 questionnaires were returned of which 82 – equivalent to 98% – were "Good" or better.

