

MEETING: 10 JUNE 2021

REPORT BY: SECRETARY TO THE COMMISSION

UPDATE REPORT

Introduction

1. The purpose of this report is to provide an update to the Commission on significant recent activity relating to local government, including issues relating to the Covid-19 pandemic.
2. The Commission receives regular information to complement this report, which is available through the [members' SharePoint site](#). This includes:
 - The Controller of Audit report to the Commission, updating the Commission on his activity.
 - An update on issues relating to local government which is considered by the Commission's Financial Audit and Assurance Committee.
 - A weekly news coverage briefing provided to the Commission by Audit Scotland's Communication Team.

Commission business

Publications

3. Audit Scotland collects media coverage on all the reports published by the Accounts Commission. [Appendix 1](#) provides download statistics for the Commission's published reports over the last 12 months. [Appendix 2](#) provides additional information on the overall engagement that reports, and other business, have received on social media.
4. On 11 May the Commission [announced](#) its collaboration with the [Improvement Service](#). Councillor Alison Evison, Chair of the Improvement Service board, said: "I welcome this alliance, which builds on the existing strong relationship between the Improvement Service and the Accounts Commission. Local Government and the communities it serves face unprecedented challenges as we recover from the Covid-19 pandemic. By capitalising on our complementary strengths, skills, knowledge and experience, we will accelerate the transformation and improvement of council services for the benefit of all citizens."
5. On 19 May, at the request of the Interim Chair, Audit Scotland communications team provided a summary of media coverage and report downloads for the Accounts Commission and Auditor General's recent performance audit report on [improving outcomes for young people through school education](#). This summary is saved on the [members SharePoint site](#). Key points include:
 - In the weeks since publication, the report has featured in 86 pieces of media coverage. This is the joint-most coverage of any Commission, Auditor General or joint report in the past three years (with this year's NHS Overview also featuring in 86 items of coverage).
 - The report had a social media reach of 45,000 in the days immediately following publication. This includes 4,200 views of the two videos on the website, including

2,366 views of the Auditor General's video, making this the second-best performing video ever.

- In terms of report downloads, the figure of 1,983 downloads (in the period of one week up to 31 March) makes it the fourth-best monthly performance in the last three financial years and compares with an average of about 560 downloads per month for the top 20 reports each month.
6. On 19 May Commission member Geraldine Wooley [published](#) a blog on working towards a more equal society in Scotland. Geraldine highlights the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on certain groups, recognises the challenges faced by the public sector, welcomes the Commission's commitment to focus on equality, and underlines the importance of the user-voice in understanding the effectiveness of services.
 7. On 24 May Elma Murray, Interim Chair, [published](#) a blog on auditing to support public service recovery. Elma highlights the Commission's [work programme for 2021/22](#) and writes that is designed to be agile, enabling the Commission to respond quickly to changing circumstances, to be innovative, by harnessing new ideas and using new technology. Elma sets out key features of the Commission's upcoming work, which include, amongst others, following the pandemic pound.
 8. On 27 May the Commission [published](#) its overview report Local government in Scotland 2021. The report found that Scotland's councils reacted quickly, working alongside communities and partners, to address the unprecedented challenges created by Covid-19. Many challenges remain significant, made more urgent by the multiple impacts of Covid-19 on communities and services. On 27 May Commission member Stephen Moore [blogged](#) about the findings of the report and underlined the need for a collective pandemic recovery response, to protect and support the people and communities who most depend on council services.
 9. Initial figures for the Commission's overview report are very positive (at the time of writing, the day after publication date). There are strong levels of engagement and key stakeholders (COSLA, the Improvement Service, councils, and senior local government figures) have interacted with content. Vlogs by Commission member [Sophie Flemig](#) and Interim Deputy Chair [Tim McKay](#) as well as Stephen's blog (referenced above) have been promoted. Social media statistics for the first 24 hours following publication are as follows:
 - Total views – 31,008 (30,600 on the Commission's Twitter, 63 on Facebook and 345 on LinkedIn)
 - Total likes, shares or comments (engagement) – (564 on the Commission's Twitter, 0 on Facebook and 29 on LinkedIn)
 - Total engagement rate (per platform): Twitter – 1.8%, Facebook – n/a, LinkedIn – 4.9%
 - Video views – 347 (Sophie – 99; Tim – 248)
 - Views of Stephen's blog – 30.
 10. On 27 May COSLA [responded](#) to the Commission's overview report. Councillor Gail Macgregor, COSLA's Resources Spokesperson said that she was delighted with the recognition for councils and of the need for them to have long term financial certainty.
 11. Over the past month the Commission also promoted blogs from Elma and Geraldine (referenced above) as well as the May meeting review [vlog](#) by Commission member Sheila Gunn, which has been viewed over 300 times. The Commission also [repromoted](#) work from earlier in the year, including the [Digital progress in local](#)

[government](#) performance audit report on the back of a Digital Office for Scottish Local Government session which was promoted on social media.

Other Commission business

12. The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) has issued a [consultation paper](#) that proposes a package of measures aimed at improving the UK's audit, corporate reporting and corporate governance systems in the private sector. The proposed measures are in response to the recommendations made by the following independent reviews, all of which have been reported previously to the Commission:

- Sir John Kingman's Independent Review of the Financial Reporting Council (FRC).
- The Competition and Market Authority (CMA)'s Statutory Audit Services Market Study.
- Sir Donald Brydon's Independent Review of the Quality and Effectiveness of Audit.

At its recent meeting, the Commission's Financial Audit and Assurance Committee agreed to recommend to the Commission that it delegate to the Interim Chair, Interim Deputy Chair and past FAA Committee Chair to agree the terms of a response to the consultation. This will be provided to members in due course.

13. On 25 May the Commission [published](#) its joint work programme with the Auditor General for Scotland and Audit Scotland, setting out planned audit work for 2021/22.
14. Members are asked to note that, in agreement between report sponsors Andrew Burns and Andrew Cowie and the report team, the Housing Benefit thematic study will be submitted to the Commission for consideration at its meeting on 12 August, rather than 10 June as originally planned. This rescheduling is due to delays in receiving data from councils and subsequent analysis.
15. Members are asked to review the members' communications schedule on the [members' SharePoint site](#). This includes a list of planned publications and communication activities for the year, along with indicative roles for members in promotion and engagement activities. This document is live and is updated monthly, following discussion with the Interim Chair and Audit Scotland's work programme and communications teams. Members are asked to share their thoughts on the schedule, as well as any suggestions for further communications items either by commenting in the [Teams discussion](#), or directly to the [schedule](#).
16. Answers to members' questions on the May Secretary update report can be found on the [members' SharePoint site](#). Data on trends in library closures has been requested from the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountability and will be shared with members upon receipt.

Auditor General

17. On 20 May Stephen Boyle, Auditor General [published](#) a blog on Scotland's colleges. The blog highlights that the full financial effects of Covid-19 were not felt during academic year 2019-20 and responding to the longer-term impact of Covid-19 will require change in the college sector.

Audit Scotland

18. On 21 May Audit Scotland [announced](#) that it has been named one of Scotland's best

companies to work for. Audit Scotland has reached 36th place across Scotland in Best Companies list, as well as being named the UK's fourth best accountancy workplace.

19. On 19 May Audit Scotland highlighted that, following negotiations with PCS, a pay award will be implemented in May's salaries. Key points of the award include, amongst others, pay increases for all colleagues (2 per cent for band 1, and one per cent for bands 2 and 3) and an extension of the commitment to no compulsory redundancies.
20. On 25 May Dr Bernadette Milligan, Audit Manager [published](#) a blog entitled "Cybercrime: A serious risk to Scotland's public sector", highlighting recent cyber-attacks at SEPA and the University of the Highlands and Islands. The blog includes a list of questions for staff and board members and signposts key resources to improve cyber-resilience.
21. On 1 July Audit Scotland will publish its annual fraud and irregularity report 2020/21. Audit Scotland plays an important role in deterring and detecting fraud in public bodies, and in helping organisations prevent the loss of public money through mistakes. Part of its counter-fraud work involves sharing examples of where fraud has been identified in public bodies. Audit Scotland shares this information anonymously through quarterly technical bulletins and a summary report after the year end. The purpose is to share information about cases where internal control weaknesses have led to fraud and irregularities. This will allow audited bodies to review their arrangements to help prevent similar circumstances happening again. The report will be shared with Commission members.

Issues affecting local government

Scottish Government

22. Given that Covid-19 has resulted in a significant number of matters originating from the Scottish Government, this section is divided, for ease of reference, into the following sub-sections:
 - Local government general
 - Economy
 - Health and social care
 - Education
 - Transport
 - Communities
 - Covid-19 measures
 - Other matters

Local government general

23. On 11 May the Scottish Government [published](#) management information provided by local authorities relating to support to isolate and support for people during the Covid-19 pandemic.
24. On 25 May the Scottish Government [published](#) figures on the number of Council Tax Reduction (CTR) recipients and the income foregone for all local authorities from April 2013 to March 2021.
25. On 25 May the Scottish Government [published](#) information on Discretionary Housing Payments (DHPs) in Scotland in 2020 to 2021.

26. On 26 May the First Minister [delivered](#) a statement setting out the priorities of government. Priorities relating to local government including, amongst others:
- providing local authorities with the first instalment of the expanded £1 billion Scottish Attainment Fund
 - funding councils for the first phase of the commitment to recruit 3,500 more teachers and classroom assistants
 - working to ensure that all children have access to a laptop or tablet, and taking steps to remove charges for core curriculum activities, and for music and arts education – including instrumental music tuition
 - making free breakfasts and lunches available to all primary 4 children in Scotland – as the next step towards extending them to all primary school children, all year round
 - raising the age at which people become liable for council tax from 18 to 22
 - working with councils, businesses and third sector organisations to improve local neighbourhoods, including legislation to support Community Wealth Building, and steps to ensure more local procurement
 - working with local authorities to resume low emission zones in cities.

Economy

27. On 5 May the Scottish Government [published](#) GDP Quarterly National Accounts for 2020 Quarter 4. Scotland's GDP is estimated to have grown by 2.3 per cent during 2020 Quarter 4, revised up from the first estimate of 2.0 per cent published in March.
28. On 21 May the Scottish Government [published](#) a letter from Mairi Gougeon, Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs to Liz Truss, Secretary of State for International Trade raising concerns about the impact on Scottish farmers of the proposed UK-Australia free trade agreement. She noted increased importation ran contrary to the Scottish Government's policy position that trade should support progress to net-zero.
29. On 25 May the Scottish Government [highlighted](#) mobile coverage in some of the most rural parts of Scotland will be improved with an additional £3.75 million investment. A further nine masts are earmarked for the Scottish Borders, Highlands, Angus, and island communities, along with three to replace masts removed earlier this year.
30. On 25 May the Scottish Government [published](#) results from the Scottish Employer Skills Survey 2020.
31. On 26 May the Scottish Government [published](#) monthly GDP estimates for March.

Health and social care

32. On 14 May the Scottish Government [announced](#) that the 4 per cent pay deal offer for NHS staff will be implemented immediately after the majority of NHS unions have voted to accept it. The GMB union and the RCN rejected the offer.
33. On 15 May the Scottish Government [highlighted](#) that the vaccination programme has delivered first doses of the coronavirus (Covid-19) vaccine to more than three million people – 66.6 per cent of the adult population.
34. On 19 May Food Standards Scotland (FSS) [published](#) its strategic ambitions for the coming five years as it sets out its aim to place a renewed emphasis on improving the Scottish diet and tackling associated negative health outcomes.

35. On 24 May the Scottish Government [highlighted](#) the launch of an online self-referral service, where 18-29 year-olds can register for a vaccination appointment.
36. On 28 May the Scottish Government [highlighted](#) that four separate funds – worth a total of £18 million – to support improvements to drugs services are open for applications from not-for-profit organisations working in the drugs sector, including Integration Authorities, Alcohol and Drug Partnerships, third sector organisations, and grassroots/ community organisations.

Education

37. On 5 May the Scottish Government [published](#) the third annual report on progress of the Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematic (STEM) education and training strategy. On 13 May the Scottish Government [published](#) the STEM Bursary Equality Impact Assessment 2021.
38. On 21 May the Scottish Government [published](#) guidance to help schools plan how they will most effectively spend their Pupil Equity Funding allocation.

Transport

39. On 24 May Transport Scotland [launched](#) a consultation on seeking views on the impact on island communities of the introduction of free bus travel throughout Scotland for those under age 22. The consultation closes on 21 June.

Communities

40. On 9 May the Scottish Government [published](#) a form to be filled out by community bodies to re-register a community interest in land.

Covid-19 measures

41. On 14 May the Scottish Government [confirmed](#) Glasgow and Moray will remain under Level 3 restrictions, with additional support for business, and travel in and out of these areas will be limited to essential purposes. All other mainland health boards moved into Level 2 on 17 May, with some island communities moving straight to Level 1. On 21 May Scottish Government [provided](#) an update: Moray moves to Level 2 and Glasgow remains in Level 3 for at least another week. The Scottish Government also advised that, due to outbreaks of the April-02 variant in Bedford, Bolton, and Blackburn with Darwen, temporary travel restrictions will be in place between Scotland and these areas from Monday 24 May onwards. On 28 May a further update [provided](#) by the First Minister confirmed that Glasgow will move to Level 2 from 5 June as long as key indicators remain stable or fall. On 1 June, this was [confirmed](#), alongside 13 local authorities remaining in level 2, 15 moving to level 1 and three moving to level 0.
42. On 19 May the Scottish Government [launched](#) a vaccination status scheme for foreign travel. A vaccination status letter can be downloaded from the NHS Inform patient portal or - for those not online - requested in the post via a Freephone Covid Status Helpline.
43. On 22 May Scottish Government [highlighted](#) that, in response to the Covid-19 crisis in India, it has donated 100 oxygen concentrators and 40 continuous positive airway pressure (CPAP) ventilators.

Other matters

44. On 30 April Skills Development Scotland published its [Equality & Diversity Mainstreaming Report 2021-25](#) and [Equality Evidence Review](#). The reports found

evidence of persistent inequality across and within protected characteristics.

45. On 7 May the Scottish Government [published](#) the chief inspector's 2021-24 plan for HM Fire Service Inspectorate in Scotland (HMFSI). Audit Scotland, the Auditor General for Scotland, and the Accounts Commission are mentioned.
46. On 12 May the Scottish Government [highlighted](#) that an estimated 78,775 children have benefitted from the Scottish Child Payment since its launch. A total of 92 per cent of the applications received and processed have been approved, and payments started in February. Applications were received from people living in all 32 local authorities in Scotland, with the highest number of 17,330 from Glasgow City.
47. On 23 May it was [confirmed](#) that Lord Advocate James Wolffe QC and Solicitor General Alison Di Rollo QC would be stepping down from their roles. Both law officers have said they will continue in their roles until replacements are appointed.
48. On 25 May the Scottish Government [published](#) a letter from First Minister Nicola Sturgeon and her Welsh Counterpart Mark Drakeford to Prime Minister Boris Johnson calling for greater clarity and substance around a proposed four-nations Covid recovery summit scheduled for 27 May. On 26 May the BBC [reported](#) that the summit has been postponed. On 27 May the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster Michael Gove [responded](#) to the letter from Nicola Sturgeon and Mark Drakeford.
49. On 26 May the Scottish Government [highlighted](#) that Scottish Ministers will enter structured talks with the Scottish Green Party, supported by the civil service, with a view to reaching a formal Co-operation Agreement.

Scottish Parliament

50. On 11 May SPICE [published](#) analysis of the election results. The analysis considers what patterns emerged from the election, the composition of the new parliament, and what the result means for both the next parliament and the formation of government.
51. On 12 May SPICE [published](#) a briefing on the key issues facing the next session of the Scottish Parliament, noting Covid-19, climate change, and the constitution are three of the most pressing concerns to be considered over the next five years.
52. On 13 May MSPs were [sworn in](#) on the first day of the new parliamentary session and MSPs [elected](#) Alison Johnstone as Presiding Officer (PO) of the Scottish Parliament. She was elected with 97 votes in favour to 28 votes against. There were two abstentions and one spoiled ballot. On 14 May Annabelle Ewing and Liam McArthur were [elected](#) as Deputy Presiding Officers (DPOs) for Session 6.
53. On 18 May Nicola Sturgeon was [elected](#) First Minister of Scotland, with 64 votes in her favour. Willie Rennie and Douglas Ross also put forward their cases for First Minister, receiving 4 and 31 votes respectively. There were 28 abstentions.
54. On 18 May John Swinney was [reappointed](#) as Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Covid Recovery and on 19 May the Scottish Government [announced](#) that the First Minister had completed appointments to her new ministerial team, consisting of 10 Cabinet Secretaries, including the First Minister, and supported by 15 Junior Ministers. Detailed listings of Cabinet Secretary and Ministerial responsibilities can be found [here](#). Appointments include, amongst others, Shirley-Anne Somerville MSP as Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills, Shona Robison MSP as Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice, Housing and Local Government, Mairi Gougeon MSP as Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and Islands. Supporting Shona Robison will be Christina McKelvie MSP, reappointed as the Minister for Equalities and Older People, and Ben Macpherson MSP, appointed as Minister for Social Security and Local Government.

55. On 24 May SPICE [published](#) a blog summarising the ten key risks for equalities identified by the Scottish Government including, amongst others, high and rising mental health problems made worse by Covid-19.
56. On 25 May Emma Harper MSP [lodged](#) a motion that Parliament notes the success of the Dumfries and Galloway Council participatory budgeting process, which allowed members of the community across the Nithsdale area of Dumfries and Galloway to determine which local causes were able to receive financial support from the Council.

Parliamentary committee news

57. The Parliament is currently in the process of establishing its committees for the new Parliamentary session.

Local government news

58. At its last meeting, I advised the Commission that I would provide further information on the European Charter of Local Government (Incorporation) (Scotland) Bill, which was passed unanimously in Parliament on 23 March:
- On 18 March SPICE [published](#) a blog on the Bill, setting out that the Charter commits signatories to a set of basic rules which seek to uphold the political, administrative and financial independence of local authorities through legislation and, where applicable, constitution. It also sets out that the charter applies to councils or assemblies composed of members freely elected by secret ballot on the basis of direct, equal, universal suffrage.
 - On 23 March Cllr Alison Evison, COSLA President [issued](#) a statement advising that COSLA sees the incorporation of the European Charter of Local Self-Government into Scots Law as “a good day for democracy in Scotland, a good day for communities in Scotland, and a good day for local government”.
 - As reported in last month’s Secretary’s Report, on 12 April the UK Government [referred](#) the Bill to the Supreme Court.
59. On 3 May Cllr Paul Mack, Renfrewshire Council was disqualified by the Standards Commission for Scotland following a hearing, at which he was found to have behaved repeatedly in a manner which was harassing, threatening and offensive towards two other councillors, as well as to the Chief Executive and other officers. The [press release](#) and [written decision](#) have been saved to the members’ SharePoint site.
60. On 7 May Public Finance [reported](#) that South Lanarkshire Council has approved the transfer of £8 million to its capital programme, after receiving additional Covid-19 funding from the Scottish Government.
61. On 12 May BBC [reported](#) that the Scottish Qualifications Agency (SQA) wrote to schools about “very serious” incidents of students sharing details of assessments on social media.
62. On 12 May The Times Scotland [published](#) its annual school league table, ranking Scottish schools by the proportion of pupils that attain the “gold standard” of five Highers in 2020.
63. On 12 May the Guardian [reported](#) that “Scottish pupils face a “mental health crisis” due to lack of exam support”. Cameron Garrett, convener of the Scottish Youth Parliament’s education committee, called for the incoming education secretary to ensure that schools and local authorities were providing adequate mental health support to pupils.

64. On 13 May Holyrood [highlighted](#) the Digital Critical Friends programme, a partnership between tech sector body ScotlandIS, Developing the Young Workforce (DYW) Glasgow, and Glasgow City Council secondary schools. The programme matches computing teachers with people working in industry and aims to encourage more young people to take computer science.
65. On 13 May Connect, Scotland's largest independent parents' group, [wrote](#) to Fiona Robertson, Chief Executive, SQA challenging the fairness of the assessments which have replaced exams. Connect also warned schools are taking different approaches.
66. On 14 May the National Qualifications 2021 Group [released](#) a statement on the alternative certification model being used this year to determine SQA grades.
67. On 17 May Julie Welsh, Chief Executive, Scotland Excel [published](#) an associate feature in Holyrood highlighting Scotland Excel's procurement week. The free event will take place online from 7-11 June and includes a range of sessions on:
- the climate emergency and sustainability;
 - community wealth building;
 - social care;
 - leadership in a post Covid-19 world; and
 - the people of tomorrow.
68. On 17 May the Herald [reported](#) that Lord Willie Haughey has revealed plans to spend more than £1 billion on building 11,000 homes in Scotland over the next nine years, aiming to tackle shortages and transform the housing market.
69. On 17 May Comhairle nan Eilean Siar [wrote](#) to the First Minister requesting the future of lifeline ferry services be prioritised. In the joint letter, Comhairle leader Cllr Roddie Mackay and chair of transportation & infrastructure Cllr Uisdean Robertson stressed the need for a new model which allows island representatives to inform the shape of future ferry networks, described it as "unacceptable" that a loss of confidence in the ability to travel was affecting hospitality and tourism businesses, and called for a meeting with the minister with responsibility for ferry services within days of the appointment being made.
70. Glasgow City Council [highlighted](#) that it has been allocated £120 million by the Scottish Government to help deliver new affordable housing in the city in partnership with the city's registered social landlords.
71. On 21 May Cllr John Alexander, leader of Dundee City Council, [welcomed](#) "two important milestones" as Eden Project [announced](#) it has signed a memorandum of understanding with the owners of its preferred site for Eden Project Dundee and released the first image of how it might look.
72. On 21 May Holyrood [reported](#) that National Records of Scotland (NRS) has been told it must release Covid-19 death figures for care homes after the Scottish Information Commissioner [ruled](#) that the information had been unlawfully withheld and the figures were in the public interest.
73. On 24 May Cllr Jacqueline Cameron, Convener for Renfrewshire Health Social Care Integration Joint Board [published](#) an associate feature in Holyrood on the mental health needs of people using alcohol and drugs.
74. On 26 May the Care Inspectorate [published](#) a statistical bulletin which includes data on deaths from Covid-19 in care services across Scotland.

75. On 26 May BBC [reported](#) that more than a quarter of Scotland's libraries are still closed a month after they were allowed to reopen and there is concern that some of the 123 public libraries across the country that remain locked will not return.
76. On 27 May City of Edinburgh Council [agreed](#) the allocation of £21 million in additional funding, including £500,000 for 20-minute neighbourhoods, £1.5 million for services for looked-after children, and £2.5 million funding for the Integration Joint Board.

Public policy news

77. Commission member Sophie Flemig has pointed members to the following areas of interest:
- Carnegie UK Trust (CUKT) recently [highlighted](#) a podcast series – the courage to be kind – which explores the importance of kindness in care settings in Scotland across six short episodes.
 - Cattanach has [highlighted](#) a recent report, jointly commissioned with CUKT and Children in Scotland, entitled “Being Bold: Building Budgets for Children’s Wellbeing”, which sets out ideas for where Scotland can go further in the space of the budget process.
78. On 4 May the Scottish Trade Unions Congress (STUC) [warned](#) that the next Scottish Government will face trade union pressure to follow through on residential care reform.
79. On 4 May LocalGov [reported](#) that Scotland has some of the least local councils in Europe and is lagging behind England in terms of voter representation, according to research by the Electoral Reform Society (ERS). On 3 May ERS Scotland [highlighted a tool](#) that can be used to see how individual councils and wards compare to Europe in terms of local representation.
80. On 4 May Educational Institute of Scotland (EIS) [urged](#) political parties to deliver on promises to employ more teachers and cut class sizes to support education recovery.
81. On 4 May Homes for Scotland, the industry body representing 200 organisations across the Scottish home building sector, [highlighted](#) cross-party support for its manifesto call for the delivery of at least 25,000 new homes each year.
82. On 4 May the Fraser of Allander Institute [reported](#) that the Scottish economy grew by 0.9 per cent in February while UK GDP grew by 0.4 per cent over the same period.
83. On 6 May the LSE-*Lancet* Commission [published](#) a report on the future of the NHS, describing the current time as a historic opportunity to strengthen the NHS and improve health and care for all. The authors also highlight the impact of poorly resourced social care programmes.
84. On 7 May Scottish Housing News [highlighted](#) a joint statement by 60 homelessness and human rights organisations condemning UK Government plans to use rough sleeping as grounds for cancelling someone’s right to remain in the UK. The statement is saved [here](#) on the members’ SharePoint site.
85. On 7 May Scotland’s Rural College (SRUC) [published](#) a study on the impacts of Covid-19 carried out by the Rural Policy Centre (SRUC), Newcastle University and the Impact Hub Inverness. The study finds that many more rural residents will be at risk of poverty and financial hardship after lockdown ends unless action is taken.
86. In May the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR):
- [published](#) a report calling for an expansion of the provision of free school meals

and the introduction of healthy food vouchers, and a ban on food linked to deforestation by 2030

- [published](#) findings which show the UK's relative poverty rate among working households has reached a high of 17.4 per cent, with working poverty rates among families with three or more children having reached 42 per cent.
87. On 7 May the Mental Health Foundation [published](#) research on how connecting with nature benefits mental health in Scotland.
 88. On 13 May the Centre for Cities [published](#) findings which show consumer spending on the high street was highest in the North and Midlands when restrictions eased in April. It argues spending in large towns and smaller cities is recovering faster than large urban centres.
 89. In May the Legatum Institute [published](#) a new UK prosperity index that outlines the prosperity of every region and local authority in the UK. The index highlights that the least prosperous local authorities are distributed across the north of England (Blackpool, Middlesbrough, Oldham) and Scotland (Glasgow City, West Dunbartonshire).
 90. On 14 May NSPCC [reported](#) its latest Childline data shows a significant rise in counselling services about emotional or mental health with children and young people. The Childline service carried out 73,088 counselling sessions between April 2020 and March 2021, with 5,646 of these involving children aged 11 or under; an increase of 29 per cent compared to the previous year.
 91. In May researchers from Loughborough University [published](#) a [paper](#) exploring local indicators of child poverty. They found that, even before the pandemic, levels of child poverty in Scotland ranged from nearly one in six children in the Shetland Islands and East Renfrewshire to nearly one in three in Glasgow - once housing costs are considered. The press release for Scotland is saved [here](#).
 92. On 20 May the Mental Welfare Commission for Scotland [published](#) a review of the legality of decision-making regarding moving patients who lacked capacity from Scottish hospitals into care homes at the outset of the pandemic. The Commission studied the detail of 457 individual moves – around 10 per cent of all such moves reported at the time by Public Health Scotland. Of the 457 cases, the Commission found unlawful moves of 20 people. The Commission also found that practice was not consistent within some HSCPs or across them.
 93. On 21 May NASUWT Scotland – The Teachers' Union [warned](#) violence and verbal abuse of teachers is at risk of being normalised in some schools, and argued the poor implementation of restorative behaviour schemes have put the learning of pupils and the safety of teachers at risk. The union also [called for](#) additional support and resources for teachers to manage the demands from the system for determining pupils' grades, and for a formal review to be undertaken of the approach to qualifications in 2021.
 94. On 24 May new research from Amnesty International UK and the Human Rights Consortium Scotland [found](#) there is little evidence the human rights of Scottish citizens were taken into consideration as major public service redesigns took place during the outset of Covid-19.
 95. On 24 May researchers from Robert Gordon University [published](#) an outline of the key issues domestic abuse service providers in Aberdeen, Aberdeenshire, and Orkney have faced throughout the pandemic.

96. On 25 May the David Hume Institute [published](#) a briefing on diversity in the sixth session of the Scottish Parliament. 16 per cent of the new intake are former MPs, and 42 per cent have been councillors. 65 per cent of the 43 new MSPs are women.
97. On 26 May Our Scottish Future [published](#) the findings from a series of virtual citizens assemblies it hosted in February and March. They brought together yes and no voters to discuss the future of Scotland. It found the vast majority agreed further investment in the economy, education, and the NHS were the highest priorities, particularly in the wake of the pandemic.
98. On 26 May the children's commissioners of Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland [published](#) a [letter](#) they sent to Thérèse Coffey, Secretary of State for Work and Pensions. The letter calls for an end to the two-child limit on Universal Credit and Child Tax Credit.
99. On 27 May the Institute for Government [published](#) a report outlining measures for a flexible state aid regime it claims will support the government's efforts to level up and target net zero.
100. In May the Resolution Foundation published:
- The [findings](#) of research into the labour market and the mental health impact of Covid-19 on young people.
 - The launch [report](#) for its Economy 2030 Inquiry, in partnership with the London School of Economics.

COSLA

101. On 12 May COSLA [highlighted](#) that it has worked collaboratively with Public Health Scotland and Sports Scotland to produce a [paper](#) on the positive contribution of physical activity across COSLA's policy areas, the National Performance Framework, and Scotland's public health priorities.

Improvement Service

102. On 10 May the Improvement Service [announced](#) a new partnership with the Scottish Cities Alliance to support officers and elected members to deliver a transition to Net Zero.
103. On 20 May the Improvement Service [published](#) an update on the early learning and childcare expansion. Data collected from local authorities by the Improvement Service indicates that 114,222 children were accessing funded ELC as of the end of February 2021, and of these, 86 per cent were accessing more than the statutory entitlement of 600 hours, with 74,096 children (65 per cent) accessing 1,140 hours funded ELC.
104. On 25 May the Improvement Service [highlighted](#) that the Scottish Government is extending free bus travel to all young people under 19 who live in Scotland. As the accountable body for the National Entitlement Card Scheme, the Improvement Service is working with Transport Scotland and other delivery partners to operationalise the Under 19s Travel Scheme as early as practicable in 2021/22.

Scrutiny, inspection, regulatory and related bodies

Ethical Standards Commissioner

105. On 2 June the Acting Ethical Standards Commissioner [wrote](#) to the Commission seeking its views on his draft strategic plan for 2021-24. It is proposed that the Commission responds to this consultation. Given that the deadline is 30 July, I propose that I prepare a response in conjunction with the Interim Chair and Deputy Chair.

Scottish Public Ombudsman (SPSO)

106. The SPSO's May newsletter [outlines](#) investigation reports, recent SPSO news and highlights emerging issues. More information on the SPSO's work, including detailed investigations and decision reports, is available on the [Our findings webpage](#). The Commission's Financial Audit and Assurance Committee will consider more detailed intelligence from the SPSO on a six-monthly basis at its meeting in May.

Scottish Housing Regulator (SHR)

107. On 13 May the SHR wrote to all social landlords to [advise](#) them of the information it will require them to submit in the quarterly returns on the impact of Covid-19. The new quarterly returns replace the monthly returns which social landlords have been submitting since March last year. The information in the returns will be used to publish quarterly dashboard reports.
108. On 5 May the SHR [published](#) a summary of its work plans for 2021-22. The year ahead will see the Regulator supporting the national Covid-19 response alongside carrying out a programme of planned regulatory activities.

Other UK audit bodies

109. On 7 May the Jersey Audit Office [published](#) a report into Jersey Government's procurement and supply chain management during the Covid-19 pandemic.
110. On 20 May Jersey Audit Office's comptroller & auditor general [issued](#) a certificate on the 2020 annual report and accounts of the States of Jersey.
111. In May the National Audit Office (NAO):
- [published](#) a guidance summary of key information and insights that can be taken from the annual reports and accounts of the Department of Education and related bodies in the education sector in England;
 - [highlighted](#) its updated Covid-19 cost tracker, which puts the estimated cost of the government's response to the pandemic at £372 billion;
 - [published](#) its National Audit Supply Estimate 2021-22;
 - [published](#) an Investigation into the Windrush Compensation Scheme;
 - [published](#) a report on initial learning from the government's response to the Covid-19 pandemic; and
 - [published](#) its framework report on the principles of effective regulation.

UK Government

112. On 4 May the UK Government [announced](#) it will publish a Levelling Up White Paper later this year, which will focus on policy interventions to improve livelihoods across the UK during the pandemic recovery. On 19 May the UK Government [unveiled](#) its levelling up agenda.
113. On 6 May the UK Government [published](#) updated figures for the job retention scheme which shows by Wednesday 31 March, 368,400 people in Scotland were on furlough. The highest uptake was among employees of passenger air transport, hotels and hospitality companies.
114. On 10 May the UK Government [published](#) a joint statement from the UK Chief Medical Officers (CMOs) recommending that the UK Covid-19 alert level move from level 4 to

level 3.

115. On 12 May Boris Johnson [announced](#) in a statement to Parliament that the UK Government would in tandem with the devolved nations establish an independent public inquiry into the handling of the pandemic.
116. On 11 May the Queen [delivered](#) her speech to both Houses of Parliament outlining a total of 30 bills ministers plan to introduce over the next year, including amongst others:
 - legislation to simplify procurement
 - legislation to reduce bureaucracy in the voluntary sector
 - a bill to modernise the planning system to allow more homes to be built.
117. On 14 May the UK Government [published](#) an overview of the voter fraud measures announced in the Queen's Speech. The government claims legislation will make clear local authorities must provide a voter card free of charge, while a range of documents will also be accepted.
118. On 19 May, the UK government [announced](#) its proposals that the Audit, Reporting and Governance Authority (ARGA), announced as a replacement for the Financial Reporting Council last year, will be strengthened with new powers to oversee the local government audit system. ARGA would provide annual reports on the state of local audit and take over responsibility for the updated Code of Local Audit Practice. This follows the December 2020 [response](#) by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to the report from Sir Tony Redmond into the local audit of, and financial reporting by, local authorities in England.
119. On 19 May the Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy (BEIS) and the Home Office [announced](#) almost 3,000 civil service jobs will be moved out of London and south east England, with BEIS creating 60 new jobs in Edinburgh by 2025.
120. On 19 May the Office for National Statistics (ONS) [reported](#) that the annual inflation rate increased to 1.5 per cent in April.
121. On 20 May the UK Government [published](#) the findings of the Williams review into the future structure of the rail industry. The White Paper [points to](#) fragmentation on the network as it recommends the formation of a new public body, Great British Railways.

Other UK news

122. On 4 May Public Finance [highlighted](#) the findings of research into local authority powers relating to climate action, writing that some funding streams available to help local authorities in England fund energy-efficient initiatives are actively working against reducing emissions.
123. On 4 May Unison [highlighted](#) the results of a survey based on responses from 200 maintained nursery schools in England, which found that 34 per cent are cutting staffing and services due to lost income and additional Covid-19 costs.
124. On 5 May the Workplace Training and Development Commission (WTDC), set up by the British Chambers of Commerce in partnership with Indeed, [published](#) its final report into skills and training provision in the UK.
125. On 7 May KPMG [announced](#) that Catherine Burnet has been appointed as the firm's new Head of Audit. The announcement follows the appointment in April of Jon Holt, the previous Head of Audit, as Chief Executive of KPMG UK.

126. On 13 May Public Finance [reported](#) that Audit Wales asked the police to investigate the accounts of Porthcawl Town Council as part of its annual audit. A statement from Porthcawl Town Council is available [here](#).
127. On 14 May the Education Policy Institute [published](#) a report which has found a three-year funding package worth £13.5 billion will be required to reverse the damage to learning in England due to the coronavirus pandemic.
128. On 17 May the John Smith Centre [published](#) findings of a poll conducted by Message House which found 51 per cent of respondents believe MPs should continue to debate and vote remotely when COVID-19 restrictions are lifted, with only a third believing MPs should be required to be in parliament to participate.
129. On 19 May Public Finance [reported](#) that the government has proposed making the replacement to the Financial Reporting Council the new system leader for local audit, following the [Redmond Review](#).
130. On 20 May the Sutton Trust [urged](#) the UK Government to put the development and wellbeing of pre-school children at the centre of the education recovery plan following polling showing a majority of parents were worried about the impact of the pandemic.
131. On 24 May Policy Exchange [published](#) a report, reflecting on how to improve the capacity and capabilities of government. It highlights the role of data management and the role of digitised medical data as a means of improving pandemic response as it highlights a departmental failure to produce data at speed.
132. On 25 May Barnardo's [published](#) a report on the accommodation experiences of young people leaving the care system in England and found that many are offered unsafe, unsuitable and unhealthy housing.
133. On 28 May the Financial Reporting Council (FRC) [issued](#) a revision of its UK auditing standard on the responsibilities of auditors relating to fraud.

Conclusion

134. The Commission is invited to consider this report for noting and in particular:
 - a) In relation to paragraph 12, to note that, subject to the Commission's agreement, the Interim Chair, Interim Deputy Chair and past FAA Committee Chair will prepare a response to the consultation by the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy on the UK's audit, corporate reporting and corporate governance systems in the private sector.
 - b) In relation to paragraph 105, to agree that I will prepare a response in conjunction with the Interim Chair, to the consultation by the Acting Ethical Standards Commissioner on his draft strategic plan for 2021-24.

Paul Reilly
Secretary to the Commission
2 June 2021

APPENDIX 1: Accounts Commission reports in past 12 months – downloads

| Report | Date | Report downloads |
|---|-------------|------------------|
| Equality Outcomes 2021-25 | 27 Apr 21 | 38 |
| Mainstreaming equality and equality outcomes: progress report 2019-21 | 27 April 21 | 38 |
| Improving outcomes for young people through school education | 23 Mar 21 | 3,240 (+1,257) |
| Local Government in Scotland: Financial Overview 2019/20 | 26 Jan 21 | 1,570 (+249) |
| Digital progress in local government | 14 Jan 21 | 1,827 (+174) |
| Digital progress in local government – supplement 1 (checklist) | 14 Jan 21 | 217 (*) |
| Digital progress in local government – supplement 2 (methodology) | 14 Jan 21 | 92 (*) |
| Housing Benefit Performance audit: annual update 2020 | 8 Dec 20 | 214 (*) |
| Best Value Assurance Report: The City of Edinburgh Council | 26 Nov 20 | 1,186 (+106) |
| Covid-19 Strategic Scrutiny Group | 5 Nov 20 | 764 (*) |
| Best Value Assurance Report: Aberdeenshire Council | 22 Oct 20 | 808 (+73) |
| Best Value Assurance Report: Dundee City Council | 29 Sept 20 | 1,038 (+91) |
| Best Value Assurance Report: Moray Council | 27 Aug 20 | 1,451 (+49) |
| Accounts Commission annual report 2019/20 | 2 July 20 | 492 (+36) |
| Best Value Assurance Report: North Ayrshire Council | 30 June 20 | 1,123 (+46) |
| Local government in Scotland Overview 2020 | 23 June 20 | 1,765 (+111) |
| Equal pay in councils - Impact report | 9 June 20 | 704 (*) |
| Best Value Assurance Report: Argyll and Bute Council | 21 May 20 | 1,076 (+37) |

Key:

(x) Increase in numbers since last month

* This figure is below 30

n/a Not applicable.

APPENDIX 2 – Accounts Commission social media engagement data

| | Followers | Posting views | Video views | Links accessed | Retweets | Likes | Replies | Number of publications |
|---------------|-----------|---------------|-------------|----------------|----------|-------|---------|------------------------|
| Jun 20 | 561 (+22) | 5,000 | 1,900 | 53 | 24 | 45 | 2 | 3 |
| Jul 20 | 583 (+22) | 12,600 | 408 | 19 | 30 | 86 | 4 | 1 |
| Aug 20 | 590 (+7) | 7,100 | 129 | 27 | 18 | 18 | 0 | 1 |
| Sep 20 | 605 (+15) | 9,700 | 607 | 82 | 35 | 46 | 2 | 1 |
| Oct 20 | 617 (+12) | 10,700 | 526 | 34 | 26 | 34 | 0 | 1 |
| Nov 20 | 639 (+22) | 23,400 | 730 | 106 | 49 | 53 | 3 | 2 |
| Jan 21 | 683 (+30) | 50,000 | 2,400 | 128 | 94 | 103 | 9 | 2 |
| Feb 21 | 686 (+3) | 11,000 | 307 | 20 | 9 | 10 | 1 | 0 |
| Mar 21 | 701 (+15) | 36,100 | 2,100 | 76 | 66 | 138 | 10 | 1 |
| Apr 21 | 704 (+3) | 3,300 | n/a | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| May 21 | 726 (+22) | 46,300 | 836 | 122 | 95 | 148 | 9 | 1 |

Increase on previous month shown in brackets