

Assurance Statement for the year ended 31 March 2020
From the Shared Service Manager – Audit & Fraud

To the Members of West Dunbartonshire Council, the Chief Executive and the Section 95 Officer (Strategic Lead - Resources)

As Shared Service Manager - Audit & Fraud of West Dunbartonshire Council, I am pleased to present my annual statement on the adequacy and effectiveness of the internal financial control system of the Group Accounts prepared by the Council for the year ended 31 March 2020.

Respective responsibilities of management and internal auditors in relation to internal control

It is the responsibility of the Council's senior management to establish an appropriate and sound system of internal financial control and to monitor the continuing effectiveness of that system. It is the responsibility of the Shared Service Manager – Audit & Fraud to provide an annual overall assessment of the robustness of the internal financial control system.

The Council's framework of governance, risk management and internal control

The Council has a responsibility to ensure that its business is conducted in accordance with legislation and proper standards.

The governance framework comprises the systems and processes, culture and values by which the Council is directed and controlled and how it accounts to communities. It enables the Council to monitor the achievement of its strategic priorities and to consider whether those objectives have led to the delivery of appropriate services and value for money.

The main objectives of the Council's internal control systems are to ensure:

- Adherence to management policies and directives in order to achieve the organisation's objectives;
- Economic, efficient, effective and safe use of resources and assets;
- The relevance, reliability and integrity of information, so ensuring as far as possible the completeness and accuracy of records; and
- Compliance with statutory requirements.

The system of internal control is a significant element of the governance framework. Any system of control can only ever provide reasonable and not absolute assurance that control weaknesses or irregularities do not exist or that there is no risk of material errors, losses, fraud, or breaches of laws or regulations. Accordingly, the Council is continually seeking to improve the effectiveness of its systems of internal control in order to identify and prioritise the risks that would prevent the achievement of the Council's strategic objectives

The work of internal audit

Internal auditing is 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 Council's Internal Audit Section operates in accordance with the *Public Sector Internal Audit Standards* (PSIAS) which have been agreed to be adopted from 1st April 2013 (revised in 2017) by the relevant public sector Internal Audit Standard setters. PSIAS applies the Institute of Internal Auditors International Standards to the UK Public Sector.

PSIAS requires that a Quality Assurance and Improvement Programme (QAIP) is developed in order to provide assurance that internal audit activity:

- Is conducted in accordance with an Internal Audit Charter;
- Operates in an efficient and effective manner; and
- Is perceived to be adding value and improving operations.

An internal self-assessment of internal audit practices has been carried out by Internal Audit every year since PSIAS became effective on 1st April 2013, with improvements identified and implemented as appropriate. PSIAS also requires, as outlined in Standard 1300 "QAIP", that:

"External assessments must be conducted at least once every five years by a qualified, independent assessor or assessment team from outside the organisation. External assessments can be in the form of a full external assessment or a self-assessment with independent external validation".

An initial external review was carried out during 2015/16 and the next external review is due to be carried out by 31 March 2021.

The Internal Audit Section undertakes an annual programme of work based on a risk assessment process which is revised on an ongoing basis to reflect evolving risks and changes within the Council. All Internal Audit reports identifying system weaknesses and / or non-compliance with expected controls are brought to the attention of management and the Audit Committee together with appropriate recommendations and agreed action plans. It is management's responsibility to ensure that proper consideration is given to Internal Audit reports and that appropriate action is taken on audit recommendations. The internal auditor is required to ensure that appropriate arrangements are made to determine whether action has been taken on internal audit recommendations or that management has understood and assumed the risk of not taking action. A programme of follow-up on assignment findings and recommendations provides assurance on the complete and timeous implementation of both internal Audit and External Audit recommendations.

Internal Audit and Corporate Fraud staff regularly attended the following external user group meetings:

- SLACIAG, the purpose of which is to develop and improve the practice of internal audit activity with Scottish local authorities. It achieves this by meeting to discuss issues of common concern, commissioning work to develop ideas, sharing good practice, working in partnership with other professional / governing bodies and promoting SLACIAG as the representative body for internal audit in local authorities; and
- The Scottish Local Authority Investigators Group (SLAIG): This group consists of fraud practitioners from local authorities in Scotland, with the objectives of:
 - Raising the profile of the counter fraud agenda;
 - Sharing good practice;
 - Raising awareness of the risk of fraud; and
 - Ensuring that fraud is investigated in a professional manner.

COVID-19

The significant incident in late March 2020 and the Council's responses as a Category 1 responder during the COVID-19 Pandemic tested how well the Council's risk management, governance and internal control framework is operating. There were examples of innovations, new business processes and solutions and new technology being embraced in order to deliver services to the community in its role as a Category 1 responder to carry out the following three essential functions: Caring for the Vulnerable; Liaising with Resilience Partners; and Supporting Economic Recovery. This was achieved using amended governance arrangements, new ways of decision-making, leadership and implementation including virtual meetings, conference calls and systems remote access. It will be important for the Council, at the appropriate time, to carry out a post-incident review and highlight any lessons learned.

Basis of Opinion

My evaluation of the control environment is informed by a number of sources:

- The audit work undertaken by Internal Audit during the year to 31 March 2020, including risk based systems audits, ICT audits, investigations, follow-up reviews and one-off exercises;
- The assessment of risk completed during reviews of the annual audit plan;
- The Code of Governance self-assessment process undertaken by the Strategic Directors and Strategic Leads for the services for which they were responsible during the year to 31 March 2020;
- The assurance statement signed by the Chief Executive for the overall Council for the year ended 31 March 2020;

- Reports issued by the Council's External Auditors, Audit Scotland, and other review agencies;
- My knowledge of the Council's governance, risk management and performance management and monitoring arrangements.

Limitation to Resources or Scope of Internal Audit Work

There were sufficient resources available to deliver the programme of audit assignments contained within the 2019/20 Audit Plan and no significant threats emerged to the independence of the internal audit activity such as inappropriate scope or resource limitations.

Opinion

It is my opinion, based on the above, that reasonable assurance can be placed upon the adequacy and effectiveness of West Dunbartonshire Council's systems of governance, risk management and internal control in the year to 31 March 2020.

Signature: Andi Priestman

Title: Shared Service Manager – Audit & Fraud

Date: 27 May 2020