

MEETING: 10 FEBRUARY 2022

REPORT BY: SECRETARY TO THE COMMISSION

SECRETARY'S UPDATE REPORT

Purpose

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 Covid-19.
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 and activities

3. Audit Scotland collects media coverage on all reports published by the Accounts Commission. [Appendix 1](#) provides download and view statistics for the Commission's published reports and blogs over the last 12 months, as of 31 December 2021. [Appendix 2](#) provides additional information on the overall engagement that reports, and other business received on social media. Alongside the promotional activities noted below, the Commission repromoted its recent joint reports with the Auditor General on [community empowerment](#) and [education outcomes](#). The February meeting of the Commission has been [promoted](#) using Commission member Sophie Flemig's overview video of the December meeting.
4. On 1 December, Commission member Sheila Gunn attended an event hosted by the Accounts Commission and the Improvement Service for local education leaders. The event explored the findings and recommendations of the joint performance report [Improving outcomes for young people through school education](#).
5. On 9 December, the Commission met to discuss, amongst other items, the Falkirk Council Best Value Assurance Report (see paragraph 10). Community groups across Falkirk were tagged in social media posts promoting the meeting. Targeted advertising of the meeting on Facebook reached 1,400 people, with an engagement rate of 1.9%. Engagement rates over 1% on Facebook are considered good.
6. On 10 December, to mark International Human Rights day, Interim Chair Elma Murray posted a [vlog](#) on Twitter talking about equalities being one of the Accounts Commission's priorities and one of four main areas of focus in its five-year Strategy 2021-26. The vlog was promoted on social media and was viewed 108 times. As a result, the Commission's [Strategy](#) page was viewed 16 times (compared to zero views in the preceding three weeks).

7. On 15 December Elma Murray stepped down as Interim Chair of the Accounts Commission and Tim McKay, the Interim Deputy Chair, assumed the role of Interim Chair until the end of 2021.
8. On 20 December the Scottish Government [announced](#) the appointment of Willian Moyes as Chair of the Accounts Commission from 1 January 2022 until 31 December 2025. This news was promoted by the Commission across all social media platforms.
9. On 21 December the Commission [published](#) its new Statutory Performance Information Direction 2021, accompanied by a [blog](#) by Tim McKay, Interim Deputy Chair, on the importance of Public Performance Reporting for councils. The Direction will apply for the three audit years from 1 April 2022.
10. On 13 January the Commission [published](#) its Best Value Assurance Report on Falkirk Council alongside a [video](#) by Tim McKay as Interim Deputy Chair. The report found that the council had done well in tackling the impact of Covid, in particular the way it had worked with its health partners, and that some services were performing well and improving. However, leaders now needed to make and implement some big decisions about how to deliver sustainable services and make the necessary savings of £70 million over the next five years. The report is being taken to the next Falkirk Council meeting on 15 February 2022. The report had been downloaded 481 times by 26 January. This compares to a total of 503 downloads for the last Best Value Assurance report published in October 2021 (Appendix 1).
11. On 27 January the Commission [published](#) a joint briefing with the Auditor General on the sustainability of social care services across Scotland alongside a [video](#) from the Chair. The briefing says fundamental issues and threats to the future sustainability of Scotland's social care system need to be addressed urgently. The pandemic has exacerbated long-standing challenges, highlighting the precarious situation of many vulnerable people who rely on social care or support. Accounts Commission member Stephen Moore set out the key messages in interviews with the BBC, STV, and on Radio Scotland's Good Morning Scotland programme.
12. Twenty four hours after publication the social care briefing had been viewed 12,223 times across a range of social media platforms. The Twitter post was viewed 1,738 times, with an engagement rate of 4.5% which is high given that above 1% is considered good. Although not an equal comparison due to the significant activity of community groups on social media, this compares to a total of 21,328 views and an engagement rate of 1.8% for the community empowerment briefing published in October 2021. The Chair's video was also viewed 463 times in the first 24 hours of publication.

Forthcoming publications and activities

13. During February, the following activities are planned:
 - A vlog on the February Commission meeting
 - Issuing the latest four-monthly Commission newsletters to Scottish councillors and to communities and third sector organisations
14. The Commission's sponsors for climate change work, Andrew Burns and Sharon O'Connor, are considering a draft baseline review on climate change that Audit Scotland plans to publish in March 2022. This includes a summary of national recommendations made to public bodies which highlights the areas where improvement is most needed. The review will cover all public bodies and help to inform future audit work. The Interim Director will report to a future meeting of the Commission on future work in the area of climate change.

15. The publication of the performance audit of Scotland's financial response to Covid-19 has been delayed slightly from mid-May to 9 June 2022. The audit is progressing well, and the team discussed emerging messages with the Accounts Commission sponsors (Sophie Flemig and Sheila Gunn) and the Auditor General on 14 January and will be considered by the Performance Audit Committee at its February meeting. All at the meeting recognise the need for flexibility in both our approach and timescales for this piece of work and agreed to slightly delay publication for the following reasons:

- The audit relies on findings from other audit work such as the Local Government Overview and business support briefing paper. Both of which have delayed publication dates because of difficulties obtaining data.
- Information from the Scottish Government on individual funds is held at a portfolio level and not centrally. This has resulted in additional work for the team in collating the evidence to make judgements. The team recently asked the Scottish Government for evidence for ten sample funds which is not expected to be received until late January.
- The team have meetings arranged with Director Generals for January and February, and it is likely that these will shape the evidence and messages.

Other Commission business

16. At its meeting on 9 December, South Ayrshire Council [unanimously accepted](#) the findings of the Commission and approved a draft action plan in response to the [Best Value Assurance Report](#) on the Council, published in October.

17. In December and January, the Commission submitted responses to the following consultations/inquiries.

- HM Inspectorate of Constabulary Scotland's (HCMIS) consultation on their scrutiny plan for 2022-25. On 7 December Gill Imery, HM Chief Inspector of Constabulary in Scotland, [wrote](#) to the Commission about their [consultation](#) on the three-year Scrutiny Plan for 2022-2025. This joint [response](#) was submitted.
- The Scottish Parliament's Health, Social Care and Sport Committee's inquiry into the health and wellbeing of children and young people in Scotland – a joint [response](#) with the Auditor General was submitted
- The Scottish Government's consultation on a Fire and Rescue Framework for Scotland – a joint [response](#) with the Auditor General was submitted.
- The Scottish Parliament's Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee's inquiry into the progress towards Scotland's net zero targets. This [response](#) was submitted.
- The Scottish Parliament's Education, Children & Young People Committee's [inquiry](#) into the effectiveness of the Scottish Attainment Challenge in raising the attainment of children from deprived backgrounds. Due to the short consultation period, it was agreed that Audit Scotland submit a response on behalf of both the Commission and Auditor General to be provided to the Commission in due course.

18. Members can review the members' communications schedule on the [members' SharePoint site](#). This includes a list of planned publications and 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 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

directly to the [schedule](#).

19. On 1 February Interim Deputy Chair Tim McKay and member Stephen Moore met with representatives of Falkirk Council to discuss the [Best Value Assurance Report](#) (BVAR) on the Council published on 13 January. They were accompanied by Paul Reilly (Secretary to the Commission), Stephen Reid (Partner, EY (appointed auditor)) and Mark McCabe (Audit Manager, Audit Scotland (audit team)). Falkirk Council was represented by councillors Cecil Meiklejohn, Leader of the Council (Scottish National Party); Robert Bissett, Leader of the Scottish Labour Party group; and Nigel Harris, Depute Leader of the Scottish Conservative group. They were accompanied by Kenneth Lawrie, Chief Executive; Robert Naylor, Director of Children's Services; Malcolm Bennie, Director of Place Services; Karen Algie, Head of People, Technology & Transformation; Rebecca McDonald, Change Manager; and Bryan Smail, Chief Finance Officer. A note of the meeting has been shared with Commission members. The Council will consider the BVAR on 15 February.

Auditor General

20. On 1 and 2 December the Auditor General joined the [ACCA International Public Sector Conference](#), speaking alongside his counterparts from Jamaica and the Maldives in a session on realising trust in public finances on 2 December.
21. On 6 December the Auditor General joined a Fraser of Allander Institute (FAI) webinar panel looking ahead to the Scottish Budget 2022/23 considering the governments options for its tax and spend policy and the implications of these options.
22. On 9 December the Auditor General published a [Section 22¹ follow up report](#) on Bòrd na Gàidhlig following a [Section 22 report](#) that identified multiple failings in the oversight and senior management of the organisation and outlined a number of areas for improvement on the 2018/19 accounts. The update report advises the Bòrd has responded well and undertaken key actions concerning the structure and capacity of the leadership team, the non-executive board membership and skills gaps, the roles of the Senior Management team, committees, board and sponsors and increasing the openness and transparency of Committee and board meetings.
23. On 9 December the Auditor General emailed all Audit Scotland staff with an update on audit quality. The [email](#) and [progress report](#) can be found on the members SharePoint site.
24. On 10 December, to mark International Human Rights day the Auditor General posted a [vlog](#) on Twitter about how human rights and equalities are central to reporting on public services in Scotland.
25. On 14 December the Auditor General [published](#) a follow up Section 22 report on NHS Highland commenting on progress over the last two years and reporting that NHS Highland has improved its governance, leadership and culture, and managed to reduce its spending. The report advises the board must now focus on addressing its challenging future financial position.
26. On 16 December the Auditor General [published](#) a Section 22 report on the 2020/21 audit of the Scottish Government consolidated accounts advising the government needs to be more transparent about its spending in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, following a

¹ Section 22 reports are prepared by the Auditor General if any specific concerns or issues have been raised in the annual audit of one of the public bodies for which he is responsible. This is done under Section 22(3) of the Public Finance and Accountability (Scotland) Act 2000.

year in which its budget grew by a quarter.

27. On 20 December the Auditor General [published](#) a Section 22 report on the 2020/21 audit of the Commissioner for Ethical Standards in Public Life in Scotland identifying that public trust in the body is now at risk because of serious failings in the way it is run. Failings identified by the appointed auditor include;
- an absence of openness and transparency
 - a breakdown in key relationships with stakeholders and within its own office
 - no effective scrutiny or challenge which might have flagged up issues earlier
28. On 14 January the Auditor General [published](#) a report on the Administration of Scottish income tax 2020/21 to accompany the Comptroller and Auditor General, Gareth Davies', [published](#) report on HMRC's administration of Scottish income tax, including the final calculation of Scottish revenues for the 2019/20 tax year.
29. On 20 January the Auditor General [published](#) a report on how effectively the Scottish Government, Skills Development Scotland (SDS) and the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) work together to ensure that Scotland's skills system responds to individuals' and employers' needs. The report found that the Scottish Government needs to take urgent action to ensure essential progress in improving how workforce skills are planned and provided and should clearly set out its strategic aims and objectives for skills alignment, and how progress will be measured.

Audit Scotland

30. In December and January Audit Scotland held the following events as part of its keynote event and insight programme which has now concluded:
- On 1 December, Elaine Boyd, Associate Director for Audit Quality and Appointments and ambassador for the Open University to support learning and employment opportunities for people with disabilities, hosted a discussion on how to create accessible and inclusive workplaces for people with disabilities. The session was recorded and is available for members to view on the Audit Scotland's [intranet](#).
 - On 8 December, Chief Operating Officer, Diane McGiffen was joined by representatives from the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) Scotland and Heriot-Watt University to discuss how we work in post-pandemic Scotland and the potential for technology to transform workplaces and how public services are delivered. The session was recorded and is available for members to view on the Audit Scotland's [intranet](#).
 - On 13 December the Data Analytics team introduced Audit Scotland's new financial ledger analytics tool, Asc. The session was recorded and is available for members to view on the Audit Scotland's [intranet](#).
 - On 25 January, Paul Johnson, Director of the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) chaired a keynote event 'Audit without borders' with a panel made up of the four Auditor Generals for the UK. Panel members shared knowledge, experience and learning from across the UK. Links to this event were shared with Commission members. The session was recorded and will be available in the near future for members to view.
31. During January Audit Scotland launched a recruitment campaign for a number of additional posts across Corporate Services, PABV and ASG including an Audit Director in Audit Services Group (ASG).

32. In January Audit Scotland launched its annual staff audit quality survey across ASG and Performance Audit and Best Value (PABV) groups asking for views on how well people feel supported to deliver quality audit work. The results will be used to help shape training and development.
33. On 20 January, Audit Director, Gordon Smail joined a panel of speakers at an ICAS event sharing insights and experiences of how chartered accountants working in the public sector have managed challenges relating to audit work during the pandemic. Information about the event is available on the [members SharePoint site](#).

Issues affecting Scottish local government

Scottish Government

34. On 9 December Kate Forbes, Minister for Finance and Digital Economy, [set out](#) the Scottish Government's spending and tax plans for 2022-23. Please see item 8 on the agenda for a briefing on the implications of the 2022-23 budget for local government. A [carbon assessment](#) and an [Equality and Fairer Scotland impact assessment](#) were also published. Accompanying information on rates and bands for [Scottish Income Tax](#) for 2022/23, a [public sector pay policy](#) for 2022/23 and [Medium term financial strategy](#) were also published. The Scottish Fiscal Commission also [updated](#) its economic and fiscal forecasts.
35. On 20 December the government published [details](#) of how the £12.5 billion allocated for local authorities in the budget will be distributed. It notes council are being given a settlement equivalent to a 5.1% real terms increase with authorities now allowed to set levels of council tax following a government induced freeze during the pandemic. On 27 January, at the Scottish Parliament's debate of the Government's budget bill, Finance Secretary Kate Forbes confirmed the Scottish Government will allocate an [additional £120 million to local authorities](#) in the budget this year. An amendment will be brought forward during Stage 2 of the Budget Bill, with funding representing the equivalent of a 4% increase in Council Tax, following the UK Government advising that the Scottish Government should anticipate further funding for 2021-22.
36. On 3 December the Scottish Government emailed key stakeholders details about changes to the [revised protocol](#) on the application of terms and conditions of employment during the Coronavirus outbreak as of 30 November and as agreed with trade unions. The key changes related to the request for employers to maximise home working, references to 'green, amber and red' list countries as there are now only 'red' list countries and removal of all references to the furlough scheme as this ended on 30 September 2021.
37. On 14 December the Scottish Government [published](#) details of the terms of reference and chair for the public inquiry into the handling of Covid 19 in Scotland. The terms of reference for the inquiry covers 12 areas of investigation, each covering a strategic element of the handling of the pandemic, to identify lessons to be learned and recommendations. The period covered by the inquiry will be from 1 January 2020 to 31 December 2022, and it will also consider pandemic planning undertaken before this. The Honourable Lady Poole QC, Senator of the College of Justice of Scotland, will chair the inquiry.

Scottish Government consultations

38. Throughout December and January, the Scottish Government announced a number of consultations and on 24 January [published](#) guidance on consultations in the Scottish Government, covering what their purpose, how responses are used and reported, and the benefits and limitations of consultations. The consultations have been split into two groups with appropriate proposals below;

- Consultations likely to be of interest to members and where it is proposed the Commission does not respond as follows;
 - A [consultation](#) on a new heating benefit that will give around 400,000 low income households the reassurance of a guaranteed £50 payment every winter. The Low Income Winter Heating Assistance will be introduced from winter 2022 to replace the current UK Government Cold Weather Payment scheme. It closes on 23 February 2022.
 - A [consultation](#) on the lessons to learn from the Covid pandemic, and the proposed new strategic arrangements for pandemic PPE supply in Scotland. It is due to close on 22 March 2022.
 - A consultation on the framework document on its forthcoming Scottish Resource Spending Review. The consultation will run until 27 March and the review will be published in May 2022. (This is referred to in item 8 on today's agenda on a briefing on Scottish budget.)
 - A [consultation](#) on the new national litter and fly tipping strategy. Proposed actions are grouped in three strategic themes: behaviour change, services and infrastructure and enforcement. It will run until 31 March 2022.
 - A [consultation](#) on regulations and guidance in local development planning. It will seek views on the secondary legislative requirements and the draft guidance to stakeholders on implementing the future local development plan system. The consultation will close on 31 March 2022.
 - A [consultation](#) on draft regulations for open space strategies and play sufficiency assessments. The consultation will close on 31 March 2022.
 - A [consultation](#) on its rental sector strategy, inviting views on how to progress the right to an adequate home and ensure all tenants have access to secure and stable tenancies across both private and social sector tenancies. The deadline to respond is 15 April 2022.
 - A [consultation](#) on the proposed new dedicated National Public Energy Agency by 2025, to lead on transformational change to the way homes, workplaces and community buildings are heated across Scotland. The consultation closed on 8 February 2022.
- Consultations likely to be of interest to members and where it is proposed the Commission does respond as follows;
 - A [consultation](#) on proposals for reviewing the effectiveness of the Public Sector Equality Duty in Scotland. The consultation sets out proposals both for legislative changes to the Scottish Specific Duties and changes to the wider implementation environment. The consultation will run until 7 March 2022, and it is proposed the Commission responds.
 - A joint [consultation](#) with COSLA on proposals for new prevention of homelessness duties. They are seeking views on two broad themes, the first involves legal duties on a range of public bodies to prevent homelessness. Secondly, they are looking to understand whether changes to existing legislation ensure homelessness is prevented at an earlier stage. The deadline for submissions is Thursday 31 March 2022, and it is proposed the Commission responds jointly with the Auditor General.

Local government general

39. On 7 December the Scottish Government published a [code of conduct for councillors](#) and a [code of conduct for members of devolved public bodies](#), setting out standards of behaviour expected to be followed by elected members of local authorities and those who serve on the boards of public bodies in Scotland. Issued by ministers under the Ethical Standards in Public Life etc. (Scotland) Act 2000, the Scottish Government has asked all public bodies to adopt the new Code within six months. I will report back to the Commission on this matter to ensure that the Commission complies with this. During December the Standards Commission for Scotland published revised [Guidance](#) on the Code, updated and revised their [Advice Notes](#) for Members and Councillors in light of changes to the Code and developed some relevant training materials available [online](#).
40. On 9 December the Scottish Government [published](#) its second national report on corporate parenting, providing an overview of corporate parents' activities over the last three years across Scotland and how duties to support children and young people with care experience have been delivered. The report concludes that corporate parents should have a clear focus on working together and ensuring new policies, practice and participation approaches underpin the delivery of the priorities. It also identifies one of the foundations is listening to and meaningfully involving children and young people in decision making about their care.
41. On 14 December the Scottish Government published a joint [letter](#) to Priti Patel, Home Secretary, from Shona Robison MSP, Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice, Housing and Local Government, and Jane Hutt AS/MS, the Welsh Government's Minister for Social Justice. The letter calls for "urgent talks" with the Home Office about unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and asylum dispersal issues for Scottish local authorities.
42. On 26 January Transport Scotland [published](#) the Scottish Government's draft vision for public electric vehicle charging in Scotland. It pledges to build on existing provision by introducing a new public electric vehicle charging fund, which will provide up to £60 million to local authorities over the next four years, with approximately half of this funding anticipated to be invested from the private sector.

Health and social care

43. On 30 November the Scottish Government [announced](#) more than £11 million has been awarded to two drugs projects to enable them to expand their residential rehabilitation service as part of a commitment to increase the number of beds in Scotland by 50% to 650 by 2026.
44. On 10 December the Scottish Government [published](#) findings from a survey of over 1,000 pupils from 50 secondary schools in Scotland undertaken between February and April 2021, on questions about mental wellbeing, relationships and social media use. On average pupils reported reasonable outcomes relating to mental wellbeing, relationships and social media but certain characteristics were identified with poorer outcomes. Those most at risk were female, older and had a physical or mental health condition. Pupils living in rural settings with either a physical or mental health condition were also more likely to experience specific poor outcomes.
45. On 14 December the Scottish Government [published](#) its quarterly report on suspected drug deaths in Scotland for July to September 2021. It reported a fall over the two most recent quarters but that levels of suspected drug deaths remained high and there continued to be an upward trend.
46. On 7 December Public Health Scotland published its [Child and Adolescent Mental](#)

[Health Services \(CAMHS\) waiting times](#) report with figures up to 30 September 2021. It reported a decline in performance for the percentage of children and young people starting treatment compared to the previous quarter and compared to the same quarter in the previous year. But there was an improvement in the percentage of children and young people seen within 18 weeks, although this remained below the Scottish Government target of 90 percent. Figures for NHS Forth Valley were [reported](#) in the local press on 14 December, with 525 young people waiting more than 18 weeks out of 617 young people and 179 waiting for more than a year. This performance was described as ‘truly appalling’ by the Mid-Scotland and Fife MSP Alexander Stewart and an apology from an NHS Forth Valley spokesperson for the wait length was included. A further related news story was [published](#) by the BBC on 26 January about one family’s experience, highlighting concerns about the serious inadequacies of Children’s Mental Health Services across Scotland.

47. On 11 January the Scottish Government [announced](#) that because of staffing availability due to Covid, the Scottish Government and COSLA, working with local partners across the public services in Scotland, have agreed to prioritise essential social care services and agreed a joint approach to maximise social care support. A joint statement was also [published](#) by Ministers and COSLA, asking all public, private and voluntary sector services to make social care support a national priority and take action to support some of the most vulnerable people in society.
48. On 13 January the Scottish Government [published](#) details of a £4 million package to expand support services to unpaid carers in recognition of the extra pressure they have faced because of the pandemic. £3 million has been allocated to local carer centres, £200,000 to the Young Carers Package, £377,000 to Family Fund support and £590,000 to wellbeing support services.
49. On 14 January the Scottish Government [published](#) details that the Protection of Vulnerable Groups (PVG) checks and Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC) registration will be funded to help encourage more staff into the social care profession and address winter staffing pressures. The entry costs for new staff will be paid until the end of March 2022. Unison [published](#) their response, highlighting how unfair the proposals were to those who were existing social care workers and urged the Scottish Government to reconsider the plans.
50. During January the Scottish Government announced the appointments of the [chair](#) and [vice chair](#) of the Drug Deaths Taskforce, following the [resignation](#) of the previous chair and vice chair in a joint letter to the Minister for Drugs Policy (Angela Constance) on 23 December 2021. With immediate effect David Strang, a former Chief Constable who previously chaired the Independent Inquiry into Mental Health Services in Tayside and who was HM Chief Inspector of Prisons in Scotland was appointed as chair and Professor Fiona McQueen, former Chief Nursing Officer and former Executive Nurse Director at NHS Lanarkshire and NHS Ayrshire and Arran was appointed vice chair.
51. On 27 January the Scottish Government [announced](#) the establishment of a new National Collaborative to ensure the views of people with Lived and Living Experience (LLE) are reflected in all aspects of the national mission on drug deaths. It will be chaired by human rights law expert Professor Alan Miller.

Education

52. In response to the Scottish Government’s [consultation](#) on education reform, two agencies published information on their responses which advocated participation from learners. Children in Scotland’s response called for a [child-rights approach](#) and the Scottish Qualifications Authority’s [response](#) called for a single integrated approach to the curriculum and assessment, and advocated investments in digital assessments.

53. On 3 December Education Scotland [announced](#) HM Inspectors of Education will not resume the routine early learning and childcare and school inspection programme as originally planned. The HM Chief Inspector of Education, advised that if Covid-19 conditions allow, from mid-February 2022, HM Inspectors will carry out 'recovery' visits to support the education sector as it continues to respond to the impact of the current pandemic.
54. On 11 December the Scottish Government [published](#) details of funding for education recovery set out in the budget. The Scottish Attainment Challenge will receive £200 million while £145.5 million has been committed for the sustained employment of additional teachers and classroom assistants.
55. On 13 December the Scottish Qualifications Agency [advised](#) it had written to all schools, colleges and training providers confirming its intention for national examinations to take place and restating its contingency plans for examinations in 2022.
56. On 14 December the Scottish Government [published](#) statistics for 2020 to 2021 on the achievement of curriculum for excellence (CFE) levels across Scotland. This includes information on national performance of schools in literacy and numeracy and covers all pupils in publicly funded mainstream schools in Primary 1, 4 and 7. The [supplementary tables](#) provide full results including information broken down by local authority. Data for secondary school pupils and special school pupils were not collected in 2020/21 and was not collected for any pupils in 2019/20.
57. On 14 December the Scottish Government [published](#) its Achieving Excellence and equity: 2022 National Improvement Framework and Improvement Plan that sets out the vision and priorities for Scottish education and the improvement activity to be undertaken. The key priorities of the National Improvement Framework are as follows;
- Placing the human rights and needs of every child and young person at the centre of education
 - Improvement in children and young people's health and wellbeing
 - Closing the attainment gap between the most and least disadvantaged children and young people
 - Improvement in skills and sustained, positive school-leaver destinations for all young people
 - Improvement in attainment, particularly in literacy and numeracy.

The Improvement plan considers the evidence and improvement actions relating to the following six areas:

- School and Early Learning and Childcare leadership
 - Teacher and practitioner professionalism
 - Parent/carer involvement and engagement
 - Curriculum and assessment
 - School and ELC improvement
 - Performance information
58. On 16 December the Scottish Government [published](#) the findings of a jointly commissioned review with COSLA of the six regional improvement collaboratives (RICs) for children, education and skills. The review found evidence of RICs having an

impact on skills development of school staff, new approaches to delivering lessons in the classroom, skills in assessment and moderation, leadership and improvement planning skills and building a collaborative culture between local authorities.

59. On 11 January the Scottish Government [announced](#) that local authorities will receive up to £5 million of additional support to ensure ventilation in schools and early years settings meets the latest Covid-19 safety guidance. The funding is to improve air flow, such as adjustments to windows and doors, use of fan systems and use of air cleaning devices in line with existing safety guidance.

Communities

60. On 1 December the Scottish Government [published](#) details on the three month extension of a superfast broadband voucher scheme. Homes and businesses in Scotland that are unable to access fast internet speeds now have until 31 March 2022 to apply for funding worth up to £400 under the Reaching 100% (R100) Scottish Broadband Voucher Scheme. An additional £250 is available for those in the hardest-to-reach areas.
61. On 17 December the Scottish Government [published](#) details of £25 million Regeneration Capital Grant Funding which was allocated to support 22 locally developed place-based projects across 15 local authorities, tackling inequalities and promoting sustainable and inclusive economic recovery from the pandemic.
62. On 17 December the Scottish Government [published](#) an interim Gypsy/Traveller site design guide developed under the [Gypsy/Traveller Action Plan](#) that was jointly published with COSLA in October 2019 and committed to more and better accommodation for Gypsy/Travellers. The Scottish Government's Housing to 2040 announced the Gypsy/Traveller Accommodation Fund of up to £20 million in capital funding available to local authorities over five years to 2026.
63. On 23 December the Scottish Government [published](#) its strategy to tackle fuel poverty in Scotland, setting out policies and proposals for national government, local authorities and third sector partners to help meet the targets set out in the Fuel Poverty (Targets, Definition and Strategy) (Scotland) Act 2019. The strategy highlights interim targets for 2030 and 2035 and sets out a range of objectives in relation to evidence gathering; capital investment; energy markets; guidance; monitoring frameworks; and stigma.
64. On 4 January the Scottish Government [published](#) details about an additional £16 million for local authorities to help tackle homelessness by moving people swiftly from temporary accommodation into settled homes. The funding includes a £6.5 million investment in the Housing First pathfinder to support people with multiple and complex needs and will be awarded over the next two financial years.
65. On 16 January the Scottish Government [published](#) details of almost £400,000 funding awarded to over 30 public and school libraries across Scotland to deliver a range of projects including initiatives to tackle climate change and promote sustainable development.
66. On 22 January the Scottish Government [published](#) details of six community projects to receive a share of almost £600,000 from the Scottish Government's Island Communities fund. The projects are located in five local authority areas, Argyll and Bute, Comhairle nan Eilean Siar, North Ayrshire, Orkney and Shetland.

Economy and business

67. On 12 December the Scottish Government [outlined](#) funding in its 2022/23 budget that relates to training, skills and supporting business. £68.3 million is being allocated for

employability and training to address skills shortages and create sustainable jobs, while £192 million is being allocated to boost the digital economy. The domestic rates package will save ratepayers over £800 million and the retail, hospitality and leisure sectors will receive ongoing relief at 50% until July 2022. Other funding includes £215 million for the Scottish National Investment Bank, £370.5 million for enterprise agencies, £49.2 million for VisitScotland and £225 million for Skills Development Scotland.

68. On 17 December and 21 January the Scottish Government published its labour market monthly briefing for [December 2021](#) and [January 2022](#) – a summary of employment, unemployment and economic inactivity sourced from the Labour Force Survey and other labour market statistics from a range of official sources for Scotland and the UK. Some of the information is broken down into Scottish local authority areas. On the 14 December and 18 January SPICe published overviews of the labour market for Scotland in [December](#) and [January](#).
69. On 17 December the Scottish Government [published](#) details of the 22 community projects across 15 different local authorities to receive a share of the £25 million funding from the Regional Generation Capital Grant Fund. These locally developed place-based projects aim to tackle inequalities and promote sustainable and inclusive economic recovery from the pandemic.
70. On 17 December the Scottish Government [announced](#) the breakdown of a £100 million financial package to support businesses experiencing cancellations due to the rapid spread of the new Omicron variant over the festive period. It was broken down into:
 - £66 million for eligible hospitality businesses
 - £20 million for the culture sector
 - £8 million for food and drink supply chain businesses including wholesalers
 - £3 million for the wedding sector
 - £3 million for the worst affected businesses in the tourism sector, including international inbound tour operators.
71. On the 29 December the Scottish Government [announced](#) targeted funding of £107 million for businesses, to help mitigate the impact of the Omicron variant of Covid-19.
72. On 13 January the Finance ministers of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland upon the Treasury to guarantee that money allocated to support Covid responses will be provided in full, following a meeting with the Chief Secretary to the Treasury.
73. On 26 January the Scottish Government [published](#) its background tables and charts related to Scotland's Labour Market – people, places and regions 2020/21. This includes charts and tables that provide detailed information relating to each Scottish local authority area.

Covid-19 measures

74. The Scottish Government undertook a wide range of measures, actions and published revised guidance during December to help reduce and mitigate against the spread of the Omicron variant of Covid-19, including;
 - Accelerating the [booster vaccination programme](#), introduced a target that all adults over 18 years would be able to book a booster appointment by 31 December 2021 and published an [updated version](#) of Scotland's Autumn/Winter vaccination strategy.

- Reducing [social interaction](#) indoors to a maximum of three households and encouraging everyone to take a lateral flow test before meeting others.
 - Providing [additional funding](#) of £100 million to ensure the Self-Isolation Support Grant was available to those who need it, and a £100 million financial package for eligible businesses.
 - Published a range of guidance to help reduce the risk and spread of the Omicron variant.
75. Throughout January as the as the impact of the Omicron variant was reviewed, a number of changes to restrictions were announced and guidance updated as well as a continued widening of the vaccination programme. This included the following actions, changes and updated guidance:
- Bringing [forward the second dose of the vaccine](#) for 12-15year olds.
 - [Reducing the requirements](#) for self-isolation and testing
 - For those travelling to Scotland from abroad, [removing the requirements](#) for a pre-departure Covid-19 test and to self-isolate on arrival. Subsequently removal of [the testing requirements for international travellers](#) where they are fully vaccinated on arrival to Scotland and updating guidance on [international travel](#)
 - The [resumption of large outdoor events](#) without physical distancing or capacity limits but continuing with Covid-19 certification requirements from events with 1,000 attendees.
 - Reducing the requirement for [new care home residents to self-isolate](#) on admission unless they tested positive for Covid-19 and a reduction of the isolation period for those who are required. The removal of [any set limits](#) to the number of households visiting care home residents. Revised [guidance](#) was also published.
 - The [reopening of night clubs](#).
 - [Removing the restrictions](#) of one metre physical distancing in hospitality and leisure settings, requiring table service in hospitality venues, and attendance limits at indoor events.
 - The [resumption of non-professional indoor contact sports](#).
 - An update on [guidance](#) on working from home and a recommendation that from 31 January employers consider [implementing hybrid working](#).
 - Publication of revised guidance for [cultural performances and events](#).

Climate emergency

76. On 6 December the Scottish Government [published](#) details that more than £13 million has been awarded to local authorities to increase the quantity and quality of recycling in Scotland with nine more local authorities successfully bidding for support from the Scottish Government's Recycling Improvement Fund. The fund will total £70 million over five years. A COSLA spokesperson said "Local Government in Scotland is fully committed to combatting climate change and supporting the Just Transition to a net zero society."
77. On 7 December the Climate Change Committee (CCC), [published](#) its tenth annual progress report on reducing emissions in Scotland, to the Scottish Parliament, including over 70 recommendations. It claims the Scottish Government has made ambitious commitments in areas which are not devolved to Scotland and a significant

proportion of the Scottish Government's ambitions for net-zero rely on carbon capture and storage and suggests recent funding decisions may hamper efforts to deliver an operational facility in the northeast by 2030. Noting the need for contingencies to be developed, the CCC warns the Scottish Government should be more transparent in how policies will be delivered and recommends that a comprehensive policy framework is developed.

78. On 14 December the Scottish Government [announced](#) that Scotland's deposit return scheme will go live on 16 August 2023 with a phased implementation and aims to achieve 90 per cent collection rates by 2024.
79. On 16 December the Scottish Government published its [response](#) to the [report by Scotland's Climate Assembly](#) which was published in June 2021 and included 81 recommendations for the Scottish Government. The response sets out the existing and proposed actions government will take to address the recommendations and specifically states it will work with the Children's Parliament.
80. On 14 January the Scottish Government [published](#) its report and findings from an evaluation of Scotland's Local Heat and Energy Efficiency Strategy (LHEES) pilot programme, which involved pilot projects, delivered by all 32 Scottish local authorities. LHEES will set out long-term plans for energy efficiency and heat decarbonisation for all buildings in each local authority area and will be crucial in delivery of national emissions reduction and fuel poverty targets.
81. On 18 January the Scottish Government [published](#) details of £8.7 million investment for eight projects across seven local authority areas, through the Low Carbon Infrastructure Transition Programme. In addition to the Scottish Government investment, project partners will provide match funding, taking the total investment to £24.4million.

Scottish Parliament

82. Progress with the Scottish Budget 2022/23, including implications for local government, is reported in the briefing at item 8 on today's agenda.
83. In December and January, SPICe published:
 - A [blog](#) on citizens' assemblies
 - A [briefing](#) on child poverty in Scotland since the 1960s
 - A [briefing](#) on how the Covid-19 pandemic has changed the way the Scottish Parliament works.
 - A [blog](#) and a [briefing](#) on the 2022-23 Budget and two related infographics, one considering [headline figures and changes](#) in cash and real terms and one on [taxes](#).
 - A [briefing](#) on the Social Security budget 2022-23
 - A [briefing](#) on the Local Government Finance and provisional allocations to local authorities
 - A [briefing](#) on adults with incapacity
 - Launched a [central hub](#) for SPICe blogs and briefings on the draft National Planning Framework 4 (NPF4).
 - A [blog](#) on the health and wellbeing of children and young people.

- A [blog](#) on retrofitting homes for net-zero.
- A [blog](#) on the Budget bill debate.

Parliamentary committee news

Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee

84. During December and January, the Committee took evidence on and [considered](#): subordinate legislation; Non-Domestic Rates (Coronavirus) (Scotland) Bill; National Planning Framework 4 and budget scrutiny.

Public Audit Committee

85. During December and January, the Committee took evidence on and [considered](#): its work programme; five Section 22 reports on the 2020/21 audits of the Crofting Commission; NHS National Services; National Records of Scotland; Bòrd na Gàidhlig and NHS Highland; a briefing on Personal protective equipment; the 2020/21 audit of Scottish Government Consolidated Accounts; the 2020/21 audit of National Records of Scotland; and the 2020/21 audit of the Commissioner for Ethical Standards in Public Life in Scotland and the work programme.
86. On 2 December the Auditor General and Senior Manager Graeme Greenhill and Pat Kenny, Director of Audit and Assurance Deloitte LLP, gave [evidence](#) on the [Crofting Commission section 22 report](#). Following this the Auditor General was joined by Carole Grant and Ashleigh Madjitey who gave evidence on the Section 22 report on the [2021/22 audit of NHS National Services](#) Scotland and a [briefing](#) on Personal Protective Equipment.
87. On 9 December the Auditor General, Senior Manager Audit Services Asif Haseeb, Senior Auditor Graeme Samson and Audit Scotland's Correspondence Manager Dharshi Santhakumaran, gave [evidence](#) on the [National Records of Scotland section 22 report](#). The committee also considered a private briefing paper by the Auditor General on the National Fraud Initiative which can be found on the [Members SharePoint site](#).
88. On 9 December the Committee [wrote](#) to Paul Johnston, director general for communities at the Scottish Government, requesting a an update on community empowerment within the context of Covid-19. The convener asked whether it has taken a pandemic for the Scottish Government to treat third sector organisations as equal partners in the planning and delivery of services and enquires what work the government is doing to better recognise the work of the third sector.
89. On 16 December the Auditor General and Senior Manager Graeme Greenhill and Pat Kenny, Director of Audit and Assurance Deloitte LLP, gave [evidence](#) on the [Crofting Commission section 22 report](#).
90. During December the Auditor General wrote to the Committee confirming he intends to publish a report on the 2020-21 audits of [Scottish Canals](#) and [SEPA](#). The letters note the December conclusion of the Scottish Canals audit meant there was insufficient time to consider findings. Therefore, Scottish Canals was unable to lay its annual report and accounts in advance of a statutory laying deadline of Monday 31 December. For SEPA, the auditor general has confirmed an annual report and accounts, together with a section 22 report, will be laid on Tuesday 1 February.
91. On 13 January the Auditor General and Senior Manager Graeme Greenhill and Pat Kenny, Director of Audit and Assurance Deloitte LLP, gave [evidence](#) on the [2020/21 audit of Bòrd na Gàidhlig section 22 report](#). Following this the Auditor General was

joined by Senior Manager Leigh Johnston and Joanne Brown, Partner, Grant Thornton UK LLP who gave evidence on the section 22 report on the [2020/21 audit of NHS Highland](#).

92. On 20 January the Auditor General, Audit Director Michael Oliphant and Senior Audit Manager Helen Russell gave [evidence](#) on the section 22 report on the [2020/21 audit of Scottish Government Consolidated Accounts](#). Following this the Auditor General was joined by Correspondence Manager Dharshi Santhakumaran and Senior Auditor Graeme Samson who gave evidence on the section 22 report on the [2020/21 audit of National Records of Scotland](#).
93. On 27 January the Auditor General, Audit Director Michael Oliphant and Senior Audit Manager Helen Russell gave further [evidence](#) on the section 22 report on the [2020/21 audit of Scottish Government Consolidated Accounts](#). Following this the Auditor General was joined by Senior Manager, Richard Robinson and Director of Audit and Assurance, Deloitte LLP, Pat Kenny to provide evidence on the section 22 report on the [2020/21 audit of the Commissioner for Ethical Standards in Public Life in Scotland](#).

Finance and Public Administration Committee

94. During December and January, the committee took evidence on and [considered](#): budget scrutiny; the work programme; the Implementation plan progress; updated complaints procedure and an independent report on the Scottish Fiscal Framework.

Covid-19 Recovery Committee

95. During December and January, the committee took evidence on and [considered](#): ministerial statements; subordinate legislation; the vaccination programme; the work programme; the Coronavirus (Discretionary Compensation for self-isolation) (Scotland) Bill; and the Coronavirus Acts report.
96. On 9 December the Committee launched an [inquiry](#) into excess deaths since the start of the pandemic. Recent data published by the Scottish Government shows deaths in Scotland are 11 per cent above the average for this time of year and have been above the average for the last 26 weeks. The committee is seeking views on whether the public health emergency has shifted from Covid-19 deaths to deaths from non-Covid-19 conditions and explore whether there is evidence of patients presenting in a more acute condition. The deadline for submitting evidence was Friday 7 January.
97. On 23 December the Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Covid Recovery, John Swinney [wrote](#) to the Covid-19 Recovery Committee to explain exemptions from self-isolation for critical national infrastructure. Annex A to the letter sets out the criteria for critical national infrastructure and outlines how specific arrangements have been made with each sector. Annex B sets out the eligibility conditions on automatic self-isolation exemptions for health and social care workers identified as household and non-household contacts.

Social Justice and Social Security Committee

98. During December and January, the committee took evidence on and [considered](#): the performance and operation of Social Security Scotland; Third Sector recovery; the new adult disability payment; subordinate legislation; Budget scrutiny 2022-23 and correspondence.

Other Committee news

99. During December and January the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee took evidence on and [considered](#): the fuel poverty strategy; carbon capture utilisation; the

Climate Change Committee Annual progress report; the role of local government and its cross-sectoral partners in financing and delivering a net-zero Scotland; European Union (withdrawal) Act 2018; subordinate legislation and the work programme.

100. During December, John Swinney [wrote](#) to the Education, Children & Young People Committee, setting out the government's response to the UK Supreme Court's judgment on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Incorporation) (Scotland) Bill. The Deputy First Minister explains the government would prefer to return the bill to parliament through the reconsideration stage and is considering whether that route offers the best approach.
101. On 10 January the Criminal Justice Committee [published](#) a report about reform of the justice sector, covering the impact of Covid, prisons and prison policy, the misuse of drugs, violence against women and girls, victims' rights and support, reducing youth offending and alternatives to custody and legal aid. The findings and recommendations are based on evidence from a series of roundtable sessions carried between September and November 2021 and includes over 60 short and long-term recommendations collated into an action plan.
102. On 18 January, the Education, Children & Young People Committee launched an [inquiry](#) into the effectiveness of the Scottish Attainment Challenge (SAC) in raising the attainment of children from deprived backgrounds. The inquiry will also look at the impact of the pandemic on attainment and how the impact of funding is measured (see paragraph 17).
103. On 26 January the Scottish Parliament [published](#) details that three committees, the Criminal Justice Committee, Health, Social Care & Sport Committee and Social Justice & Social Security Committee will be holding two special sessions on action to reduce drug deaths in Scotland. The sessions will question the Scottish and UK governments, as well as the new chair of the Scottish Drugs Deaths Taskforce, with each committee sending representatives to question witnesses.

Local government news

104. On 14 December the [SNP retained control of Moray Council](#), following a vote brought forward by the Conservatives and Moray Alliance Group after a councillor resigned. A vote on the proposed change tied at 12 councillors for each side, with councillors cutting cards to settle leadership of the administration.
105. On 17 December, Gavin Stevenson [retired](#) as Dumfries and Galloway Council's Chief Executive. Derek Crichton has been appointed as Interim Chief Executive and Lorna Meahan, Director of Economy and Resources has been appointed Returning Officer in the interim, pending a permanent appointment.
106. On 21 December the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Economy, Kate Forbes [wrote](#) to the Economy & Fair Work Committee confirming the signing of the Heads of Terms Agreement for the Falkirk Growth Deal with the UK Government and Falkirk Council on Tuesday 21 December 2021.
107. On 21 December the UK Government [published](#) the Head of Terms Agreement for the Falkirk Growth Deal, defining the broad activities to be supported. The Scottish and UK governments will invest £40 million each with a £50.8 million contribution from local partners including £5.8 million from Scottish Canals, [enabling 11 projects](#) to proceed and for the creation of an investment zone for Falkirk and Grangemouth.
108. On 18 January three local government trade unions, UNISON, Unite and GMB [submitted](#) a joint pay claim to COSLA calling for a 'fair and decent' pay increase to make up for decades of cuts and to recognise the vital role workers played during the

pandemic.

COSLA

109. During December, in response to the budget, COSLA published a '[budget reality document](#)' on the local government settlement and a [response](#) to the budget following a full meeting of council leaders on 10 December. The response describes the budget as a bad deal for communities, warning of serious financial challenges in key service areas for local councils. A spokesperson said, 'We are left in a position where we do not have adequate funding to provide our range of essential services and support recovery from Covid.'
110. On 22 December, COSLA [announced](#) that following a virtual meeting, council leaders will take their case for a better financial settlement directly to the First Minister.
111. On 10 January, following the publication of [findings of a Councillor Remuneration Survey](#), COSLA's president, Councillor Evison [stated](#) there should be a 'realistic' review of remuneration for the role and called upon the Scottish Government to look at Councillors' salaries and to be paid the Real Living Wage as a minimum.

Improvement Service

112. On 3 December the Improvement Service [published](#) information on progress of a project to automate the collection and publication of planning and building standards data. It has now entered the deployment phase with the first local authority, Comhairle nan Eilean Siar, providing updates of its data along with Loch Lomond and Trossachs and Cairngorms National Parks. The project is part of wider work to create national layers of local authority location-based data via the [Improvement Service's Spatial Hub](#) platform.
113. During December the Improvement Service published its [2021 Annual report](#), a new [prospectus for Scottish councils](#) and a new [prospectus for local government partners](#).

SOLACE UK

114. On 16 December SOLACE UK [called](#) for a finance commission and a fundamental review of the way local government is financed. This was in response to the UK Government's local government finance settlement that it said was insufficient and last minute in nature.

Scottish Public Sector Ombudsman (SPSO)

115. On 22 December and 19 January the SPSO published their [December](#) and [January](#) newsletters, outlining statistics on complaints and learning points from decision reports, statistics on Scottish Welfare Fund reviews, case studies and listing training courses available.

Scottish Housing Regulator (SHR)

116. On 30 November the Scottish Housing Regulator [published](#) details about its approach to the next annual risk assessment, identifying six main risks as follows;
- The delivery of services for people who are threatened with, or experiencing, homelessness.
 - Service delivery performance of landlords and how they meet the social housing charter standards and outcomes.

- Stock quality and how social landlords are ensuring they meet the Scottish Housing Quality Standard and the Energy Efficiency Standards.
- The development of new homes
- Financial health of registered social landlords (RSLs)
- Good Governance of RSLs

Care Inspectorate

117. On 9 December the Care Inspectorate [published](#) an overview report on the first three years of justice related scrutiny and assurance work. The report considered three areas of assurance activity covering community justice social work and community justice partnerships, considering each approach separately, outlining key messages and highlighting consistent themes relevant to other local authority and partnership areas. The three areas were;

- community payback orders in five local authorities,
- supported and validated self-evaluation work across five community justice partnerships
- throughcare practice across four local authority areas.

The report identified a number of strengths in practice which were consistent, particularly in relation to report writing and risk management.

118. On 6 January the Care Inspectorate [announced](#) the retirement of Peter Macleod as Chief Executive from Thursday 10 February following a period of ill health. Edith Macintosh, Deputy Chief Executive and Executive Director of Strategy and Improvement, will become Interim Chief Executive.

119. On 11 January the Care Inspectorate [published](#) a joint inspection report on services for children and young people at risk of harm in Dundee City. The inspection looked at how staff were working together across a range of services in the Dundee community planning partnership area.

Scottish public policy news

120. On 29 November PWC [published](#) findings of its first [green jobs barometer](#) which show Scotland is the region with the greatest proportion of new green job creation at 1.65% of all new vacancies, against a national average of 1.2% for the year to July 2021. The report also identifies the largest relative impact of job losses will be felt in Scotland and the East Midlands and reports that Scotland is among the lowest performing for delivering workplace training, education, and communications.

121. During December Understanding Scotland [published](#) findings of a recent survey on economic attitudes and expectations in Scotland. It found 72% of respondents felt the economy operates against the interests of most people with 52% noting a focus on growth came at a detriment to the environment.

122. On 1 December the Times [published](#) an article by the previous Auditor General for Scotland, Caroline Gardner about whether Scotland should adopt a social prescribing model nationally and would help reduce the pressure on health services. Caroline Gardner chaired the inclusive public service working group for the Royal Society of Edinburgh's post-covid-19 Future Commission that [published](#) a joint report with Support in Mind Scotland, in April 2021, urging decision makers to adopt a social prescribing approach.

123. On 1 December the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations (SCVO) [published](#) findings of a study on the impact of Covid on the third sector in Scotland. The report found 57 per cent of surveyed organisations saw an increased demand in services despite almost half also facing financial issues, with a majority seeing emerging mental and physical health needs from service users.
124. On 1 December the Scottish Drugs Taskforce published a working group [report and recommendations on women and drug related deaths](#) that should underpin Scottish Government actions and the work of all services supporting women who use drugs and their families. A [summary of the 26 recommendations](#) focusses on the development of services including drug and alcohol services and other wider relevant services, the promotion of united and collaborative working between sectors and stakeholders to support a whole system approach and ensuring workforce training and information sources are appropriate for women.
125. On 6 December Public Health Scotland (PHS) [launched](#) a new online public health [learning hub](#) to support those working in our public services. The hub will allow those working in local government, NHS, third sector and community-based organisations to learn more about factors that influence health and provide guidance on embedding health and wellbeing into professional roles to improve population health and reduce health inequalities.
126. On 6 December, Citizens Advice Scotland [launched](#) an energy saving winter campaign following the results of a poll by YouGov for the organisation that found 36% of adults in Scotland find their energy bill unaffordable, with 40% citing low incomes as a reason, working out to around one in seven adults.
127. On 7 December the Office for National Statistics (ONS) [published](#) figures on alcohol-specific deaths in the UK for 2020. Figures show that Scotland and Northern Ireland had the highest rates of alcohol-specific deaths (21.5 and 19.6 deaths per 100,000) compared with England and Wales (13.0 and 13.9 deaths per 100,000).
128. On 9 December, the Fraser of Allander Institute (FAI) [published](#) their initial consideration of the budget indicating that additional funding was transferred into the local government settlement but that there were also more constraints to this.
129. On 14 December the FAI [published](#) an article following a survey of business carried out in October on how business priorities are changing in the face of the climate emergency. The survey established that the majority of businesses had committed to achieving net zero but that it varied significantly across different sectors and 42 percent of businesses had not set any net-zero targets.
130. On 15 December the Resolution Foundation [published](#) a briefing note urging renewed furlough and increases to Universal Credit amidst the possibility of business closures due to the Omicron variant of Covid-19.
131. On 16 December the FAI [published](#) an article about their latest quarterly economic commentary which anticipates that the Scottish economy will recover to pre-pandemic levels in the Spring, but that the speed of recovery in 2022 could be impacted as restrictions are increased in response to managing the spread of the Omicron variant. The commentary also finds the removal of the furlough scheme, has not had the negative impact on employment and unemployment that was feared.
132. On 12 January, Age Scotland [called](#) for more to be done to meet the needs of Scotland's ageing population, highlighting new [published](#) figures from National Records of Scotland which show the number of over-65s is expected to grow by 30% by 2045, while the number of children is projected to fall by 22% in the same period.

133. On 17 January ENABLE Scotland [launched](#) a campaign to uphold the human rights of all adults with learning disabilities in Scotland. The campaign calls for urgent action to ensure all ensure all adults with learning disabilities are supported to live in the community of their choice by 2023, after a [report](#) found hundreds of people with learning disabilities are living in hospital or far from their families.
134. On 24 January the Fraser of Allander Institute [published](#) a new report looking at the policy options for tackling child poverty in Scotland. The report does not provide recommendations but looks at a number of measures that could be considered and sets out the scale of the challenge with around one in four children in Scotland currently living in poverty.
135. In January the Poverty and Inequality Commission [published](#) advice for the Scottish Government on its Child Poverty Delivery Plan 2022-26. The report states insufficient progress has been made, to meet Scotland's child poverty targets and advises the Scottish Government they will need to use all levers available to end child poverty. It makes recommendations about the approach the Scottish Government should take to the next Delivery Plan, and the actions that should be included.
136. On 24 January the Data for Children Collaborative with UNICEF [published](#) information about a collaborative project with the Northern Alliance regional improvement collaborative to explore how to make better use of data to assess the poverty-related attainment gap. The eight local authorities involved with the Northern Alliance improvement collaborative are Aberdeen City, Aberdeenshire, Argyll and Bute, Comhairle Eilean Siar, Highland, Moray, Orkney Islands and Shetland Islands and cover a wide range of school settings. Following this, on the 28 January, the FAI [published](#) details about their involvement with this project and links to the following three papers;
- Paper 1 – [Statistical analysis](#) of the Educational Mobility of Primary Schools across Scotland
 - Paper 2 – A [scoping study](#) on data and information that describes poverty and educational attainment
 - Paper 3 – A [review](#) of the literature on the effects of Covid-19 on the poverty related attainment gap and rural Scotland
137. On 26 January the Scottish Veterans Housing Group [published](#) a report on veterans' homelessness in Scotland with 24 recommendations that will feed into the Government's [Ending Homelessness Together Action Plan](#). The recommendations include introducing an Armed Forces Lead Officer as part of every local authority housing department, ensuring social landlords prioritise ex-Service personnel and providing more support for tenancy sustainment in the private rented sector.

Other UK audit bodies

138. On 21 December the Northern Ireland Audit Office [published](#) Local Government Auditor's Report 2021, assessing the management of local authorities, particularly in relation to the pandemic. It found that additional central funding offset some of the financial implications of the pandemic but that councils will feel the effects of the pandemic for some time, with significant challenges expected next year.
139. On 13 January the National Audit office [published](#) an interactive guide to good practice principles for annual reporting for public sector organisations, covering the six sections of an annual report.
140. On 13 January Audit Wales [published](#) a public interest report relating to a county

council's decision to give a former chief executive an exit payment that was found to have failed to follow internal policies and procedures and had not followed the council's decision-making process and did not comply with legislative requirements.

UK Government

141. During December and January the Prime Minister announced a number of changes to restrictions to help tackle the spread of Omicron cases across the UK. These included moving to a [plan B](#), confirming that [additional funding](#) from the UK Reserve will be made available to the devolved administrations to support their vaccine rollout and health response in light of the Omicron variant and subsequently [announcing](#) the additional funding being made available to governments in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland to support measures tackling Covid-19 would double.
142. On 1 December the UK Government [published](#) the adult social care reform white paper which sets out a ten year vision to improve adult social care and which will provide greater choice for those receiving care and certainty over costs. The white paper is part of the government's wider social care plans, backed by £5.4 billion, which for the first time provides a limit to the cost of care for everyone in the adult social care system, and significantly increases state support.
143. From 1 December [changes](#) to the Universal Credit taper rate and work allowances will apply to tens of thousands of low income households in the UK. A reduction to the taper rate, from 63% to 55% and an increase to the work allowances by £500 per year were announced in the UK Government Autumn Budget.

UK public policy news

144. On 21 December the Fraser of Allander Institute and Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) [published](#) findings of a joint study exploring reforms of the fiscal framework for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. They argue devolved governments should in times of extreme crises be given minimum funding guarantees or enhanced borrowing powers to create more headroom for decision making.
145. On 7 January the Office for National Statistics (ONS) [published](#) figures relating to household total wealth in Great Britain between April 2018 and March 2020. These show the median household net wealth in Great Britain was £302,500 between April 2018 and March 2020. Scotland was one of the regions with the lowest median household wealth and experienced a 12% dip in wealth, when adjusted for inflation, compared with the previous period.
146. On 12 January ONS [published](#) interim national population projections which suggest the UK population will increase by 3.2% from 67.2 million in mid-2020 to 69.2 million in mid-2030. England's population is projected to grow more quickly than the other UK nations: 3.5% between mid-2020 and mid-2030, compared with 2.6% for Wales, 2.0% for Northern Ireland and 0.3% for Scotland.
147. On 13 January, the Policy Exchange [published](#) findings of a survey examining the public's response to climate and environmental policies. It found the public particularly supported policies with local benefits, such as job creation or protecting the beauty of British landscapes and ocean environments.
148. On 17 January, the Resolution Foundation has [published](#) a briefing note on the likely increase in fuel stress experienced by households when energy bills increase in April. It states households in England, spending more than 10% of their budget on energy is likely to treble from 9% to 27%, with the scale of increase likely to require targeted intervention.

149. On 18 January the Joseph Rowntree Foundation [published](#) its first new-style UK poverty report, which aims to comprehensively outline trends across all characteristics and impacts. It notes the Scottish Government's plan to double the Scottish Child Payment in April this year, but warns more action is needed to meet child poverty targets.
150. On 19 January the ONS [published](#) figures which show inflation rose to 5.4% in December, up from 5.1% in November. The increase is largely driven by the rising price of food and non-alcoholic drinks, and household costs including energy bills. Increases in the cost of furniture and clothing also contributed to the increase.
151. On 19 January the Resolution Foundation [published](#) a report claiming the existing social security system in the UK is not well placed to meet the scale and nature of challenges in the coming decade. It notes unemployment benefits in 2022-23 will be at their lowest level in real terms since 1990-91 with rates falling behind average incomes.
152. On 24 January the Centre for Cities [published](#) findings show Edinburgh lost nearly a years' worth of sales during the pandemic, with government support shielding less prosperous areas but ultimately delaying business closures. Across 52 city and town centres studied, Aberdeen saw a 5.6% increase in unit vacancy rates, with 10.1% of city centre units now vacant in Edinburgh.
153. On 24 January the Nuffield Foundation [published](#) the final report of its Covid-19 Realities programme examining life on low incomes during the pandemic. The report finds the multiple financial pressures faced by those on low incomes were made worse by the social security system during the pandemic, citing issues such as the five-week wait for the first payment of Universal Credit as a particular problem.
154. During January the IFS has [published](#) a report on the effects of increasing the state pension age to 66. It notes the increased pension age increased the employment rate of 65-year-old men by 7.4% and of women by 8.5%, putting a total of 55,000 more people in employment than had the pension age remained at 65.

Conclusion

155. The Commission is invited to:

- a) Note the progress of climate change work (paragraph 14).
- b) Note the proposed delay to the publication of the performance audit of Scotland's financial response to Covid-19, to be considered by the Performance Audit Committee at its February meeting (paragraph 15).
- c) Note the responses to the consultations and inquiries highlighted in paragraph 18.
- d) Note this report.

Paul Reilly
Secretary to the Commission
2 February 2022

Appendix 1 - Accounts Commission reports/blogs in past 12 months – downloads and views

Report / Blog	Date	Report downloads/ blog views
Blog: Public performance reporting – why it matters	21 Dec 21	62
Blog: Assurance and scrutiny on Scotland's housing benefit services	25 Nov 21	179 (+58)
Community empowerment: Covid-19 update	28 Oct 21	1,946 (+248)
South Ayrshire Best Value Assurance Report	27 Oct 21	503 (+101)
Auditing climate change: An update	21 Oct 21	494 (+86)
The role of sponsors in our reporting work	14 Oct 21	176 (*)
The impact of Covid-19 on Scottish Councils' benefit services	7 Oct 21	287 (*)
Blog: Christie – it really is now or never	4 Oct 21	606 (+31)
East Dunbartonshire Best Value Assurance Report	29 Sept 21	412 (+53)
Accounts Commission Strategy 2021-26	23 Sept 21	485 (+132)
Blog: Digital exclusion	16 Sept 21	787 (+79)
Blog: Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services	31 Aug 21	1,044 (+72)
Blog: Public Services and Scotland's Voluntary Sector during Covid-19?	25 Jun 21	477 (*)
Best Value Assurance Report: Aberdeen City Council	24 Jun 21	880 (+46)
Social Care: social care reform questions remain	3 Jun 21	1,699 (+40)
Accounts Commission annual report 2020/21	3 Jun 21	388 (*)
Local government in Scotland Overview 2021	27 May 21	2,992 (+174)
Equality Outcomes 2021-25	27 Apr 21	563 (+30)
Mainstreaming equality and equality outcomes: progress report 2019-21	27 April 21	500 (*)
Improving outcomes for young people through school education	23 Mar 21	7,478 (+406)
Local Government in Scotland: Financial Overview 2019/20	26 Jan 21	3,238 (+381)
Digital progress in local government	14 Jan 21	3,159 (+113)
Digital progress in local government – supplement 1 (checklist)	14 Jan 21	377 (*)
Digital progress in local government – supplement 2 (methodology)	14 Jan 21	167 (*)

Note: Figures are reported as of 31 December 2021

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	No. of publications
Jan 22	805 (+13)	12,600	839	103	27	38	6	2
Dec 21	792 (+4)	6,500	108	48	20	25	2	0
Nov 21	788 (+10)	6,600	499	32	29	35	0	1
Oct 21	778 (+13)	22,500	316	93	47	97	6	6
Sep 21	765 (+8)	13,600	584	43	35	39	0	3
Aug 21	757 (-1)	11,200	339	48	3	13	0	0
Jul 21	758 (+18)	7,700	24	5	16	26	0	0
Jun 21	740 (+14)	56,900	513	348	113	174	8	1
May 21	726 (+22)	46,300	836	122	95	148	9	1
Apr 21	704 (+3)	3,300	n/a	1	1	0	0	0
Mar 21	701 (+15)	36,100	2,100	76	66	138	10	1
Feb 21	686 (+3)	11,000	307	20	9	10	1	0
Jan 21	683 (+30)	50,000	2,400	128	94	103	9	2
Dec 20	653 (+24)	26,400	688	46	34	47	0	1

Figures as of 31 January 2022.

Increase on previous month shown in brackets.