

**The Head of Internal Audit Service's Annual Opinion
on the overall adequacy and effectiveness
of ESPO's control environment
2023-24**

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Background

During the financial year 2023-24, Leicestershire County Council Internal Audit Service (LCCIAS) provided internal audit activity to the Eastern Shires Purchasing Organisation (ESPO). LCCIAS conforms to the Public Sector Internal Audit Standards (the PSIAS) revised with effect from April 2017. The PSIAS require the Head of Internal Audit Service (HoIAS) to give an annual opinion on the overall adequacy and effectiveness of ESPO's control environment i.e. its framework of governance, risk management and control. The PSIAS definitions of the types of audits undertaken and of the control environment are to be found at the end of this document, along with further explanation from the Institute of Internal Auditors about what an effective system of internal control facilitates.

The HoIAS annual opinion is **macro-assurance** over a defined period (financial year 2023-24) and combines:

- An objective assessment based on the results of individual audits undertaken and actions taken by management thereafter. Individual internal audit opinions on what level of assurance can be given as to whether risk is being identified and adequately managed are formed by applying systematic grading to remove any elements of subjectivity. **Annex 2** lists the audits and other work undertaken during the year and where appropriate the individual audit opinion. Individual audit engagements provide targeted **micro-assurance**.
- Professional judgement of the HoIAS based on his knowledge, experience and evaluation of other related activities. This provides a holistic, strategic insight into ESPO's control environment.

The results of the above, when combined, form the basis for the opinion on ESPO's control environment. However, the caveat at the very end of this document explains what internal control cannot do. i.e., no system of internal control can provide absolute assurance against material misstatement or loss, nor can LCCIAS give absolute assurance, especially given its limited resource. The work of LCCIAS is intended only to provide reasonable assurance on the adequacy of the control environment based on the work undertaken and known facts.

Governance related internal audit work

Governance themed audits of hybrid working arrangements and procurement fraud returned substantial assurance. A further follow up audit of cyber security arrangements showed more recommendations had been implemented. There were no new HI recommendations raised.

Advice was provided on the compilation of the Annual Governance Statement for 2022-23. Good governance principles were found to have been applied in the compilation. The HoIAS is part of a group comprising the ESPO Director, the Commercial Financial Controller, the Consortium Treasurer, and Consortium Secretary which review the content of the draft Annual Governance Statement.

The HoIAS and the designated Audit Manager attend the Finance and Audit Subcommittee and appropriate Management Committee meetings to present audit plans and reports, which enables him to gauge ESPO Member governance at first hand.

The HoIAS and the Audit Manager have regular discussions with the ESPO Director and the Leadership Team, the Consortium Treasurer, and where required the Consortium Secretary, on governance issues and related aspects of audits.

Risk management related internal audit work

The majority of audits planned and conducted were 'risk based' i.e. ensuring that ESPO management identifies, evaluates and manages risk to achieving its objectives i.e. ensuring controls are in place to reduce risk exposure.

Audits of IT Developments, Warehouse expansion and supply chain returned substantial assurance. Advice continues to be given in respect of the warehouse project, with the Audit Manager being a critical friend of the project board.

An assessment of any matches identified in the National Fraud Initiative results was completed and no material issues found.

The HoIAS monitors members engagement with ESPO's risk registers through Committee meetings.

Financial (and ICT) Controls related internal audit work

A number of financial system audits were undertaken including those of ESPO's General Financial Systems, IT General Controls and data analytics counter fraud-based audits all returned substantial assurance.

Advisory work was undertaken in respect of the refresh of the Servicing Authority SLAs

The annual rebates income audit was planned but could not be completed. Site visits are planned for 2024-25

HoIAS Opinion 2023-24

No significant governance, risk management or internal control failings have come to the HoIAS' attention therefore substantial assurance is given that ESPO's control environment overall has remained adequate and effective.

Definitions

The revised 2017 Public Sector Internal Audit Standards (the PSIAS) define the following: -

Assurance audit

An objective examination of evidence for the purpose of providing an independent assessment on governance, risk management and control processes for the organisation. Examples may include financial, performance, compliance, system security and due diligence engagements.

Consulting audit

Advisory and related client service activities, the nature and scope of which are agreed with the client, are intended to add value and improve an organisation's governance, risk management and control processes without the internal auditor assuming management responsibility. Examples include counsel, advice, facilitation and training.

Control

Any action taken by management, the board and other parties to manage risk and increase the likelihood that established objectives and goals will be achieved. Management plans, organises and directs the performance of sufficient actions to provide reasonable assurance that objectives and goals will be achieved.

Control Environment

The attitude and actions of the board and management regarding the importance of control within the organisation. The control environment provides the discipline and structure for the achievement of the primary objectives of the system of internal control. The control environment includes the following elements: -

- Integrity and ethical values
- Management's philosophy and operating style
- Organisational structure.
- Assignment of authority and responsibility.
- Human resource policies and practices.
- Competence of personnel.

The Institute of Internal Auditors further explains that the control environment is the foundation on which an effective system of internal control is built and operated in an organisation that strives to achieve its strategic objectives, provide reliable financial reporting to internal and external stakeholders, operate its business efficiently and effectively, comply with all applicable laws and regulations, and safeguard its assets.

Continued.....

Caveat

The Financial Reporting Council in an Auditing Practices Board briefing paper, 'Providing Assurance on the Effectiveness of Internal Control' explains what internal control cannot do, namely: -

'A sound system of internal control reduces, but cannot eliminate, the possibility of poor judgement in decision making, human error, control processes being deliberately circumvented by employees or others, management overriding controls and the occurrence of unforeseen circumstances. A sound system of internal control therefore provides reasonable, but not absolute assurance that an organisation will not be hindered in achieving its objectives, or in the orderly and legitimate conduct of its business, by circumstances which may reasonably be foreseen. A system of internal control cannot, however, provide protection with certainty against an organisation failing to meet its objectives, or all material errors, losses, fraud or breaches of laws and regulations'.

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