

Audit scope

Orthopaedic services

Inpatient and day care cases

AUDITOR GENERAL 

Prepared by Audit Scotland
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Background

Orthopaedics is a large, complex speciality that provides treatments for people with injuries and conditions of the musculoskeletal system (the body's muscles and skeleton).

Many orthopaedic conditions need surgery, such as hip and knee replacements or fracture repairs. These require admission to hospital as either a day care or inpatient. Other conditions may require medication or rehabilitation provided either as an outpatient or in the community. Around 11,500 individuals received planned orthopaedic inpatient or day care treatment during the first quarter of 2026.

The Covid-19 pandemic disrupted planned orthopaedic care, increasing the number of people waiting for an inpatient and day care orthopaedic treatment. More than 42,000 people are currently waiting for treatment.

People tend to wait longer for orthopaedic procedures than for other types of planned care, with ten per cent of people waiting more than a year for treatment.

NHS boards are adopting a range of measures to increase efficiency and reduce waiting times for orthopaedic services, including additional funding and an increased focus and use of National Treatment Centres.

The Scottish Government also announced a new subnational approach for healthcare in November 2025 to enable NHS boards to work more closely together, improve efficiencies and reduce waits. Orthopaedic services are the first service to adopt this approach.

Why this audit is important

National waiting times targets for inpatient and day care are repeatedly missed and orthopaedics have the largest ongoing waiting list of all hospital specialities. This means people are waiting too long – often in pain – which impacts not just their physical and mental health, but also their quality of life, mobility and economic productivity.

Demand for orthopaedic care is also projected to increase as Scotland's population ages and becomes frailer.

The Auditor General has repeatedly called on the NHS to reduce inefficiencies and change how it works to meet increasing demand within the challenging financial context. This audit allows an insight into the NHS's response for a major speciality service, identifying lessons for other NHS services.

What this audit will look at

The overall aim is to consider both the efficiency and effectiveness of the management and delivery of inpatient and day care orthopaedic services by NHS boards and the Scottish Government.

The audit will compare spend and activity levels. It will set out demand for services, and assess performance against national waiting time targets, and variation across health boards. It will evaluate evidence of ongoing inefficiencies and improved performance, and the impact these have on the sustainability of services.

The audit focuses on inpatient and day care services. It will not look at orthopaedic outpatients or services provided in communities. It will only consider other hospital departments and wider issues where they directly impact on the efficiency of planned orthopaedic inpatient and day care services. For example, it is not an audit of orthopaedic trauma services, but will evaluate the impact this has on planned care.

How we will carry out this audit

This is a focused performance audit. We will analyse national data sets, including national orthopaedics waiting times data, workforce, and financial data.

We will review qualitative information, such as national plans and reviews. We will hold interviews with the Scottish Government, Public Health Scotland, The National Centre

for Sustainable Delivery, and orthopaedic specialists across Scotland. We will use this information to understand the factors impacting waiting times and efficiencies, and identify good practice.

What we want to happen as a result

This audit aims to provide an insight into the efficiency of orthopaedic inpatient and day care services in Scotland and associated challenges. It will provide public scrutiny of NHS boards and the Scottish Government, holding them to account for performance. It will identify risks to future delivery and, where appropriate, recommend areas for improvement.

Timetable

We plan to publish the report on behalf of the Auditor General in February 2027. Following publication, the Auditor General will present our findings to the Scottish Parliament's Public Audit Committee.

Contact

If you have questions about this audit, please contact our communications team on media@audit.scot.

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