

Assurance Map Guidance Note

Source & Level of Assurance - Three Lines of Defence

Assurance can come from many sources within an organisation. A concept for helping to identify and understand the different contributions the various sources can provide is the Three Lines of Defence model. By defining the sources of assurance in three broad categories, it helps to understand how each contributes to the overall level of assurance provided and how best they can be integrated and mutually supportive. For example, management assurances could be harnessed to provide coverage of routine operations, with internal audit activity targeted at riskier or more complex areas.

First Line of Defence – Level 1 – Management Assurance

Within the ‘front-line’ or business operational areas, there will be many arrangements established that can be used to derive assurance on how well objectives are being met and risks managed; for example, good policy and performance data, monitoring statistics, risk registers, reports on the routine system controls and other management information.

Nature of assurance: This comes direct from those responsible for delivering specific objectives or operation; it provides assurance that performance is monitored, risks are identified and addressed and objectives are being achieved. This type of assurance may lack independence and objectivity, but its value is that it comes from those who know the business, culture and day-to-day challenges.

Second Line of Defence – Level 2 – Other Internal Assurance

This work is associated with oversight of management activity. It is separate from those responsible for delivery, but not independent of the organisation’s management chain. This could typically include compliance assessments or reviews carried out to determine that policy or quality arrangements are being met in line with expectations for specific areas of risk across the organisation.

Nature of assurance: The assurance provides valuable management insight into how well work is being carried out in line with set expectations and policy or regulatory considerations. It will be distinct from and more objective than first line assurance.

Third Line of Defence – Level 3 – Other Independent Assurance & External Assurance

This relates to independent and more objective assurance and focuses on the role of internal audit, which carries out a programme of work specifically designed to provide the Section 151 Officer with an independent and objective opinion on the framework of governance, risk management and control. Internal audit will place reliance upon assurance mechanisms in the first and second lines of defence, where possible, to enable it to direct its resources most effectively, on areas of highest risk or where there are gaps or weaknesses in other assurance arrangements. It may also take assurance from other independent assurance providers operating in the third line, such as those provided by independent regulators, for example.

As an additional line of assurance, sitting outside of the internal assurance framework and the Three Lines of Defence model, are external auditors, who are external to the organisation with a statutory responsibility for certification audit of the financial statements.

Nature of assurance: Independent of the first and second lines of defence. Internal audit operates to professional and ethical standards in carrying out its work, independent of the management line and associated responsibilities. External audit operates similarly.