

## Audit scope

# General practice

## Impact of the 2018 General Medical Services contract

AUDITOR GENERAL 

Prepared by Audit Scotland

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### Background

General practice plays a critical role in the performance of the health service, and in Scotland's ambition to improve the population's health and reduce health inequalities. General practices are usually the first point of contact with the NHS. GPs provide a wide range of general medical care to the populations they serve. They diagnose and treat common medical conditions, refer patients on to specialist services where necessary, and manage patients' care in the community, preventing unnecessary admissions to hospitals.

The Scottish Government and the British Medical Association agreed a new General Medical Services (GMS) contract in 2018. The GMS contract set out plans to improve patient care and aimed to address significant challenges recruiting and retaining GPs. Some of the ways it intended to achieve this include:

- the roll-out of multi-disciplinary teams (MDTs), which are a mix of healthcare professionals such as physiotherapists, nurses and mental health workers, to reduce GP practices workloads and improve access to care
- freeing up time for GPs to lead MDTs, focus on patients with complex care needs and improve the quality of care provided

- a new funding model that aimed to better reflect GPs' workloads, particularly for GPs in areas with older or more deprived populations
- improving infrastructure, for example by providing support for GPs who own or lease their practice premises; and introducing improved IT systems for practices
- and new information sharing agreements that acknowledge NHS boards as joint data controllers with GPs.

### Why is this audit important?

Six years on from the introduction of the 2018 GMS contract, general practice continues to face significant challenges in recruiting and retaining GPs, alongside reported increases in demand for services and increasing complexity of care needs.

The 2018 GMS contract aimed to address these challenges. It set out what services would be provided by general practice and how it should be resourced, including staff, funding and infrastructure and incentives for recruiting and retaining GPs.

Implementation was originally intended to be completed by 2021. It was extended to 2023 because of the impact of Covid-19. It is important to understand how well these commitments have been implemented, how

much has been spent, and what impact these changes have had.

In 2019, we published a [short guide](#) covering the main commitments in the GMS contract and our [NHS workforce planning – part 2](#) report focused on the clinical workforce in general practice. This audit will build on this work.

## What will the audit look at?

This performance audit aims to assess the performance of general practice since the GMS contract was introduced. To do this, it will aim to answer the following questions:

- **How are general medical services in Scotland provided and funded?** This will include the structure of services, who provides them, and trends in spending on general medical services.
- **What progress has been made in improving patient care since the 2018 GMS contract?** This will cover access, outcomes, progress addressing health inequalities and plans to improve the quality of care.
- **What progress has been made in improving recruitment and retention challenges and financial pressures in general practice since the 2018 GMS contract?** This will cover workforce trends, new funding arrangements for GPs and progress addressing challenges with GP premises.

The audit will focus on services provided by general practice teams and the wider MDTs outlined on page 1. It will not cover other primary care services such as dentistry and optometry.

## How will we carry out this audit?

We will use a range of evidence to develop judgements and recommendations. We will review and analyse a range of documentation and financial and operational data from the Scottish Government, NHS boards, integration authorities, professional

bodies, third sector organisations and others.

We will interview representatives from relevant stakeholder groups, including those outlined above. We plan to reflect the views and experiences of patients using information from existing surveys and other engagement that has been carried out.

## What do we want to happen as a result?

The audit will provide an independent assessment of how effective the implementation of the 2018 GMS contract has been in improving patient care and the sustainability of general practice. It aims to provide assurance to the public, the Scottish Parliament and other stakeholders, enabling greater transparency and scrutiny of the impact of the GMS contract. We will highlight areas of good practice and make recommendations for public bodies to implement that will support improvement.

## Timetable and contact

We plan to publish the report on behalf of the Auditor General for Scotland in Spring 2025.

If you have any questions or would like further information about this audit, please contact Eva Thomas-Tudo, Audit Manager, on 07779961981 or by email at [ethomas-tudo@audit-scotland.gov.uk](mailto:ethomas-tudo@audit-scotland.gov.uk).

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Audit Scotland, 4th Floor,  
102 West Port, Edinburgh EH3 9DN  
T: 0131 625 1500  
E: [info@audit-scotland.gov.uk](mailto:info@audit-scotland.gov.uk)  
[www.audit-scotland.gov.uk](http://www.audit-scotland.gov.uk)