



Sword of Honour 2026

Chief Adjudicator's Report

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In 2026, 93 submissions were received for the Sword of Honour awards and 80 (86.0%) of these were adjudged to have reached the pass standard. The remaining 13 submissions (14.0%) did not meet the required standard.

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

General Comments

A maximum of 60 marks are available for the written aspect of the Sword of Honour application. With the pass standard set high, it remains important to score well on each question. One or two weak answers may put the required standard out of reach. As in previous years, the strongest applicants answered all aspects of each question, referred closely to the marking scheme and made effective use of the word allowance to provide a clear, rounded and evidenced response.

Whilst not wishing to be overly critical, the Chief Adjudicator again feels it important to stress that more care should be taken when preparing some applications. The Sword of Honour recognises excellence in health and safety and applicants should demonstrate that excellence through a complete, considered and well-evidenced submission. The questions and marking scheme are made available in advance and should be used throughout the preparation and review of each application. The previous year's Chief Adjudicator's Report is also a useful guide to what is expected.

The 2026 marking scheme makes clear that the final assessment is based on the written application alone, with the Five Star Health and Safety Audit providing the right of entry to the awards. However, every question expressly requires relevant reference to the outcomes of that recent audit. Applicants should therefore not confuse a strong audit result with a strong written answer, nor assume that a passing reference to the audit is sufficient.

This requirement continues to be one of the clearest points of distinction in the submissions. The highest-scoring applicants showed how specific audit findings informed the actions, priorities and arrangements they described. Other applicants provided detailed accounts of systems and initiatives but did not consistently explain which audit outcome had prompted the action, why it was relevant or how improvement would be demonstrated.

The assessment also highlighted some variation across the four questions. Responses to the question on the continued effectiveness of the Occupational Health and Safety Management System were generally stronger. The question dealing with senior management leadership and its contribution both now and in the future proved more challenging, particularly where senior management was not clearly defined or where the relationship between leadership activity and the audit was left implied.

I am pleased to report that there were again a considerable number of high-quality, well-written and well-structured submissions. It was evident that many applicants had invested thought, time and effort in their responses and they are to be commended for this. The use of relevant, site-specific examples was particularly helpful. While 13 applicants did not secure an award this year, their result in this written element should not be taken as a judgement on the quality of the audited health and safety management arrangements which provided their eligibility to apply.

Specifically, the strongest submissions:

- Answered each question in full, recognising that the marking scheme requires more than a description of current activities or procedures.
- Made explicit, appropriate and consistent reference to specific outcomes from the recent Five Star Health and Safety Audit.
- Presented a range of site-specific examples, explaining why action was necessary, what was or would be done and the intended benefit.
- Distinguished clearly between the assurance role of top management and the leadership and management responsibilities of the senior management team.
- Showed a clear line of sight between audit findings, participation, innovation, governance, leadership and continual improvement.

Less complete responses commonly:

- Referenced the audit generally, without identifying the finding or recommendation relevant to the example.
- Described initiatives or established processes without explaining their intended effect or how effectiveness would be reviewed.
- Missed one or more dimensions of the question, notably employee feedback closure, assurance of improvement or the definition of senior management.
- Listed programmes or technologies without adequately explaining their application or the risk and performance benefits involved.
- Placed too much emphasis on past activity when the question specifically asked about future plans, priorities and continuing improvement.

Applicants are reminded that each response must not exceed 750 words (3,000 words overall). The most effective submissions used the available words to address the question directly, rather than to reproduce lengthy descriptions of policies, corporate commitments or operational history.

As I have stressed previously, the use of evidence is important, but evidence must support an answer to the question asked. An extensive list of initiatives is not a substitute for explaining the connection between an audit finding, management action and the resulting or intended improvement. The Chief Adjudicator would encourage future applicants to review every example against this simple test before submitting their application.

The health component of health and safety also warrants continued attention. Technological improvements to physical risk control featured prominently in many innovation responses;

applicants should give comparable consideration to occupational health, exposure prevention, work design and wellbeing where these are relevant to their audit findings and organisational risk profile.

Main Business Activities

Whilst marks are not awarded for this section, it remains important that applicants clearly describe the main business activities, the personnel involved and the most significant health and safety risks and issues. This information underpins the whole application. It provides the adjudicator with insight into the organisation, its operations and its risk profile and allows the examples in the answers to be considered in context. The description should be specific and proportionate, with particular attention to the risks that inform the organisation's current and future priorities.

Q1: With relevant reference to the outcomes from your recent Five Star Health and Safety Audit, describe how your organisation will use innovation (for example, research, technology, tools and equipment, training, and management information or data) in future plans and programmes to improve health and safety performance.

- **High scoring applicants (11–15)** – Presented a comprehensive description of innovation in its broadest sense, covering both hard and soft approaches. Explained how relevant technologies, digital information, research, equipment, training and people-centred improvements would be used to address site risks and improve performance. Stronger responses did more than list proposals: they explained their application, expected benefits and clear links to recent audit outcomes.
- **Mid scoring applicants (6–10)** – Described a number of relevant innovations, sometimes in considerable detail, but did not consistently explain their practical application, the anticipated improvement or the link to the audit. Some responses were stronger on technology than on workforce and management approaches or described general aspirations rather than sufficiently developed future plans.
- **Lower mark band (0–5)** – The marking scheme identifies basic or generic accounts of innovation, with limited site context, few relevant examples and little explanation of how future plans would improve health and safety performance or address findings from the recent audit.

Q2: With relevant reference to the outcomes from your recent Five Star Health and Safety Audit, describe how the site has established suitable processes to recognise and support employee suggestions and feedback in support of continual improvement.

- **High scoring applicants (11–15)** – Explained a complete process for inviting and capturing suggestions from the different employee groups, recognising and supporting those who contribute, assessing suitability, making and communicating decisions, implementing agreed ideas and reviewing effectiveness. The strongest examples showed how employee feedback resulted in a specific improvement and related this to an identifiable audit outcome.
- **Mid scoring applicants (6–10)** – Identified appropriate channels such as committees, suggestion schemes, consultations and reporting arrangements, but did not always explain the process from receipt to decision, feedback, implementation and review. In some answers the process was comprehensive, yet the audit connection was general or absent from individual examples, limiting the marks available.

- **Lower mark band (0–5)** – The marking scheme describes basic accounts of suggestion or feedback collection with little information on recognition, assessment, support, communication of decisions or subsequent implementation, and few or no audit-linked examples of continual improvement.

Q3: With relevant reference to the outcomes from your recent Five Star Health and Safety Audit, explain how the site's top management ensures the continued effectiveness of the Occupational Health and Safety Management System (OHSMS).

- **High scoring applicants (11–15)** – Explained how top management assures the continuing suitability, adequacy and effectiveness of the OHSMS. Responses addressed relevant governance and assurance arrangements, including management review, objectives, performance information, legal requirements, resources, responsibility, employee participation and the completion and verification of corrective actions. Strong examples showed how significant audit findings were prioritised, acted upon and reviewed to demonstrate continuing improvement and post-audit value.
- **Mid scoring applicants (6–10)** – Provided an adequate account of management review and other assurance activities but did not always present the complete process from review and decision through to action and verification. Some answers described performance monitoring or corrective action without showing how top management assesses continuing effectiveness or how recent audit outcomes had influenced its decisions.
- **Lower mark band (0–5)** – The marking scheme describes limited accounts of top-management involvement, with little evidence of review, governance, resources, accountability, corrective action or verification and few or no examples linked to the recent audit.

Q4: With relevant reference to the outcomes from your recent Five Star Health and Safety Audit, describe how the senior management team leads and manages the organisation to improve health and safety performance both now and in the future.

- **High scoring applicants (11–15)** – Clearly defined the senior management team and distinguished how its members lead and manage the health and safety agenda. The best answers explained visible leadership, standards, compliance, resources, accountability, worker engagement and the development of culture, with current action and future priorities supported by practical examples linked to the audit.
- **Mid scoring applicants (6–10)** – Referred to relevant senior leadership activities but often failed to define the team clearly or to distinguish leading from managing. Some provided credible examples of governance, engagement and planned improvement without showing how those actions followed from particular audit findings. This was the question in which these omissions were most evident in the scoring analysis.
- **Lower mark band (0–5)** – The marking scheme describes a basic account of senior management, focused predominantly on compliance and offering limited explanation of its contribution to culture, engagement, future priorities or continual improvement, with few or no audit-linked examples.

Conclusion

This year's Sword of Honour assessment again reinforces the importance of a complete, evidence-based application in which relevant outcomes from the recent Five Star Health and Safety Audit are properly integrated into every answer. The award is not secured by the existence of an excellent management system alone; applicants must demonstrate that excellence through their response to the questions and the marking scheme.

The strongest submissions demonstrated how their audit findings informed innovation, employee voice, management-system assurance and the present and future contribution of senior management. Weaker answers frequently contained worthwhile activity but failed to make those connections sufficiently clear or to show how effectiveness and improvement would be demonstrated.

The adjudication panel commends the 80 successful applicants and recognises the work undertaken by all 93 organisations in preparing their submissions. The observations in this report are intended to support a further improvement in the standard of applications and to provide useful direction to those considering entering the Sword of Honour in future years.