

1. STRATEGIC VISION

1.1. The vision of this strategy is to guide MLC Internal Audit function in delivering a high-quality internal audit service to Midlothian Council (MLC) and Midlothian Health & Social Care Integration Joint Board (MIJB), which is capable of:

- providing the statutory annual assurance and audit opinion on the adequacy of each organisation's risk management, internal control and governance arrangements to the relevant organisation's senior management and board/audit committee;
- carrying out all other objectives contained in Internal Audit's Charter; and
- adding value to each organisation by influencing and offering ways to enhance the governance and internal control environment in alignment to their strategic priorities.

2. STRATEGY OBJECTIVES

2.1. The objectives of this strategy are to:

- Outline the assurance framework which comprises assurances from within the organisation and from external providers of assurance to improve the organisational understanding of the expectations of Internal Audit;
- State how the key themes which are integral to the assurance gathering process across the organisation's activities will be covered to inform the annual audit opinion statement;
- Describe the approach to the development of the risk based Internal Audit annual plan;
- Set out the relative allocation of Internal Audit resources;
- Outline how the Internal Audit programme of work will be delivered to add value and will be prioritised to ensure those areas of greatest risk are covered during the audit year; and
- Describe the monitoring and reporting of the Internal Audit findings from its work and progress with its plans to the relevant organisation's audit committee/board.

3. ASSURANCE FRAMEWORK

3.1. It is Management's responsibility to design and maintain proper risk management, governance and internal control processes and systems to ensure probity in systems and operations, and mitigation of risks, including the prevention, detection and resolution of fraud and irregularities. Management is also responsible for checking that the arrangements and controls are operating effectively and obtaining assurances from internal compliance, risk, inspection, quality, and control functions. These are known as the first and second lines of assurance. Internal Audit, as the third line of assurance, is the review function which will provide independent assurance on the effectiveness of the first and second lines of assurance, challenge current practices, recommend best practice and improvements to lead to a strengthening of the control environment and management of risks, thus assisting the organisation in achieving its objectives.

3.2. The organisation's assurance framework is the means by which the relevant organisation's Senior Management and Audit Committee/Board ensures that they are properly informed on the risks of not meeting objectives or delivering appropriate outcomes and that it has adequate assurances on the design and operation of systems in place to mitigate those risks.

3.3. The assurance framework comprises assurances from within the organisation (from Management and compliance functions, and independent and objective assurance from Internal Audit) and from external providers of assurance. Examples of the latter include the Accounts Commission, External Audit (Audit Scotland for MLC and MIJB), Education Scotland, Care Inspectorate, Scottish Housing Regulator, and other regulators.

3.4. The assurances are considered during the annual review of the effectiveness of each organisation's overall governance framework carried out by officers of each organisation and supported by Internal Audit. The output is the Annual Governance Statement which is included within the relevant organisation's Annual Report and Accounts.

3.5. Where audit assurance is required on services that are delivered jointly by public sector joint working arrangements which include the organisation as a partner, these assurances will be sought as appropriate from partners' Internal Audit service providers and Management.

4. KEY THEMES INTEGRAL TO INTERNAL AUDIT ASSURANCE

4.1. Each organisation is responsible for ensuring that its business is conducted in accordance with the law and proper standards, and that public money is safeguarded and properly accounted for, and used economically, efficiently and effectively. Fundamentally corporate governance is about the systems and processes, and cultures and values that are used by the organisation to discharge those responsibilities in a timely, inclusive, open, honest and accountable manner. This includes: setting the strategic direction, vision, culture and values of the organisation; effective operation of corporate systems; processes and internal controls; engaging with and, where appropriate, lead communities; monitoring whether strategic objectives have been achieved and services delivered cost effectively; and ensuring that appropriate arrangements are in place for the managing risks.

4.2. The organisation's statutory financial officer, Section 95 Officer or equivalent, i.e. Chief Financial Officer (MLC) and Chief Finance Officer (MIJB), is responsible for the proper administration of the organisation's financial affairs. Under their direction, the organisation's system of internal financial control is based on a framework of Financial Regulations (rules and regulations for financial management or administration arrangements linked to other key financial documents that set out the policy framework, associated strategy, and the more detailed procedures and guidelines), regular Management Information, administrative procedures (including segregation of duties), Management Supervision, and a system of Delegation and Accountability.

4.3. The continued use of and investment in technology to support service delivery, and digital change and transformation to improve operations is a key part of the vision for each organisation. Arrangements in place are underpinned by the overarching framework of the ICT security policy designed to ensure that computer systems are secure, reliable and conform to nationally agreed standards, and by the ICT Strategy linked to Corporate Priorities designed to support effective and modern service delivery and to meet service objectives.

5. APPROACH TO PERIODIC PLANNING

5.1. The Internal Audit Strategy and the Internal Audit Annual Plan 2025/26 has been prepared in conformance with the Global Internal Audit Standards to fulfil the requirement to produce the statutory annual assurance and audit opinion for each organisation.

5.2. As part of the Internal Audit planning process, it was necessary to consider each organisation's priorities, plans, strategies, objectives, risks and mitigating controls, and the internal and external assurances provided to determine the priorities of the Internal Audit activity consistent with the organisation's goals, as follows:

- Analysis was undertaken of Internal Audit work during the past 5 years against the Audit Universe, which has been significantly revised and realigned to reflect the current strategic and operational management arrangements and approach to service delivery, to ensure appropriate coverage;
- The Strategic Risk Profile was checked to confirm coverage on key strategic risks, as reliance is placed on the risk assessments carried out by the Risk Owners taking account of the risk ratings and mitigations;
- Where service level risk management processes were not sufficiently up to date or mature to provide timely reporting on risks Internal Audit undertake there won risk assessment processes to establish levels of risk; and
- Account was taken of known external audit and inspection activities to avoid duplication of assurance work; however this may fall short of the level of co-ordination required under GIAS standard 9.5 Coordination and Reliance.

5.3. The audit planning process involves consultation with key stakeholders including discussions with Senior Management of each organisation to capture potential areas of risk and uncertainty more fully. This is of particular importance during a period of change and transformation as each organisation responds to new legislation or service delivery arrangements that might affect plans, priorities and resources.

6. ALLOCATION OF INTERNAL AUDIT RESOURCES

6.1. The Internal Audit staff resource totalling 3.22 FTE comprises Chief Internal Auditor (0.5 FTE), Principal Internal Auditor (0.72 FTE) and Internal Auditor (2.0 FTE). Each member of the Internal Audit team has a professional internal audit or accountancy qualification, and has suitable experience, knowledge, skills and competencies (such as the training on the requirements of GIAS and the Seven Principles of Public Life) needed to deliver the plan. The Available Days has been amended to reflect the Internal Audit resources after consideration of estimated annual leave, public holidays, absence, learning and development (including required professional CPD), and management and supervision.

6.2. It is estimated that around 80% of Available Days will be spent on *assurance, and legislative and other compliance* activities combined. The Assurance work includes sufficient work across a range and breadth of audit areas which assure those processes that are currently in place and which Management rely on to deliver services, and to enable preparation of the required annual audit opinion on the adequacy of the organisation's control environment.

6.3. An estimate of 10% of Available Days will be spent on other activities in support of the Internal Audit function meeting its wider objectives as set out in the Internal Audit Charter.

6.4. An estimate of around 4% of Available Days will be utilised on *Consultancy* activities which support Management in delivering innovation, change and transformation. Management seek this value added activity during this unprecedented period of change for Local Government though this allocation reflects a reasonable estimate of what is actually deliverable within the boundaries of the role of Internal Audit and the resources available.

6.5. It is estimated that around 6% of Available Days will be spent on the provision of Internal Audit services to Midlothian Integration Joint Board (MIJB). This reflects MLC's contribution of support resources as governance arrangements have changed in response to statutory partnership working for the provision of health and social care integration.

7. APPROACH TO DELIVERY OF PROGRAMME OF WORK

7.1. To facilitate operational delivery, an Internal Audit Programme of Work will be developed which provides an indication of when work will be scheduled during the year, taking account of discussions with Senior Management and the availability of Internal Audit resources.

7.2. For each Internal Audit, in line with recognised good practice, an Audit Assignment detailing the scope, objectives and timing will be prepared and agreed with the relevant Chief Officer/Head of Service and Manager prior to commencement of Internal Audit fieldwork. Within assurance work:

- The organisation's Local Code of Corporate Governance (MLC/MIJB) will be used by Internal Audit as an integrated toolkit to test the extent of compliance.
- End to end reviews of financial management and administration processes will be undertaken by Internal Audit to test the extent of compliance (as integral part of protecting public finances, safeguarding assets, and delivering services effectively and sustainably), and substantive testing of transactions including data analytics will be carried out where this is possible to ensure completeness and accuracy.
- The Plans (Financial and Asset Management) to deliver the organisation's strategies, plans and priorities will be reviewed against best practice standards.
- Internal Audit will consider fraud risk and prevention and detection controls, and other appropriate cross-cutting risks and controls (such as risk management, performance management, community engagement, equalities, business continuity, and health and safety), highlight examples of effective internal controls, and share good practice across service areas.
- The ICT arrangements in place to protect each organisation from attack in relation to data security, integrity and availability will be tested and ICT Plans will be reviewed to confirm they support delivery of the organisation's strategies and priorities.
- National reports that give rise to introducing best practice arrangements or lessons learned from other local authorities or other public sector bodies will be considered and applied by Internal Audit to influence and offer ways to enhance governance and internal controls.

7.3. The Legislative and Other Compliance work will include testing in accordance with the terms of the funders' service level agreements or legislative requirements, as part of the wider assurance framework.

7.4. Within Advisory activities, Internal Audit will add value to the Council as it transforms its service delivery models, re-designs its business processes, and utilises technology to automate processes by influencing and offering ways to ensure adequate governance, risk management and internal controls. Internal Audit in its 'critical friend' role will provide an independent view and challenge of a sample of programmes and projects, and an objective assessment of self-evaluation arrangements and improvement that underpin the provision of Best Value, when resources allow.

7.5. *Other* work will include:

- Carrying out Follow-Up to monitor Management's progress with implementation of Audit recommendations to: ensure that improvement actions have been timeously and effectively implemented; check that these have had the desired effect to manage identified risks; and demonstrate continuous improvement in internal control and governance. To facilitate the Internal Audit follow-up activity, Audit recommendations will continue to be input to the Ideagen system, the corporate performance management system, to assist relevant Management in tracking and recording their implementation in a consistent way;
- Performing Contingency advisory reviews on specific instruction from Members or Senior Management, investigations and review of sufficiently important issues highlighted during the year where resources allow; and
- Delivering the Help Desk Facility where Internal Audit guidance and advice is given to Management on internal controls.

8. MONITORING THE WORK OF INTERNAL AUDIT

8.1. The Global Internal Audit Standards (GIAS) requires periodic reporting on the Internal Audit activity to the relevant organisation's Senior Management and Audit Committee/Board.

8.2. Internal Audit assurance work completed and work in progress, and consultancy and other work for the Council associated with the delivery of the Plan will be outlined within regular reports to its Audit Committee. Specifically relating to Internal Audit assurance work, this report will include an Executive Summary of the audit objective, good practice, findings, recommendations, and audit opinion of assurance for each Final Internal Audit Report issued to relevant Senior Management in the period.

8.3. Regular progress updates on implementation by Management of relevant Audit recommendations will be reported periodically during the year to the relevant organisation's Senior Management and Audit Committee/Board.

8.4. Internal Audit's compliance with its Strategy, delivery of its risk-based Annual Plan, and outcomes of assessment(s) against GIAS will be considered by the Chief Internal Auditor on a regular basis and formally reported every six months to the Council's Corporate Management Team and the Audit Committee, through a Mid-Term Performance Report and within the Annual Assurance Report.

8.5. The Internal Audit Annual Assurance Report for each organisation (Midlothian Council and MIJB) to their respective Senior Management and Audit Committee/Board will provide the statutory annual audit opinion on the levels of assurance based on Internal Audit findings over the year to inform each organisation's Annual Governance Statement.

8.6. The GIAS requires an annual Internal Self-Assessment and an External Quality Assessment (EQA) each five years by appropriately qualified and independent reviewers to assess conformance with the Global Internal Audit Standards, as well as performance measurement to assess the internal audit function's progress toward the achievement of its objectives and promotion of continuous improvement. The program also will assess, if applicable, compliance with laws and/or regulations relevant to internal auditing. The Scottish Local Authorities Chief Internal Auditors Group (SLACIAG) have implemented a "peer review" framework, in which MLC participates, as a cost-effective means of complying with the EQA requirement. Reporting on outcomes includes a statement on conformance with GIAS and the quality assurance and improvement plan (QAIP) to enable an evaluation of the Internal Audit quality management framework and to identify opportunities for improvement.