



Northumberland
County Council

Internal Audit and Risk Management Service

Strategic Audit Plan 2025/26

1 Introduction

- 1.1 Internal Audit is “*an independent, objective assurance and advisory service 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*”¹. It objectively examines, evaluates and reports on the adequacy of the control environment as a contribution to the proper, economic, efficient and effective use of resources.
- 1.2 Internal Audit is an independent resource available to assist the organisation to explore areas of potential efficiency and matters of probity and internal control. We seek to use our business intelligence and knowledge of the Council to make sensible, informed recommendations for improvement, and thus contribute to the effective running of the organisation.
- 1.3 Internal Audit provides assurance to the organisation that controls established to manage risks to the achievement of the Council’s objectives are operating effectively. This has a positive impact on the risk environment, informing management whether the action which they are taking to control and manage risks is working as it should.
- 1.4 The Strategic Audit Plan has been prepared in accordance with the Global Internal Audit Standards (GIAS) and accompanying UK Public Sector Application Note, which, with effect from 1 April 2025, replace the Public Sector Internal Audit Standards (PSIAS) and accompanying Local Government Application Note introduced in 2013 (revised in subsequent years). The GIAS and accompanying UK Public Sector Application Note set out similar requirements to the PSIAS and are mandated in the Accounts and Audit Regulations 2015. Internal Audit is therefore required to follow the standards when planning the use of its resources. Preparation has involved establishing a risk-based plan to determine the priorities of internal audit activity, consistent with the organisation’s goals and the aspirations of key stakeholders with regard to assurance activity for the Council.
- 1.5 The Strategic Audit Plan, more detail of which is included in section 8, helps to ensure that Internal Audit is able to meet its objectives as an independent assurance function for the Council and to provide an independent and objective opinion to the organisation on the adequacy and effectiveness of the framework of governance, risk management, and control. Internal Audit must be independent in its planning and operation. Accordingly, in producing the Strategic Audit Plan, the Chief Internal Auditor (Head of Internal Audit and Risk Management) is required to determine the priorities of Internal Audit, following consultation with stakeholders and assessment of risk, and to present this Plan to senior management and the Audit Committee (acting as the ‘Board’) for review and approval.

¹ Global Internal Audit Standards Institute of Internal Auditors (IIA), January 2024

2 Period Covered by the Strategic Audit Plan

- 2.1 The Strategic Audit Plan sets out the assurance coverage which Internal Audit will deliver within the coming financial year, 2025/26. The Plan needs to be realistic and achievable, and sufficiently flexible to respond to changing priorities as they occur.
- 2.2 On an annual basis, the areas which may benefit from audit review, and the risk associated with the Council's operations are reassessed. Every year, an updated Strategic Audit Plan is presented to the Audit Committee for approval.
- 2.3 The key objectives for the audit reviews identified to take place during 2025/26 are shown in section 8 of this document and each audit has been mapped to the Corporate Plan 2023-2026, to demonstrate that assurance is not provided in isolation but contributes directly to the achievement of the Council's main goals.

3 Risk Assessment and Audit Planning

- 3.1 It is important that audit resources are targeted at areas in which audit coverage will produce greatest benefit. Risk-based internal auditing requires Internal Audit to understand and analyse management's assessment of risk, and base audit efforts around this assessment of risk to the organisation.
- 3.2 Internal Audit adopts assurance mapping to assess the level of confidence the Council can have in its service delivery, management of risks, operation of controls and performance. Considering the prevailing corporate risks, details of assurance sources have been mapped across three levels often referred to as the three lines model, i.e. management, corporate oversight and independent assurance. This provides information on assurances the Council has on areas of the business that matter most, and highlighting where there may be potential deficiencies.
- 3.3 In addition to corporate risks, a number of other sources of information are considered as part of the Internal Audit planning process, including:
 - Service Strategic Risks rated as 'Red' by Heads of Service and Directors
 - Internal Audit work undertaken during 2024/25 and any audit reports with a 'Limited Assurance' Opinion
 - Our 'Audit Universe' of auditable areas across the Council
 - Reports to Council, Cabinet and other Committees
 - Consultation with key stakeholders, including Executive Management Team, Corporate Risk Owners, Audit Committee, the Cabinet Member for Corporate Services and the external auditor.
- 3.4 Those auditable areas identified as most risk-sensitive by this process have been prioritised for audit in the Plan. Changes in the risk environment along with progress against the Plan will continue to be monitored and assessed throughout the year, and the results of this assessment used to inform in-year and future audit priorities. This ensures that the Plan remains flexible and reflects the risks facing the Council.

3.5 The Strategic Audit Plan has therefore been based on an assessment of the Council's objectives and business goals, risks facing the organisation and its achievement of these goals, known strengths and weaknesses in the internal control system, the Accounts and Audit Regulations 2015, and the views of consultees.

4 Internal Control: Roles of Management and of Internal Audit

4.1 It is a management responsibility to establish effective internal controls, in order that activities are conducted in an efficient and well-ordered manner. Internal control comprises the whole system of controls and systems, financial and otherwise, established by management to:

- safeguard assets and prevent fraud;
- ensure the completeness and reliability of records;
- monitor adherence to laws, regulations, policies and directives;
- promote operational efficiency and good value for money; and
- manage risk.

4.2 Amongst its responsibilities, Internal Audit examines, evaluates and reports on the adequacy of internal control as a contribution to the proper, economic, efficient and effective use of resources. Internal Audit assists management in delivering the objectives of the Council through assessing exposure to risk and recommending, where appropriate, practical improvements to the control environment. Internal Audit's remit includes:

- assessing if operations are being carried out as planned, and if objectives / goals are being achieved;
- assessing the adequacy of systems established to ensure compliance with policies, plans, procedures, laws and regulations, i.e. rules established by the management of the organisation or externally;
- assessing the completeness, reliability and integrity of information, both financial and operational;
- assessing the extent to which the Council's assets, data and interests are properly accounted for and safeguarded from losses of all kinds, including fraud, corruption, waste, extravagance, abuse, ineffective management and poor value for money; and
- assessing the economy, efficiency and effectiveness with which resources are deployed.

4.3 It is usual that a project brief is produced and distributed prior to an audit starting so that the objectives of the audit and approach to be adopted are understood and agreed by both Internal Audit and the audit client.

5 Quality Standards

5.1 Under the Accounts and Audit Regulations 2015, the Council 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." Proper practices in relation to internal control comprise both the Public Sector Internal Audit Standards and the specific Local Government

Application Note. With effect from 1 April 2025, proper practices in relation to internal control will comprise both the Global Internal Audit Standards and accompanying 'Application Note: Global Internal Audit Standards in the UK Public Sector'. The Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA) has been designated the relevant Internal Audit Standard Setter for local government bodies.

- 5.2 The GIAS incorporate a Code of Ethics for internal auditors, and a number of clear attribute and performance standards with which Internal Audit functions are required to comply. It is a requirement of both the PSIAS and the GIAS that Internal Audit is externally assessed for its conformance to the standards at least once in every five years. During 2023 an external assessment of Northumberland County Council's Internal Audit Service was performed by CIPFA. The overall opinion of the external assessor was:
"It is our opinion that the internal audit service GENERALLY CONFORMS to the requirements of the Public Sector Internal Audit Standards and the CIPFA Local Government Application Note."
- 5.3 This is a positive result and "generally conforms" is the highest assessment outcome provided by CIPFA. Some suggested improvements were identified and an action plan has been developed to address these.

6 Resource Management

- 6.1 The Chief Internal Auditor must ensure that internal audit resources are appropriate, sufficient and effectively deployed to achieve the approved plan. Internal Audit's establishment from April 2025 comprises the equivalent of 7.51 full time employees, an Internal Audit apprentice and the Head of Internal Audit and Risk Management, although Internal Audit also provides assurance services for some other entities (e.g. the Advance Northumberland Group of Companies) from the same FTE complement outlined above. As we prepare for 2025/26 this figure includes one vacancy within the service, and the recruitment process in relation to this post is currently being progressed. The resourcing of Internal Audit is kept under constant review.
- 6.2 Reporting lines within the Internal Audit and Risk Management team ensure a separation of duties between Internal Audit and Risk Management functions, in order to ensure compliance with the Public Sector Internal Audit Standards and prevailing good practice regarding assurance and independence.
- 6.3 As reported to Audit Committee, the professional standards require that a quality assurance and improvement programme (QAIP) be developed, designed to enable an evaluation of internal audit's compliance with the standards and Code of Ethics, and assess the efficiency and effectiveness of internal audit activity and identify opportunities for improvement. The QAIP approved by Audit Committee in January 2023 was developed to codify these arrangements. As part of this process, we have formalised performance indicators designed to measure the efficiency and effectiveness of the service, which are reported to Audit Committee throughout the year.

7 Key Themes in the Strategic Audit Plan

- 7.1 Based on Internal Audit's assessment of risk, including knowledge of the Council's internal controls, areas of strength and weakness and the Council's priorities, the Strategic Audit Plan bears the following key themes.

Advice & Programme Assurance

Programme and Project Assurance

- The Strategic Audit Plan recognises Internal Audit's project assurance role. This role involves advising on, and challenging, the approach to internal control within new or improved systems and methods of service delivery. By undertaking this role, Internal Audit proactively acts as a partner to the business and adds maximum value to service improvement, in order to assist the Council's Executive Management Team and the organisation to achieve objectives. This aspect of Internal Audit's role has increased in prominence over recent years and was a recurring theme in Internal Audit's discussions with senior management as part of our consultation in relation to the 2025/26 Audit Plan, particularly in respect of our BEST programme.

Advice and Consultancy, and Contingencies

- During the year Internal Audit will be approached by management for advice, or requested to examine ad-hoc areas, systems or irregularities. A contingency has been set aside in order that Internal Audit is able to respond efficiently to such requests. The required number of contingency days is difficult to predict and can by its very nature be subject to variation as it includes responding to potential irregularities and performing special investigations. For the purposes of resource planning, historic data on the ad-hoc requests previously made to Internal Audit, and the time required, have been reviewed and used to inform the allocation set out.

Audit and Assurance

Corporate and Cross Cutting Activities

- Areas which are important throughout all of the Council's services in respect of which audit review helps give assurance to the organisation or highlights aspects in which improvement could be made. During 2025/26 these audit activities will include:
 - Following up audit recommendations.
 - Pre-submission review of grant claims.
 - The Chief Internal Auditor's Annual Opinion.
 - Governance and value for money reviews.

Service Area Assurance / Schools

- The Internal Audit Service performs high quality audits of the Council's service areas, focusing on specific areas of importance or risk. Regarding schools, Internal Audit will address risk issues within a school environment by auditing

key risk areas in a sample of schools and cascading key messages and learning points throughout the wider school environment. For 2025/26 it is planned to increase the Internal Audit resource allocated to undertaking audit work in schools.

Computer Audit

- The Council invests heavily in computer-based systems to aid delivery of services and to undertake the majority of financial processing tasks. The use and integration of information and communications technology (ICT) within the Council continues to increase. As well as improved economy, efficiency and effectiveness, computer-based systems involve a different set of risks which require a specific audit approach.
- Computer audit is a specialist audit area, requiring detailed knowledge and skills associated with information and communications technology. Accordingly, it is planned to undertake a continuous programme of audits on the Council's ICT systems.

Counter Fraud and Key Financial Systems

Key Financial Systems

- A key role of the Internal Audit Service is the assessment of internal control in the Council's key financial and strategic systems. Key financial systems comprise those major systems by which the Council makes payments (payroll and creditor payments), and the major systems through which income is received (cash or debtor account). Strategic systems are fundamental to the payment or collection of money to or from the Council, including housing benefit / council tax support, council tax, business rates and housing rents.
- The key systems are fundamental to internal financial control and management, as they are the systems by which the Council's income is received and disbursed. The Council needs to be assured that a high standard of probity are present in these systems. During 2025/26 Internal Audit's review of the key financial systems are being designed to focus on the areas of highest risk to the Authority.

Counter Fraud

- The establishment and maintenance of effective controls in the Council's key financial systems and strategic systems is a major strand in our organisation's counter fraud arrangements. Such controls proactively prevent the opportunity for many types of fraud, and the evaluation of the existence and application of suitable controls within these systems is therefore given due prominence in Internal Audit's planned workload.
- The management of fraud and corruption is the responsibility of management, and the Head of Internal Audit & Risk Management is required to make arrangements to be notified of all suspected or detected fraud, corruption or impropriety, to inform his annual Internal Audit opinion and the risk-based Plan.

Although Internal Audit does not have the responsibility for the prevention or detection of fraud and corruption, its work assists management to fulfil their responsibilities through the strengthening of internal control.

- All members and officers of the Council are responsible for the prevention of fraud and corruption. Internal Audit assist in this by undertaking pro-active anti-fraud work during the year, linked to work on the key financial systems, the content of which is determined through an ongoing risk assessment process. The transfer of the Council's Corporate Fraud team into the Internal Audit and Risk Management Service provides a number of opportunities for liaison and joint working between the Internal Audit and Corporate Fraud Teams and these arrangements continue to evolve and develop.
- Internal Audit acts as a key contact for the Cabinet Office in respect of the National Fraud Initiative (NFI). The NFI is the Cabinet Office's data matching exercise that tackles a broad range of fraud risks faced by the public sector. The NFI has been embedded in the statutory external audit process for audited and inspected bodies since 1998.

Reprogrammed Work

- Professional auditing guidance states that internal audit plans should be flexible to accommodate work not originally included in the plan which has arisen as a result of external and internal factors. This is a normal part of the audit planning and management process and reflects that audits are undertaken on a continuous rolling programme, according to the optimum timing for each piece of work.

8 Annual Audit Plan 2025/26

Advice & Programme Assurance

Heading	Auditable Area	Description / Audit Objectives	Priority	Link to Corporate Plan
Advice, Contingencies & Assurance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advice & Guidance • Contingencies & Work Requests • Fraud & Special Investigations 	Responding to ad-hoc queries and requests for advice; responding to requests for one-off audit assignments, where it is considered that audit involvement is necessary; project assurance and assuring appropriate consideration has been given to internal control & governance issues when new systems are introduced.	N / A	All Corporate Plan priorities
Programme Assurance	New Systems / Methods of Service Delivery	<p>Internal Audit may be asked to add value by providing assurance on aspects of the approach and work undertaken and assessing the robustness of arrangements for benefits realisation. The systems, programmes and new initiatives to be supported are continually reviewed and assessed. Consultation on the Audit Plan identified the following areas that may benefit from Internal Audit's support:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Data Quality Supporting the Performance Management Framework • BEST – Benefit Realisation Management Processes • Corporate Health and Safety Actions Following External Review • Swift System Replacement • Process changes within Community Services 	N / A	All Corporate Plan priorities

Audit and Assurance – Corporate and Cross Cutting

Heading	Auditable Area	Description / Audit Objectives	Priority	Link to Corporate Plan
Corporate and Cross Cutting	Follow up on Recommendations	Monitoring the implementation of Internal Audit recommendations in consultation with the service areas which have received these recommendations. During the year, Internal Audit will review the process within the Internal Audit and Risk Management Service to ensure recommendations are followed up and reported upon to Audit Committee in a timely, efficient and effective manner.	N / A	All Corporate Plan priorities
	Pre-Submission Review of Grant Claims	There is an increasing number of funding streams that require an Internal Audit review prior to final claim submission. Internal Audit will undertake the necessary assurance checks as these grant submissions become due.	N / A	'Achieving Value for Money'
	Annual Opinion	An annual opinion on the 'adequacy and effectiveness of the framework of governance, risk management and control' will be drafted and presented to the Chief Executive, Executive Team and Audit Committee, outlining the audit work performed during the year and summarising key themes. This will be timed to support production of the Council's Annual Governance Statement.	N / A	All Corporate Plan priorities

Audit and Assurance – Corporate and Cross Cutting (continued)

Heading	Auditable Area	Description / Audit Objectives	Priority	Link to Corporate Plan
Corporate and Cross Cutting	Governance and Value for Money Reviews	<p>To review whether appropriate internal controls exist within a sample of significant business arrangements within Northumberland County Council. Where it is possible to assess the economy, efficiency and effectiveness of specific aspects of these arrangements, this will also be undertaken. Areas proposed to be reviewed under this heading in 2025/26 include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adults, Ageing and Wellbeing: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Joint Equipment Loan Service ○ CQC Inspection Action Plan Implementation ○ Prevention & Triage • Chief Executive’s Office: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Wholly Owned Companies. ○ Health and Wellbeing Arrangements ○ RIPA Arrangements ○ Elections Governance & Accounts ○ Assurance Over Awareness & Implementation of New Legislation ○ Public Protection ○ NFRS Post / Pre-Inspection Support • Children, Young People & Education: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ School Organisation Plan ○ SEND Statutory Assessment Panels • Place & Regeneration: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Multiple Large Scale Capital Schemes – Follow-up review ○ Fleet Management / Depots ○ Building Control • Public Health, Inequalities & Stronger Communities: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Complaints Processes • Transformation & Resources: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Treasury Management Arrangements ○ Procurement / Contract Management (reflecting BEST) 	High	All Corporate Plan priorities

Audit and Assurance – Service Area Specific (Corporate Resources)

Heading	Auditable Area	Description / Audit Objectives	Priority	Link to Corporate Plan
Information Services	Systems and Governance Reviews	<p>To determine whether the systems and procedures in operation are functioning satisfactorily and are in accordance with legislation and Council policy. In particular, to determine whether:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The systems and procedures comply with good practice and all legal, statutory and regulatory body requirements, and meet business needs; • All transactions are completely and accurately recorded and traceable; • Access to information and facilities is controlled and restricted to authorised users according to their needs; • The potential for fraud and error are minimised; • The systems and procedures are effectively administered and supported; • All staff have been correctly trained to the level that will allow them to properly fulfil their duties; • The systems are available to serve the needs of the business; • The systems and procedures provide complete and accurate management information; and • Upgrades and changes to systems and procedures are properly resourced and managed to meet clearly stated and agreed business objectives. <p>For 2025/26, specific ICT audit coverage will be prioritised to cover areas including Cyber Security, Data Storage, Retrieval and Access Rights, Business Continuity and Disaster Recovery, Change and Incident Management, Office 365/SharePoint and Oracle Fusion.</p>	High	'Achieving Value for Money'
	Accreditation pre-submission reviews	<p>To undertake independent review of the Authority's compliance with recognised standards prior to submission for accreditation or re-accreditation:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Payment Card Industry Data Security Standard (PCIDSS) • Public Service Network (PSN) Compliance 		

Audit and Assurance – Service Area Specific

Heading	Auditable Area	Description / Audit Objectives	Priority	Link to Corporate Plan
Education and Skills	Schools' Financial Value Standard (SFVS)	To co-ordinate schools in the completion of their mandatory returns, and provide assurance to the Section 151 Officer relating to their annual report to the Department for Education.	High	'Achieving Value for Money'
	Schools & Other Educational Establishments	To assess the application of controls associated with the discharge of responsibilities relating to delegated school budgets, within a sample of the County's schools on a risk assessed basis.	High	'Achieving Value for Money'
	Schools & Other Educational Establishments	<p>To provide advice and support on issues of probity and internal control, on school and other educational establishment financial governance related issues, as requested. This may include, for example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support in verifying aspects of financial arrangements in the case of any planned school closures or transfer to academy status; • Support in verifying aspects of financial arrangements in the case of any planned transfer of elements of service provision; or • Support to schools within the Schools Intervention and Support Programme. 	High	'Achieving Value for Money'

Counter Fraud and Key Financial Systems

Heading	Auditable Area	Description / Audit Objectives	Priority	Link to Corporate Plan
Counter Fraud	Pro-active anti-fraud work	To undertake pro-active anti-fraud and corruption work (including participation in the Cabinet Office's National Fraud Initiative and performing internal data matching exercises); and to raise the awareness of counter fraud and corruption measures across the organisation.	N / A	'Achieving Value for Money'
Key Financial Systems	Business Rates Council Tax Payroll Creditor Payments Cash and Bank Debt and Income Management Rent Assessment and Collection Housing and Council Tax Benefit	The key financial systems encompass the main ways in which the Council either pays money out (Creditor Payments, Payroll, Housing & Council Tax Benefit) or receives monies in (Business Rates, Council Tax, Debt and Income Management, Rent Assessment and Collection). Each of these areas will be given some audit coverage in each financial year, with emphasis dictated by the organisation's risk profile determined on an annual basis.	High	'Achieving Value for Money' All Corporate Plan priorities