

Correspondence and whistleblowing

Annual report 2023/24



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Key messages

- 1** We dealt with 301 items of correspondence in 2023/24. This was a three per cent increase compared to 292 items dealt with in 2022/23. The increase in correspondence we have seen over the past three years is due to growth in the number of issues of concern raised with Audit Scotland about public bodies. The number of enquiries about Audit Scotland's work sent to us over this period has fallen.
 - 2** The percentage of our issues of concern that related to local government increased from 44 per cent in 2022/23 to 49 per cent in 2023/24. We have also seen an increase in the volume of concerns that are out of our remit in 2023/24.
 - 3** The proportion of issues of concern raised with us in correspondence that has led to audit work or been used as audit intelligence has fallen this year. This trend is similar across sectors, and for both overall issues of concern and whistleblowing disclosures. We are exploring ways to provide correspondents with more information on our role and remit at the time they provide us with information on their issue of concern, to be clearer about what we can and cannot assist with.
 - 4** We continue to perform well in relation to target response times. In 2023/24, 97 per cent of correspondence was acknowledged within five working days and 98 per cent received a final response within 30 working days.
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Introduction

- 1.** This report sets out information about the correspondence we received between 1 April 2023 and 31 March 2024 and performance against our target response times.
- 2.** We receive correspondence from a range of people, including the public, Members of the Scottish Parliament (MSPs), Members of Parliament (MPs) and councillors. This correspondence covers a variety of matters about the bodies we audit and can be a valuable source of information for our audit work. [Exhibit 1 \(page 5\)](#) details the types of correspondence covered in this report. Freedom of information requests and complaints about Audit Scotland are covered in a separate annual report.
- 3.** Audit Scotland is a statutory body set up in April 2000 under the Public Finance and Accountability (Scotland) Act 2000. We support the Auditor General for Scotland and the Accounts Commission in their mission to provide clear, independent and objective assurance on how effectively public money is being managed and spent, as set out in our [Corporate Plan](#). To do this, we demonstrate our corporate values of equality; independence; innovation; integrity; and respect, while managing the correspondence sent to the Auditor General for Scotland and the Accounts Commission.
- 4.** We consider issues of concern as part of our [Code of Audit Practice](#). The Code states that the key factor in determining whether we examine an issue of concern is its relevance to Audit Scotland's role and functions.

Exhibit 1

Types of correspondence covered by this report	
Issues of concern	We receive correspondence detailing issues of concern covering a broad range of topics across public bodies that are under the remit of the Auditor General for Scotland and the Accounts Commission.
Whistleblowing	Under the Public Interest Disclosure Act 1998, people can raise concerns about an organisation with 'prescribed persons' including the Auditor General, the Accounts Commission and Audit Scotland. Statutory reporting about whistleblowing disclosures came into effect on 1 April 2017. This report includes whistleblowing disclosures during 2023/24.
Objections to local government accounts	Auditors appointed by the Accounts Commission have specific duties to consider formal objections to the accounts of local government bodies raised by members of the public.
Enquiries	We receive queries from people about aspects of our work.

Source: Audit Scotland

1. Correspondence in 2023/24

Overall volumes of correspondence have continued to increase

5. In 2023/24 we dealt with 301 items of correspondence.¹ This was a three per cent increase compared to 292 items dealt with in 2022/23. Our 2023/24 correspondence comprised of:

- 195 new issues of concern, including 18 whistleblower disclosures and three objections to accounts
- 53 re-opened issues of concern
- 47 enquiries about our work
- six cases carried forward and completed from 2022/23.

6. Prior to 2021/22, our overall levels of correspondence were decreasing. We have received an increasing number of issues of concern over the past three years, but enquiries have continued to fall over this period ([Exhibit 2, page 7](#)).

7. Some of the audit outputs we published this year have directly resulted in related correspondence. We discuss this further in [paragraphs 12, 16, and 17](#).

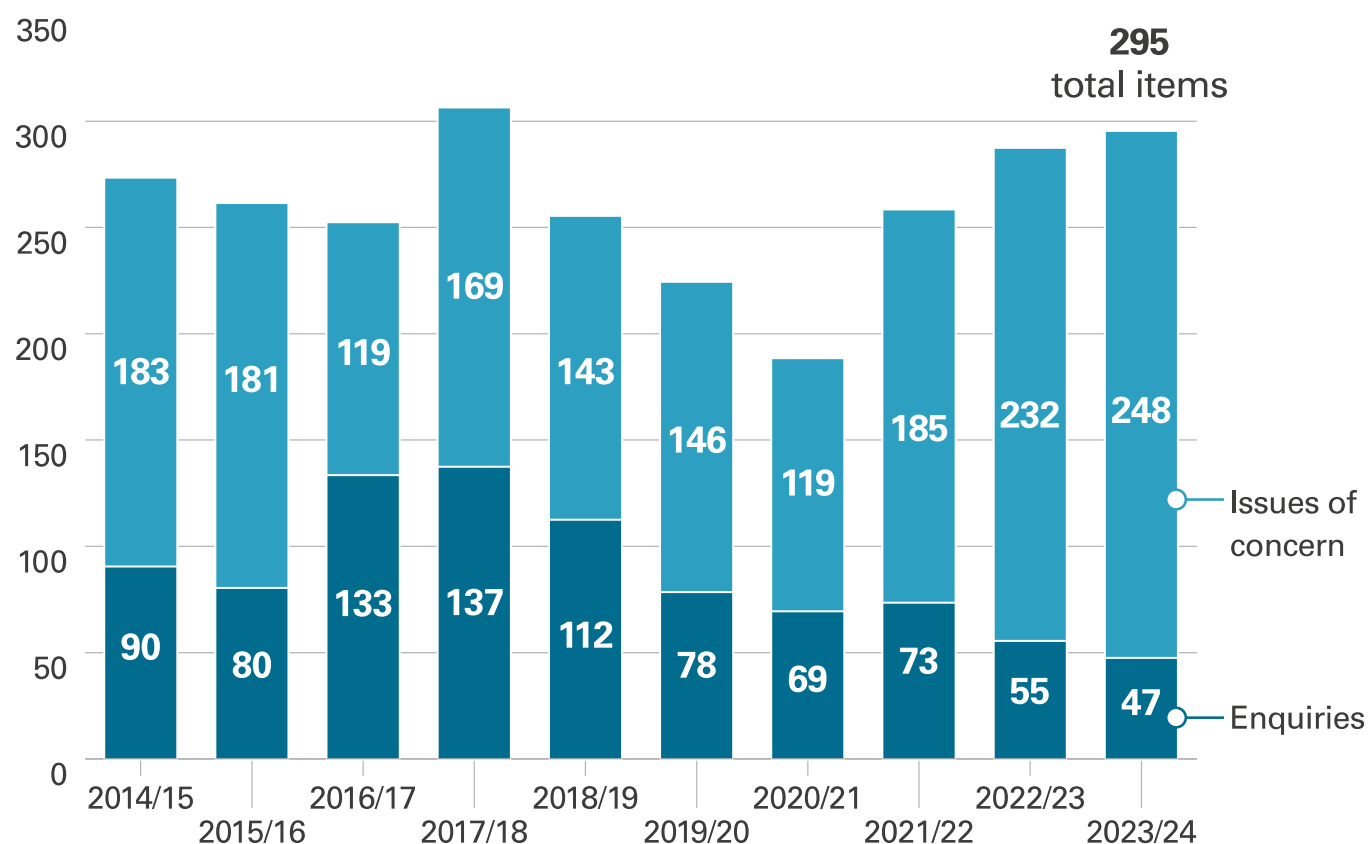
We continue to receive some persistent correspondence

8. This year we continued to communicate with a few persistent correspondents. Where a correspondent sends subsequent correspondence on the same issue, following our closing response, we reopen the case. In 2023/24 we had 53 reopened cases, compared to 72 in 2022/23 and 42 in 2021/22. Of the 53 re-opened cases, 42 per cent (22 cases) concerned repeat correspondence from seven individuals.

¹ This number includes six cases carried forward from the previous year that were completed in this reporting period.

Exhibit 2**Volume of correspondence received between 2014/15 and 2023/24**

Issue of concern are driving the increase in overall correspondence received since 2020/21.



Note: These figures are correspondence received in the reporting period and do not include cases carried over from previous years. Issues of concern include whistleblowing disclosures and objection to accounts.

Source: Audit Scotland, Correspondence database

More of our correspondence is coming from elected representatives

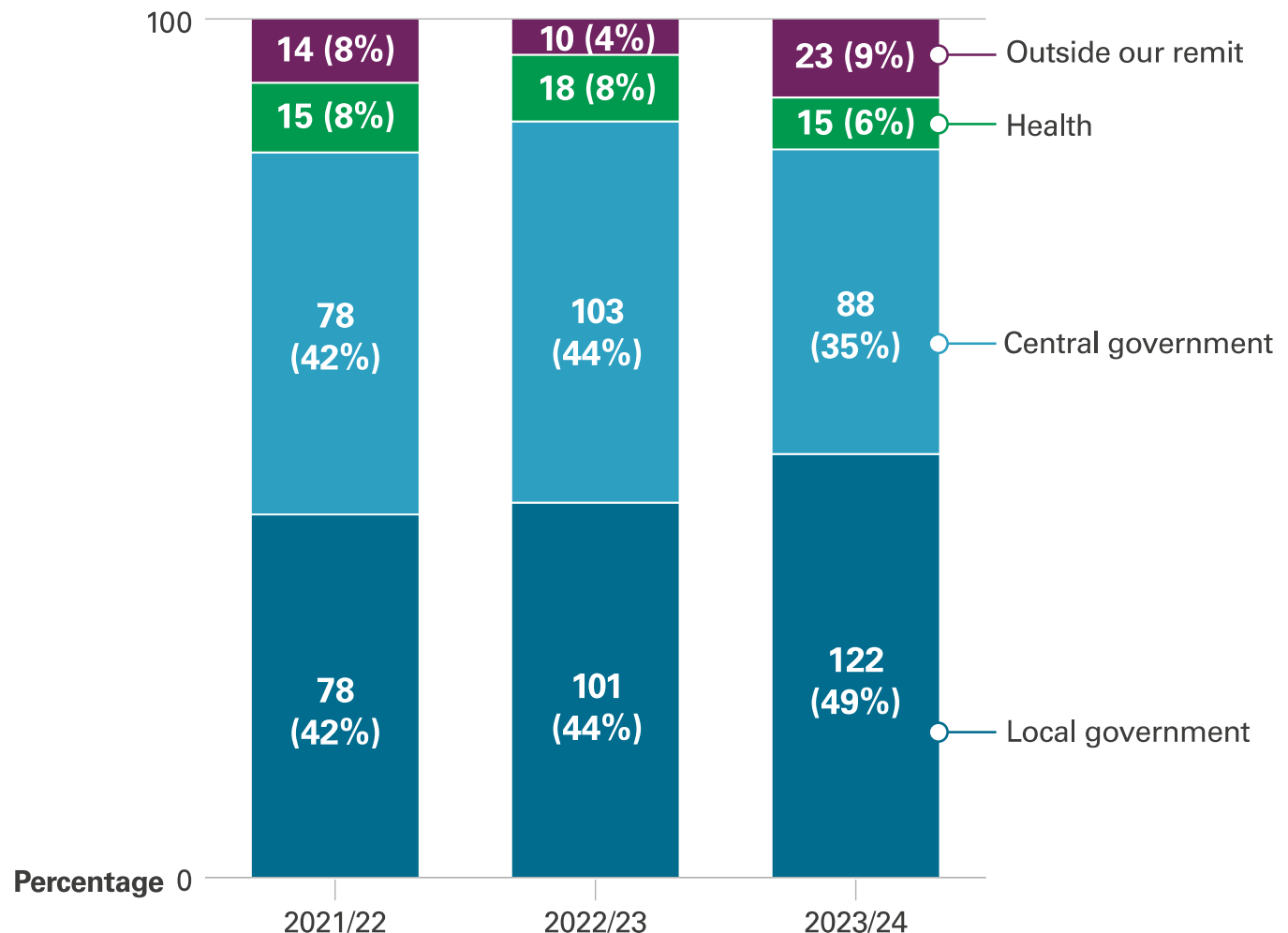
9. The correspondence we received from elected representatives increased in 2023/24, with around ten per cent of the issues of concern raised with us coming from councillors, MSPs or MPs. This compares with around seven per cent in both the previous two years.

More of our correspondence is about local government

10. [Exhibit 3 \(page 8\)](#) shows that an increasing proportion of our concerns relate to the local government sector. Almost half of the concerns we received in 2023/24 were about local government.

Exhibit 3**Number and percentage of concerns by sector 2021/22 to 2023/24**

An increasing proportion of our concerns relate to local government.



Source: Audit Scotland, Correspondence database

11. The 122 local government issues of concern received, were mainly about councils (94 per cent). In 2023/24, we received issues of concern relating to all councils in Scotland with the exception of Dundee, East Renfrewshire, East Dunbartonshire and Inverclyde councils. We have not received any issues of concern regarding East Renfrewshire or Inverclyde councils in the past three years. In 2023/24, local government issues of concern also included three objections to accounts for two councils: Aberdeen City and North Ayrshire councils. This compares to one objection in 2022/23 and four in 2021/22.

12. More than a quarter of the issues of concern we received about local government in 2023/24 centred on two councils:

- Renfrewshire Council (24 cases, around 20 per cent of all local government issues of concern).
- East Lothian Council (10 cases, around eight per cent of all local government issues of concern).

After taking account of population, Renfrewshire and East Lothian councils still had the highest rates of issues of concern raised per 100,000 population (13 cases and 9 cases per 100,000 population respectively). East Lothian Council was also one of the councils with the most issues of concern in 2022/23. The high volume of correspondence regarding Renfrewshire Council was related to concerns shared with us in response to our report on [The 2022/23 audit of Renfrewshire Council: School accommodation for Dargavel Village](#).

13. There are some recurring themes in the issues of concern raised with us about local government. Of note this year were concerns about:

- transparency of decisions about education
- councils' governance and scrutiny arrangements
- council spend on local area projects
- officer and elected members' conduct and transparency
- planning/planning decisions.

14. Transparency of decisions made within councils has been a recurring theme in our last three annual reports. Similarly, council spend for local projects also featured for the last two reports. This year these concerns about local projects have focussed on flood prevention measures, compared to a wider range of projects in previous years.

Issues of concern raised about central government continue to focus on the Scottish Government and Transport Scotland

15. In 2023/24, we received 88 issues of concern relating to central government bodies, compared to 103 in 2022/23. These 88 issues of

concern covered 20 central government bodies.^{2, 3} Similar to previous years, around half of these concerns related to the Scottish Government and Transport Scotland. In 2023/24, we received seven concerns about colleges, compared to 18 concerns the previous year.

16. There were some recurring themes in the issues of concern raised about central government bodies. Similar to our previous two annual reports, ferries has remained one of the most common themes. This remains an area of audit interest for the Auditor General for Scotland. We also received a number of issues of concern related to the topics covered by our [Decarbonising heat in homes](#) report.

Issues of concern regarding NHS bodies followed similar trends to previous years

17. We received 15 items of correspondence relating to eight NHS boards. Similar to 2022/23, the NHS boards we received the most issues of concern about were NHS Grampian (four concerns) and NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde (two concerns). We also received three NHS general items of correspondence in 2023/24, these were all linked to issues raised in our [NHS in Scotland 2023](#) report.

18. Similar to previous years, the concerns raised regarding NHS bodies mainly focussed on governance and transparency.

More of the issues of concern we received were out of our remit

19. Twenty-three of the concerns we received in 2023/24 (9 per cent) related to bodies that were outside of our remit. This was a 130 per cent increase from the previous year (ten cases) ([Exhibit 3, page 8](#)). Issues of concern outside of our remit may include concerns around charities, public bodies outside of Scotland or private companies. To provide the best service to our correspondents, we are developing a new system to gather information on issues of concern. This will provide more information on our role and remit and the bodies we audit when correspondents first provide us with information on their concern.

² Central government bodies include the Scottish Government and other public bodies which fall under the remit of the Auditor General for Scotland. More information about the bodies we audit is available [here](#).

³ Five cases were marked as general central government and general education, meaning they were more general issues in the sector and may apply across multiple audited bodies.

2. Outcomes for correspondence 2023/24

We use correspondence to inform our audit work

20. There are four potential outcomes for the issues of concern we receive ([Exhibit 4](#)). Audit Scotland's correspondence team, in collaboration with auditors, uses technical and professional judgement in deciding what action to take. Whilst we recognise that the issues our correspondents raise are important to them, we must ensure we use our resources carefully and that public money is not spent looking at issues that are not relevant to audit work.

Exhibit 4

Outcomes for correspondence	
Audit work	<p>Sometimes the issues of concern raised by correspondents relate to a topic that we are already covering in our audit work. The auditors can include this as part of the audit process. We may be able to provide correspondents with findings of this work, but generally auditors would only report significant findings in the relevant published audit report.</p> <p>In some cases, the concerns we receive may lead to us carrying out specific audit work to examine the issue. If appropriate, we would publish the findings of this work on our website.</p>
Audit intelligence	<p>We may conclude the issue of concern does not warrant specific audit work, but that it can still inform the work we do. Along with other sources of intelligence, the information provided by correspondents may be helpful to the auditors in carrying out their work.</p> <p>It can help us to identify trends affecting public bodies that we may need to examine.</p>
We cannot take any action	<p>We may conclude that we cannot act on an issue of concern. For example, if a correspondent is unhappy about a council's planning decision or how a health board has handled a complaint.</p> <p>Where possible, we will refer correspondents to the public body or a regulator that may be able to help.</p>

Outcomes for correspondence

Concern outside our remit

We cannot examine issues of concern about bodies that we do not audit.

A list of the public bodies we audit is available [here](#).

If possible, we will suggest other organisations that may be able to help.

Source: Audit Scotland, 2024

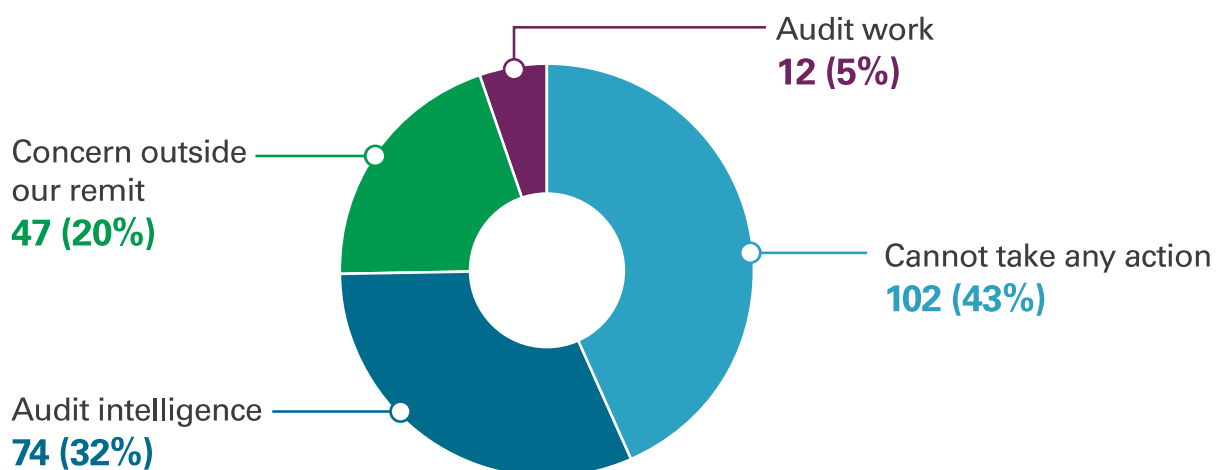
The proportion of issues of concern that were included in our audit work or used as intelligence has fallen this year

21. We use correspondence to add to our knowledge of public bodies, and issues of concern may inform audit work in some way, even in cases where we cannot take any direct action. There has been a large decrease in the proportion of issues of concern that were included in audit work or used as audit intelligence this year, with only in 37 per cent of issues of concern receiving these outcomes ([Exhibit 5](#)). This compares to 54 per cent with these outcomes last year. As noted in [paragraph 19](#), we are planning to improve the information available to correspondents on our role and remit, at the time of submitting their issue of concern, to be clearer about what we can and cannot assist with.

Exhibit 5

Outcomes for 2023/24 issues of concern

The most common outcome for issues of concern was being unable to take any action



Note: Exhibit 5 does not include 13 cases still in progress.

Source: Audit Scotland, Correspondence database

22. The proportion of cases which were either included in our audit work, or used as audit intelligence was similar across sectors.

23. We use relevant intelligence from correspondence when planning audit work and in developing our programme of performance and Best Value audits. For example, auditors have drawn on concerns raised through correspondence when planning their wider scope work.

3. Whistleblowing

Whistleblowing has slightly increased, but fewer disclosures resulted in audit work or were used as audit intelligence

24. Workers, as described by the guidance accompanying the Public Interest (Prescribed Persons) Disclosure Order (2014), can raise disclosures about fraud, corruption or wrongdoing within the public bodies we audit. Our role is to provide workers with an alternative method for making a protected disclosure where they do not feel they can contact the public body directly.

25. We take our whistleblowing responsibilities very seriously and have a process in place to ensure we deal with disclosures appropriately.

26. Whistleblowing cases are included in the figures for issues of concern reported in the previous chapters. In 2023/24, we received 18 whistleblowing disclosures, a slight increase on the 16 received in 2022/23.

27. The 2023/24 breakdown by prescribed person is as follows:

- Auditor General – 12
- Accounts Commission – 6.

28. Audit Scotland, the Accounts Commission and the Auditor General and the auditors they appoint do not have the power to issue fines or enforcements on the public bodies we audit. The legislation does not place any additional power or duty on 'prescribed persons' and we do not have a legal obligation to act on a whistleblowing disclosure.

Outcomes for whistleblowing disclosures

- Issues raised in two disclosures were included as part of routine audit work.
- Issues raised in five disclosures did not warrant an investigation but were considered as useful audit intelligence.
- We could not take any action in relation to nine disclosures as the concerns raised were outside the scope of our audit work. Nonetheless we shared this intelligence with the auditors for information. Two cases were still in progress, with no outcomes concluded.
- Similar to the trend observed for overall issues of concern, a smaller proportion of whistleblowing disclosures were included in audit work or used as audit intelligence compared to the previous year.

4. Our performance in 2023/24

We performed well in relation to target response times

29. We have two key performance targets relating to response times for concerns: to acknowledge receipt of all concerns within five working days; and to provide a final response within 30 working days.

30. During 2023/24, we acknowledged 97 per cent of concerns within five working days and 98 per cent received a final response within 30 working days (98 per cent and 99 per cent respectively in 2022/23).

31. The correspondence team comprises a correspondence manager and a correspondence officer. The cost of handling correspondence in 2023/24 was around £112,000, similar to the previous year's total of around £115,000. This includes time spent by our correspondence team on managing cases, training and some of our auditors' input. The overall cost will be higher, as most auditors record time on items of correspondence as part of their annual audit work.

32. For more information about the correspondence function please visit our [website](#).

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Audit Scotland, 4th Floor, 102 West Port, Edinburgh EH3 9DN

Phone: 0131 625 1500 **Email: info@audit.scot**

www.audit.scot

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