

Annual Internal Audit Report & Opinion
2020-21
New Forest National Park Authority

**Southern Internal
Audit Partnership**



Assurance through excellence
and innovation

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1. Role of Internal Audit

The requirement for an internal audit function in local government is detailed within the Accounts and Audit (England) Regulations 2015, which states that a relevant body must:

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

The standards for ‘proper practices’ are laid down in the Public Sector Internal Audit Standards [the Standards – updated 2017].



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 Authority 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 Authority that these arrangements are in place and operating effectively.

The Authority’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.

The approach to each review is determined by the Deputy Head of the Southern Internal Audit Partnership and will depend on the:

- Level of assurance required;
- Significance of the objectives under review to the organisation's success;
- Risks inherent in the achievement of objectives; and
- 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 Authority on the framework of internal control, risk management and governance in operation and to stimulate improvement.

The impact of COVID-19 during the year has had a significant impact on the way we have worked and interacted. The enforced central government directive *'if you can work from home, you must do so'* has required the Southern Internal Audit Partnership to adopt a revised operating model and innovative approach to virtual auditing.

Work contributing to my 2020-21 annual opinion has all been undertaken virtually, optimising technology and virtual platforms to share, monitor and observe operations to substantiate our findings.

I am confident that the revised operating model has not compromised quality or SIAPs ability to complete assurance work throughout the year or the conclusion drawn. I would wish to extend my appreciation to the Authority's officers with whom we have worked during the year for their support, cooperation, and seamless transition to the virtual audit approach without which the delivery of an annual opinion would not have been possible.



3. Internal Audit Opinion

The Deputy Head of the Southern Internal Audit Partnership is responsible for the delivery of an annual audit opinion and report that can be used by the Authority to inform its 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 Authority's audit need that has been covered within the period.

Annual Internal Audit Opinion 2020-21

"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 New Forest National Park Authority's internal control environment.

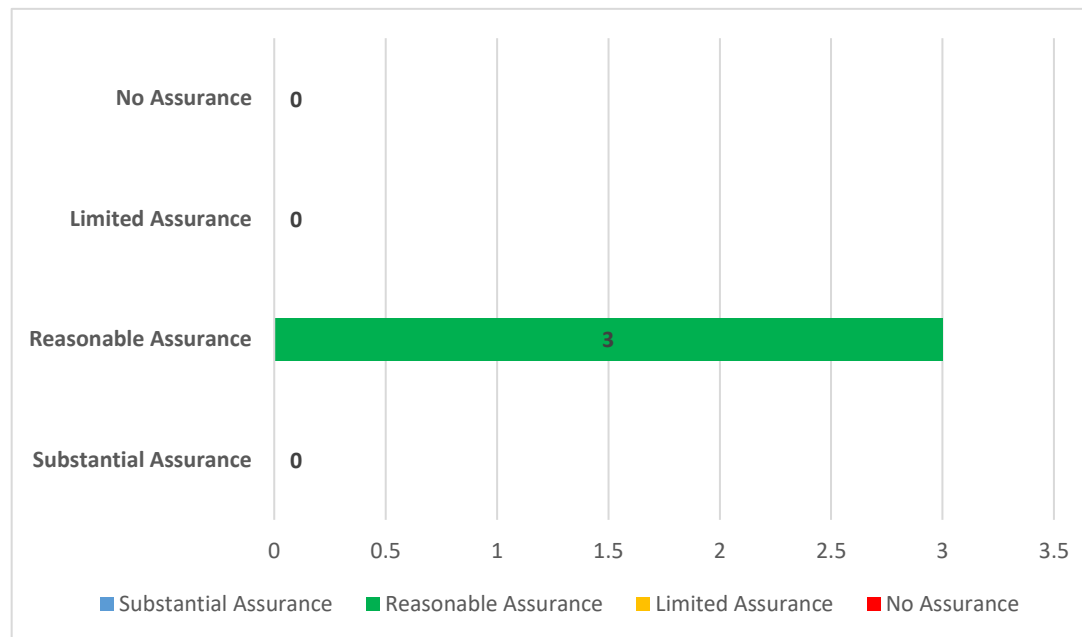
In my opinion, the New Forest National Park Authority's framework of governance, risk management and control is 'Reasonable' and audit testing has demonstrated controls to be working in practice.

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

4. Internal Audit coverage, output and key observations

The 2020-21 Internal audit plan, approved by the Resources, Audit and Performance Committee in March 2020, was informed by internal audits own assessment of risk and materiality in addition to consultation with management to ensure it aligned to key risks facing the organisation. The annual internal audit plan was prepared to take account of the characteristics and relative risks of the Authority’s activities and to support the preparation of the Annual Governance Statement.

Work has been planned and performed to obtain sufficient information and explanation considered necessary in order to provide evidence to give reasonable assurance that the internal control system is operating effectively. In delivering the internal audit opinion internal audit have undertaken 3 reviews relating to the year ending 31 March 2021, the results of which are summarised below:-



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.

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.

Limited - Significant gaps, weaknesses or non-compliance were identified. Improvement is required to the system of governance, risk management and control to effectively manage risks to the achievement of objectives in the area audited.

No - Immediate action is required to address fundamental gaps, weaknesses or non-compliance identified. The system of governance, risk management and control is inadequate to effectively manage risks to the achievement of objectives in the area audited.

Due to the timely delivery of the internal audit plan, we are pleased to report that despite the significant impact and subsequent challenges posed by the coronavirus pandemic both to the way we work and the delivery of services, this has not inhibited our ability to provide an opinion on the Authority's framework of risk, governance and control for 2020-21.

The Authority's main financial system (Business World) is provided by New Forest District Council. Business World was implemented in April 2020 as a replacement to the legacy Agresso system. To account for the change to Business World, all reviews were intentionally scheduled to be completed during quarter four of 2020-21. The scheduling provided the opportunity for the new systems and processes to become embedded and provide a more complete view of activity within the year after such a significant change.

Whilst the audit opinion for 2019-20 for the Authority was 'Substantial' this was based upon the mature financial systems that had been in place for a number of years. Despite the inevitable challenges and drain of Officers' time presented by the change in fundamental systems, together with reacting to COVID-19 and adopting to new ways of working, we are pleased to report that the Internal Audit work found there to be a generally sound control environment in place across all review areas during the year, which were found to be working effectively to support the delivery of corporate priorities.

Although some opportunity to improve controls or compliance were identified as a result of the system changes, and additional pressures faced during 2020-21, there were no significant issues identified arising from the work completed during 2020-21 and no reviews concluded with a 'No' or 'Limited' assurance opinion.

An initial review of the IT strategy was planned during 2021 which was intended to inform a more detailed review of ICT planned for 2021-22. Due to the impacts of the pandemic on the Authority's ICT team's workload, this work has not taken place and therefore this will be combined with the coverage in 2021-22.

The scale of COVID-19 coupled with the speed of its impact and the wide-ranging challenges presented has necessitated new and different ways of working across the Authority. Such challenges and subsequent resolutions bring with them new and emerging risks that management need to consider, manage, and mitigate. The 2021-22 plan will continue to be discussed and remain fluid throughout the year to maintain an effective focus and ensure new and emerging risks are considered.

5. Quality Assurance and Improvement

The Quality Assurance and Improvement Programme (QAIP) is a requirement within ‘the Standards’.

The Standards require the Head of the Southern Internal Audit Partnership to develop and maintain a 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 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.’

6. 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.

7. Quality control

Our aim is to provide a service that remains responsive to the needs of the Authority and maintains consistently high standards. In complementing the QAIP this was achieved in 2020-21 through the following internal processes:

- On-going liaison with management to ascertain the risk management, control and governance arrangements, key to corporate success;
- On-going development of a constructive working relationship with the External Auditors to maintain a cooperative assurance approach;
- 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; and
- An independent external quality assessment against the IPPF, PSIAS & LGAN.

8. Internal Audit Performance

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

Performance Indicators	Target	Actual
Percentage of the revised internal audit plan delivered (to draft report)	95%	100%
Positive customer survey response (NFNPA)	90%	100%
Positive customer survey response (all SIAP Partners)	90%	98%
Public Sector Internal Audit Standards	Compliant	Compliant

Customer satisfaction was collated for SIAPs EQA and 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 date May 2020).

9. Acknowledgement

I would like to take this opportunity to thank all those staff throughout the Authority 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 2021