



Shield of Honour 2026

Chief Adjudicator's Report

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In 2026, one submission was received for the Shield of Honour award and that submission (100%) was adjudged to have reached the pass standard.

There is no quota of Shields to be awarded and nor will there be in future years. If every applicant meets the minimum criteria, every applicant will be awarded a Shield of Honour.

General Comments

A maximum of 60 marks are available for the written aspect of the Shield of Honour application. With the pass mark set high, it is crucial to perform well on every question. The questions must be answered in full and with close reference to the marking scheme. As in previous years, the strongest answers are those which provide an appropriate range of examples and explain not only what the organisation does, but how its arrangements make a measurable and lasting difference.

The 2026 marking scheme makes clear that the written application alone determines the award result, with the Five Star Wellbeing Audit serving as the right of entry. Nevertheless, all four questions specifically require relevant reference to the outcomes of that audit. Applicants should therefore demonstrate how significant findings and recommendations are translated into wellbeing strategy, business decisions, continuing improvement and organisational culture.

This year a single application was received, and it achieved the required standard, obtaining a high score across all four questions. The applicant is to be commended for a well-structured, detailed and considered submission, containing a substantial range of audit-related examples and a clear emphasis on future action and improvement.

With only one applicant, it would be inappropriate to draw comparisons between high-, mid- and lower-performing organisations. My comments below therefore reflect the strengths and opportunities for improvement in the submission received, together with the standards set out in the marking scheme. This approach is intended to provide useful guidance for future applicants without implying that weaker submissions were received this year.

The strongest features of the application were the explanation of how significant audit findings would be identified and acted upon and the development of a structured next-year improvement programme. Further depth would have been valuable in demonstrating that monitoring trends directly influenced individual interventions, in evidencing benefits from wellbeing investment and in setting complete baselines and measures for future cultural and performance outcomes.

Applicants are reminded that each answer must not exceed 750 words (3,000 words overall). The available word allowance should be used to present relevant evidence, clear explanations and meaningful examples, rather than repeating general descriptions of wellbeing initiatives or organisational commitments.

Specifically, the strongest submissions historically have:

- Presented wellbeing as an organisational priority connected to governance, risk, employee experience and business performance.
- Explained how information from work-related ill health and mental health monitoring can inform strategy, objectives and action.
- Considered the financial and non-financial aspects of wellbeing through planning, approval and resource-allocation processes.
- Identified significant audit outcomes and linked them to prioritised actions, clear responsibilities and longer-term improvement.
- Set out a forward-looking programme with defined workstreams, milestones and measures intended to improve both wellbeing performance and culture.

Areas where further evidence would have strengthened the submission:

- The submission did not always show the particular trend or analytical finding which prompted each intervention.
- The submission described some investment benefits and performance measures as intended rather than already evaluated or verified.
- The submission grouped audit references across several actions instead of showing an explicit finding-to-recommendation-to-action link in each example.
- The submission left some baselines, targets and evidence requirements to be developed during the year ahead.
- The submission could have provided more precise measures to demonstrate the cultural impact of its planned programmes.

The distinction between an activity being delivered and a benefit being achieved is especially important in wellbeing. Training, campaigns, support services and employee consultation can all contribute positively, but applicants should also explain how they assess whether these arrangements have changed work-related risks, employee experience, absence, participation or other appropriate outcomes.

The Chief Adjudicator would encourage future applicants to retain a clear line of sight from the audit findings to the decision taken, the resources committed, the expected benefit and the evidence subsequently used to verify that benefit. This is central to demonstrating sustained post-audit value.

Main Business Activities

Whilst marks are not awarded for this section, it is important that applicants clearly describe the main business activities, the workforce involved and the most significant health and wellbeing risks and issues. This information underpins the application, providing the adjudicator with a useful understanding of the organisation, its working environment and the factors which may affect wellbeing. Such context is particularly important when explaining the significance of audit findings, the relevance of investment decisions and the choice of improvement priorities.

Q1: With relevant reference to the outcomes from your recent Five Star Wellbeing Audit, explain how information obtained through monitoring work-related ill health, including mental health factors, is used to influence wellbeing strategy and objectives.

- **High scoring applicants (11–15)** – The submission achieved the top mark band. It described a comprehensive range of information sources and monitoring arrangements and explained how these inform wellbeing governance, strategy and programmes, including psychosocial and mental health considerations. The answer would have been stronger still had each major intervention been traced more explicitly to a particular finding, trend or risk factor identified through analysis and then to a relevant audit outcome.
- **Mid scoring applicants (6–10)** – In terms of the marking scheme, an adequate response would identify relevant monitoring processes and at least one example of how a finding influences an objective or programme, but give less detail on analysis, the trends identified and their strategic consequences.
- **Lower mark band (0–5)** – The marking scheme describes a basic account of health monitoring with limited explanation of analysis, work-related mental health factors, the decisions taken or how these relate to the audit.

Q2: With relevant reference to the outcomes from your recent Five Star Wellbeing Audit, describe how the organisation integrates the financial costs, benefits and investment requirements associated with wellbeing into business processes and decision-making.

- **High scoring applicants (11–15)** – The submission achieved the top mark band and gave a comprehensive account of how wellbeing expenditure, investment requirements and potential benefits can influence budgeting, business planning, procurement, approvals and management review. Clear examples demonstrated the application of these processes. Further evidence of completed benefits evaluation verified financial information and consistent links between individual investments and defined audit findings would have strengthened the answer.
- **Mid scoring applicants (6–10)** – The marking scheme describes adequate answers that explain some financial considerations and provide an example of business decision-making, but do not fully address the evidence used, responsibility for approval, investment evaluation or measurement of benefits.
- **Lower mark band (0–5)** – The marking scheme identifies basic accounts of costs or benefits which do not explain how wellbeing is incorporated into decisions, how proposed investment is evaluated or how results are assessed, and have few audit-linked examples.

Q3: With relevant reference to the outcomes from your recent Five Star Wellbeing Audit, identify the most significant audit outcomes for your organisation and explain how relevant recommendations will be used to ensure longer-term continual improvement in wellbeing performance.

- **High scoring applicants (11–15)** – The submission provided one of its strongest answers on this question. It set out a clear approach to identifying significant audit outcomes and determining their relevance by reference to risk, workforce needs, recurrence and strategic priorities. It explained planned action, ownership, review and the means of securing longer-term post-audit value. The answer could have been strengthened by linking every material action to a distinct audit finding and recommendation rather than relying in places on grouped references.
- **Mid scoring applicants (6–10)** – The marking scheme describes an adequate identification of significant findings and relevant recommendations, with some evidence of action, but less explanation of the method used to establish significance or the means of sustaining longer-term improvement.
- **Lower mark band (0–5)** – The marking scheme identifies basic lists of audit findings or recommendations without a clear explanation of relevance, planned delivery, post-audit value or the contribution to longer-term improvement.

Q4: With relevant reference to the outcomes from your recent Five Star Wellbeing Audit, explain how the organisation will use the audit output to positively impact and improve wellbeing performance and associated organisational culture during the next year.

- **High scoring applicants (11–15)** – The submission again achieved a strong top-band score. It presented a structured programme for the next year, with relevant workstreams, accountable functions, planned initiatives, milestones and an explanation of the cultural and operational changes sought. To achieve the highest standard, the applicant should ensure that baselines, targets and measures are sufficiently defined to demonstrate both programme delivery and the positive effect on wellbeing performance and organisational culture.
- **Mid scoring applicants (6–10)** – The marking scheme describes adequate accounts of planned campaigns, programmes and initiatives, with some responsibilities, timescales or measures, but limited depth on the specific effects expected during the next year or the link to audit outcomes.
- **Lower mark band (0–5)** – The marking scheme identifies basic accounts with few relevant future initiatives, weak arrangements for ownership, milestones or measurement, and little explanation of how organisational culture will be improved.

Conclusion

This year's Shield of Honour assessment reinforces the importance of using the Five Star Wellbeing Audit as a meaningful starting point for action, rather than as a stand-alone achievement. Strong applications explain how evidence is assessed, how priorities and investments are determined and how the resulting changes will be reviewed for both operational and cultural impact.

The sole application in 2026 met the pass standard and demonstrated a mature and forward-looking approach to wellbeing. The most significant opportunity for further improvement concerns the completeness of the evidential chain from monitoring and audit findings through to interventions, investment decisions, measurable benefits and sustained performance improvement.

The adjudication panel commends the successful applicant. It is hoped that the comments in this report will also support future entrants in demonstrating the strategic, operational and cultural value of strong health and wellbeing management.