

MEETING: 7 APRIL 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.
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 28 February 2022. [Appendix 2](#) provides additional information on the overall engagement that reports, and other business received on social media, as of 25 March 2022.
4. On 10 March the Commission held and livestreamed its second hybrid meeting on YouTube, where, amongst other items, it discussed a statutory report on Orkney and Shetland Valuation Joint Board. The livestream was viewed 72 times, and the recorded version has been viewed 24 times. This compares to 71, 27 and 6 views of the Commission's livestreamed meetings in the previous three months. Commission member Andrew Burns posted a [vlog](#) of the February meeting which has been viewed 37 times.
5. March saw four times the number of impressions (the number of browsers exposed to the Commission's social media content) compared to February, with 33,100 impressions compared to 8,000 in February. Clicks, retweets, likes and video views were around double that when compared to February too. Much of this activity is derived from the promotion of the joint briefing [Scotland's economy: Supporting businesses through the Covid-19 pandemic](#) (paragraph 9), but also from the other publications in March which are covered below.
6. On 3 March the Commission [published](#) its findings on its progress report on Moray Council's Best Value Assurance Report. The report noted that the council has made progress in some important areas to address financial stability and had plans in place to tackle poor performing services. However, challenges remain as it seeks to deliver

strategic change, and that progress continues to be hindered by some poor working relationships among some councillors. The report, video and animation was promoted on [Twitter](#) and Facebook, with engagement rates of 7.9% and 35.2% respectively. The Interim Deputy Chair was interviewed by the BBC and the Press and Journal. STV covered the report in their main bulletin and the BBC reported the story online and shared on their social media platforms. The media coverage can be found on the [members' SharePoint site](#).

7. On 8 March the Commission and Auditor General [published](#) a joint update on Scotland's drug and alcohol services. The report found that a clear plan is needed to improve people's lives and increase transparency around spending. The report was covered widely in national and local print and broadcast media. A number of political parties and drug and alcohol charities responded to the report and many stakeholders engaged with it on social media. The Auditor General's [vlog](#) was viewed over 1,000 times on Twitter. Media coverage can be found on the [members' SharePoint site](#).
8. On 10 March the Commission [published](#) its financial overview of local government in Scotland 2020/21. The report stated that whilst Scotland's councils have increased reserves over the last year, they must address the impacts of an overall reduction in funding and the ongoing challenges caused by Covid-19. The Chair's [audiogram](#) summarising the key messages was viewed 2,317 times in the first 24 hours. The report was covered widely in national and local print and broadcast media. All the main political parties and COSLA responded to the report. Media coverage can be found on the [members' SharePoint site](#). On 21 March, the Chair of the Commission re-promoted the report through his [blog](#). In this he highlighted the significant financial challenges and impacts of the pandemic.
9. On 17 March the Commission and Auditor General [published](#) a briefing on the Scottish Government's business support provisions throughout the pandemic. It notes that £4.4bn in grants and rates relief was administered in 2020-21, with a further £375m announced in December 2021. The report finds there was insufficient emphasis placed on gathering data on how money was allocated and distributed. The briefing was one of the top 15 topics discussed on [Twitter](#) on the day. The Scottish Government issued a [news release](#) in response to the report and all political parties and COSLA responded to the report. Media coverage can be found on the [members' SharePoint site](#).
10. On 18 March the Commission distributed its regular [newsletter](#) to 221 community groups, third sector organisations and those who have signed up to receive updates on local government issues across Scotland. The newsletter can also be found on the Commission's website [homepage](#).
11. On 21 March the Commission [confirmed](#) the six private companies that will deliver a selection of audits on behalf of the Accounts Commission for local government, from October 2022. These companies will also deliver a selection of audits on behalf of the Auditor General for Scotland, for health, central government and further education bodies. The six companies are Azets, Deloitte, Ernst & Young, Grant Thornton, KPMG and Mazars.
12. On 22 March the Commission [published](#) its findings on a statutory report on the 2020/21 audit of Orkney and Shetland Valuation Joint Board which highlights significant concerns regarding governance and transparency. The Board will consider the findings at a future meeting.
13. On 31 March the Commission and Audit Scotland submitted a joint response to the Scottish Government's consultation on the review of the Public Sector Equality Duty in Scotland. This can be found on the [members SharePoint site](#).

### ***Forthcoming publications and activities***

14. Between 24 March and 5 May 2022, the Commission will not release any publications in respect of the moratorium for local government elections.

### ***Other Commission business***

15. On 3 March, the Commission met with representatives of Moray Council to discuss the [progress report](#) on Best Value Assurance Report on the council which was published the same day.

The Commission was represented by:

- Tim McKay (Interim Deputy Chair)
- Sharon O'Connor
- Geraldine Wooley
- Paul Reilly, Secretary
- Brian Howarth, Audit Director, Audit Scotland (appointed auditor).

The Council was represented by:

- Members:
  - Graham Leadbitter (Council Leader and SNP Joint Group Leader)
  - Shona Morrison, (Convener and SNP Joint Group Leader)
  - George Alexander (Councillors Open Group Leader)
  - Frank Brown (Conservative and Unionist Party Group member)
  - Donald Gatt (Conservative and Unionist Party Group member)
  - Derek Ross (Moray Alliance Group Joint Group Leader)
  - Amy Taylor (Independent).
- Officers:
  - Roddy Burns (Chief Executive)
  - Rhona Gunn (Depute Chief Executive Economy, Environment & Finance)
  - Denise Whitworth (Depute Chief Executive Education, Communities & Organisational Development)
  - Simon Bokor-Ingram (Chief Officer Health and Social Care Moray)
  - Alasdair McEachan (Head of Governance, Strategy and Performance/Monitoring Officer).

16. On 15 March, Moray Council considered the [progress report](#) on the Best Value Assurance Report published by the Commission on 3 March. The Council agreed with the Commission's findings and agreed a Strategic Action Plan in response, to be taken forward to the Moray Council following the local government elections in May 2022.
17. On 29 and 30 March the Commission held its Spring Strategy Seminar, where it discussed its plans for 2022/23 and beyond.
18. Members are asked to 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 Audit Scotland's communications team. Members are asked to share their thoughts on the schedule, as well as any suggestions for further communications directly to the [schedule](#).

### **Auditor General**

19. On 15 March the Auditor General [published](#) an update on the progress of the Scottish Government's R100 superfast broadband rollout programme. It notes average

broadband speeds have improved significantly since 2018, despite a slow start. It notes 107,000 premises are still to be connected through three R100 contracts, mostly in rural and hard to reach places.

20. On 23 March the Auditor General [published](#) a report setting out the major problems obstructing the delivery of two new ferries intended to provide lifeline services to islands off the west coast. It notes the shipyard has now been under Scottish Government control for two years but significant operational failures remain unresolved, delivery of the two vessels is now four years late with no set delivery date.

## **Audit Scotland**

21. On 1 March Audit Scotland [published](#) a report on addressing climate change in Scotland, a summary of key recommendations and areas of improvement for public bodies that need to be made if Scotland is to reach its goal of a just transition to net zero.
22. From 7 March Audit Scotland saw a return to Phase 4 of the programme for accessing workplaces where staff can book desks in the offices and move into hybrid working with social distancing requirements reducing to 1 metre. In addition Audit Scotland is supporting the [Distance Aware Scheme](#) for colleagues who prefer others to take extra care around them and have created Distance Aware Zones in each office location where some desks remain distanced by 2metres.
23. On 7 March the Association of Chartered Certified Accountants (ACCA) [announced](#) that Audit Scotland's Associate Director, Elaine Boyd was the new Chair of ACCA Scotland's Members' Committee.
24. On 16 March Audit Scotland received a [letter](#) from the Scottish Government's Head of Social Housing Services Team asking for any views on the proposed revisions to the Scottish Social Housing Charter. In consultation with the Commission Support Team it was agreed that the suggested changes outlined in the [revised social housing charter](#) document had no substantive changes that the Commission and Auditor General would wish to respond to formally.
25. During March Audit Scotland set up a new working group and information and resource hub for colleagues as the approach to hybrid working for its employees is developed.
26. On 29 March the first 2022 edition of the staff newsletter Abacus was published. A copy can be found on the [members' SharePoint site](#).

## **Issues affecting Scottish local government**

### ***Scottish Government***

27. On 2 March the Scottish and Welsh Governments [published](#) a joint statement criticising UK Government proposals to replace the Human Rights Act with a Bill of Rights, stating that proposals were 'unwelcome and unnecessary'.
28. On 7 March the Scottish Government's race employment team contacted public bodies with an update on the development of the Scottish Government's ethnicity pay gap strategy. The update includes a revised scope, identifies four key themes arising from stakeholder engagement and explains where it sits within the wider Fair Work agenda. A copy of the email can be found on the [members SharePoint site](#).
29. On 17 March the Scottish Government [announced](#) that Craig Naylor will be succeeding Gill Imery as Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Constabulary in Scotland. He will take up his position from 21 March 2022.

30. On 23 March the Scottish Government [published](#) its 2021 annual report for the National Islands Plan. Progress is measured against 100 commitments and 13 strategic objectives. These include addressing population decline, promoting sustainable economic development, improving transport services, housing, digital connectivity and health and social care, and reducing levels of fuel poverty. Fulfilled commitments include understanding the impact of Brexit on the islands, producing a national development plan for crofting, ensuring Housing to 2040 reflects the needs of island communities, and developing a remote rural, remote, small town and island Minimum Income Standard uplift.
31. On 24 March the Scottish Government [published](#) its second Tackling Child Poverty Delivery plan outlining action for 2022-2026. The plan recognises actions from across all sectors and with a wide range of partners to facilitate change. The plan focuses on giving children the best start to life, supporting them to learn and grow and supporting young people after leaving school.
32. During March the Scottish Government's Director for International Trade and Investment and Deputy Director for Trade Policy wrote to all chief executives of public bodies in Scotland regarding relationships with Russian businesses and guidance on aligning with the Scottish Government position on sanctions. The letters can be found on the [members' SharePoint site](#).
33. On 30 March the Scottish Government [published an implementation plan](#) setting out actions and commitments to Keep the Promise for care experienced young people and their families. The aims to significantly reduce the number of children in care, with at least £500m over the parliamentary term invested to help families stay together.
34. On 30 March the Scottish Government held its 24th National Economic Forum, attended by senior figures from business, the third sector, trade unions, government and the wider public sector meet to debate how to grow Scotland's economy. In a speech to the National Economic Forum, Nicola Sturgeon [emphasised](#) the impact of climate change, the pandemic and conflict in Ukraine on the economy.

#### *Local government general*

35. On 2 March the Scottish Parliament [approved](#) the local government funding settlement for 2022-23.
36. On 2 March the Scottish Government [published](#) guidance for public bodies on the collection of equality data and notes on recommended questions to ask when collecting information on age, disability, ethnic group, gender, religion or belief and sexual orientation.
37. On 22 March the Scottish Government [published](#) its annual report on local government finance for 2020/21, providing an overview of financial activity of Scottish local authorities based on authorities' audited accounts.

#### *Health and social care*

38. On 1 March the Scottish Government [published](#) its annual update of the long-term monitoring of health inequalities indicators. The report investigates both absolute and relative inequalities and identified that except for the healthy birthweight indicator, significant health inequalities persist for each indicator in the report.
39. On 8 March the Scottish Government [published](#) its consultation paper on the health and social care strategy for older people. It seeks the views of those involved in the provision and receipt of care services, closing on 19 June. As the consultation is aimed at service users and clinicians, it is proposed that the Commission does not respond.

Neither Audit Scotland nor the Auditor General are responding.

40. On 11 March the Scottish Government [published](#) its first national workforce strategy for health and social care. The strategy was co-produced with COSLA and identifies five areas which will support the creation of a sustainable, skilled workforce.
41. On 15 March the Scottish Government [published](#) its quarterly report on the number of suspected drug deaths for October to December 2021 indicated a fall of 8% on the previous year. The report uses quarterly management information from Police Scotland, rather than the annual National Records of Scotland (NRS) National statistics.

### *Education*

42. On 2 March Education Scotland [invited](#) schools and early learning and childcare settings to take part in upcoming 'recovery visits' with the aim of learning from education establishments about what has worked well and the challenges they have faced due to the pandemic.
43. On 9 March, the Scottish Government [announced](#) three new national organisations will be created to drive improvement in education. The three new education bodies will be underpinned by new values and governance and are designed to improve outcomes and build trust in Scotland's education system.
  - A new public body will replace the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) and be responsible for developing and awarding qualifications.
  - A new national agency for education will replace Education Scotland (ES).
  - A new and independent inspectorate body will be created.
44. On 23 March the Scottish Government [published](#) a consultation on proposed updates to home education guidance, setting out the roles and responsibilities of local authorities and parents. The consultation ends 13 July 2022. Due to the operational nature of the consultation, it is proposed that the Commission does not respond. Neither Audit Scotland or the Auditor General are responding.
45. On 29 March the Scottish Government [published](#) details of Pupil Equity Funding (PEF) totalling £520 million to help headteachers put in place more support for children and young people. A breakdown of PEF allocations by local authorities is available via this [link](#).

### *Social Security*

46. On 16 March the Scottish Government [published](#) details of improvements to disability benefits, with the Adult Disability Payment replacing the UK Government's Personal Independence Payment (PIP) in Scotland later in March. Changes include where disabled people with the most serious lifelong health conditions and whose condition is highly likely to change will be eligible for an 'indefinite award' and no longer be subject to fixed term reviews.
47. On 16 March the Scottish Government [published](#) details of six social security benefits that will be increased by 6% from 1 April. These benefits will support low-income households and carers in light of the cost-of-living pressures. Benefits including the Job Start Payment, Young Carer's Grant, Funeral Support, Best Start Grant and Carer's Allowance Supplement were due to be uprated by 3.1% but, subject to parliamentary approval, will receive a 6% uprate in Scotland. The move comes as a coalition of charities including the Child Poverty Action Group [called for a minimum 7% uplift in benefits](#) this April to match inflation.



48. On 21 March the Scottish Government [published](#) details about the new adult disability payment pilots that begin in Dundee City, Perth and Kinross and the Western Isles from 21 March 2022.
49. On 30 March The Scottish Government published its [Scottish Attainment Challenge framework for recovery and accelerating progress](#). This is aimed at supporting schools, local authorities and others across the education system to support educational recovery and increase progress in improving outcomes for children and young people impacted by poverty. An [island communities screening impact assessment](#), [fairer Scotland duty assessment](#), [Equality Impact Assessment](#), [child rights and wellbeing screening sheet](#) and a [Child Rights and Wellbeing Impact Assessment](#) were also published.

### *Communities*

50. On 21 March the Scottish Government [published](#) details of the almost £6 billion that has been invested to support low income households across Scotland in the last three years. The Scottish Government state that more than a third of this has directly benefitted children.
51. On 21 March the Scottish Government [published](#) details of a £4 million package to help improve infrastructure on Scotland's islands. The capital investment will be allocated to the six island local authorities to fund the improvement, creation or safeguarding of locally developed infrastructure projects.
52. On 24 March the Scottish Land Commission [published](#) new guidance on community wealth building and land as part of Land Reuse Month. The guidance aims to set out practical actions public bodies can take to use and manage land productively and in the public interest.
53. On 25 March the Scottish Government [published](#) its [water safety action plan](#) that was drawn to renew efforts to prevent drownings, following a number of incidents during the summer of 2021. Actions include strengthening the role of Water Safety Scotland (WSS) and working in partnership with key stakeholder organisations to increase awareness raising, develop skills training and ensure responses to incidents are effective. This includes lesson plans on water safety for school pupils and continued development of the National Learn to Swim Framework delivered with local authorities.
54. On 29 March the Scottish Government [published](#) its third fire and rescue framework for Scotland 2022, setting out Scottish Ministers' expectations of the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service. It covers seven strategic priorities; prevention and protection; response; innovation and modernisation; climate change; effective governance and performance; people; and partnership working.

### *Economy and business*

55. On 1 March the Scottish Government [published](#) its National Strategy for Economic Transformation setting out how the government, public bodies, third sector and businesses can use current economic powers to deliver transformation in the coming decade.
56. On 3 March the Scottish Government [published](#) information about a new short life working group to consider the economic and social opportunities for Gaelic. Representatives from a range of sectors with experience of working and living in Gaelic communities will be included in the group.
57. On 16 March the Scottish Government [published](#) its first quarterly estimate of Scotland's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) for 2021 Quarter 4 (October to December).

Scotland's GDP grew by 1.3% in real terms during the fourth quarter compared to 1% for the UK.

58. On 18 March the Scottish Government [published](#) details of additional funding to support rural tourism. This includes plans to create more than 200 seasonal posts for countryside rangers and operations staff, to support sustainable and responsible rural tourism. Funding includes £1.5 million for the NatureScot Better Places Fund Round 3 which local authorities, community and third sector organisations can apply to.
59. On 22 March the Scottish Government published its labour market monthly briefing for [March 2022](#). This summarises employment and economic inactivity from the Labour Force Survey and other labour market statistics from a range of official sources. Some of the information is broken down into Scottish local authority areas. On the 15 March SPICe [published](#) overviews of the labour market for Scotland.

#### *Covid-19 measures*

60. Throughout March, as the Scottish Government reviewed the latest evidence regarding Covid-19 and restrictions, a number of changes were announced and [guidance](#) for local authorities and their partners was updated on supporting gypsy/traveller communities. Announcements included:
  - From 7 March [spring booster jabs](#) will be offered to those aged 75 years and over, residents in care homes for older adults, and individuals aged 12 years and over who are immunosuppressed.
  - From 18 March [international travel restrictions end](#) with fully vaccinated travellers entering the UK no longer being required to complete Passenger Locator Forms and non-vaccinated travellers ceasing to be required to take pre-departure and day two PCR tests.
  - From 31 March patients with [Covid-19 symptoms](#) are being asked to contact their GP instead of NHS 24 and until the end of April [people with symptoms should still isolate and get a PCR test](#).
  - [Legal requirements for businesses and service providers](#) to collect customer details for contact tracing and have regard to Covid guidance will end on 21 March, but legal requirements to wear face coverings on public transport and most indoor public settings will continue until at least early April.
  - As part of the Test and Protect Transition Plan, [people without Covid-19 symptoms](#) will no longer be asked to take regular lateral flow tests from 18 April.
  - From 4 April, the legal face covering requirement would be removed for those attending places of worship, marriage ceremonies, civil partnerships, funeral services, and commemorative events. From 18 April, the legal requirement would become guidance for shops, certain indoor settings, and public transport

#### *Climate emergency*

61. On 12 March the Scottish Government [published](#) details of three Scottish Government energy efficiency and heat programmes that will receive additional support, in response to the cost of living crisis. This will increase the capacity of the Home Energy Scotland (HES) advice service by 20%, widen the eligibility criteria of the Warmer Homes Scotland fuel poverty programme and increase the funding available to individual households, through local authority-led Area Based schemes.
62. On 15 March the Climate Change Committee (CCC) [published](#) a report for the Scottish Parliament on whether Scotland is 'climate ready'. The report highlights five areas



where action to adapt and build resilience to climate change is stalling, especially in relation to the adaptation and responsiveness to extreme weather, including flooding. Recommendations include improved monitoring, changes to Flood Risk Management Plans and requiring relevant local authorities to have a Shoreline Management Plan.

### **Scottish Parliament**

63. In March, the Scottish Parliament Information Centre (SPICe) published:
- A [briefing](#) on earnings in Scotland 2021, including a [breakdown](#) by local authority
  - A [briefing](#) on changes to economic, social and cultural rights in the proposed Human Rights Bill
  - A [post](#) on Scotland's latest Covid-19 strategy
  - A [post](#) on population growth and decline on Scotland's islands – 2001 to 2020
  - Two [guest blogs](#) on the National Performance Framework, one summarising a new report on the framework and one on the [psychological factors](#) that can influence change.
  - A [blog](#) on the Scottish Government's 10-year strategy for economic transformation
  - A [blog](#) with a renewable energy map of Scotland
  - A [blog](#) on the UK Spring Statement

### **Parliamentary committee news**

#### *Public Audit Committee*

64. During March the Committee took evidence on and [considered](#): the Social Care Briefing, Planning for Skills, the Section 22 Report<sup>1</sup>: The 2020/21 audit of the Scottish Environment Protection Agency, the Section 23 Report: NHS in Scotland 2021, the Section 22 Report: The 2020/21 audit of Scottish Canals and the work programme.
65. On 3 March the Auditor General, Audit Scotland Interim Director of Performance Audit and Best Value, Antony Clark and Audit Manager Shelagh Stewart gave [evidence](#) on the joint [Social Care Briefing](#).
66. On 10 March the Auditor General, Audit Director Gordon Smail, Senior Manager Rebecca Seidel and Audit Manager Douglas Black gave [evidence](#) on the [Planning for Skills](#) report.
67. On 17 March the Auditor General, Audit Scotland Senior Manager Leigh Johnston, Audit Managers Derek Hoy and Eva Thomas-Tudo gave [evidence](#) on the [NHS overview 2021](#). This was followed by the Auditor General, Audit Scotland Senior Manager Morag Campsie and Joanne Brown, Partner at Grant Thornton UK LLP on the Section 22 report: [The 2020/21 audit of the Scottish Environment Protection Agency](#).
68. On 24 March the Auditor General, Audit Scotland Senior Manager Graeme Greenhill and Joanne Brown, Partner at Grant Thornton UK LLP gave [evidence](#) on the Section

---

<sup>1</sup> 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.

22 report: [the 2020/21 audit of Scottish Canals](#).

69. On 30 March the Committee wrote to Finance Cabinet Secretary [Kate Forbes](#) and UK Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government [Michael Gove](#) about future audit and accountability arrangements for replacement EU funds. These replacement funds include the Shared Prosperity Fund, Community Renewal Fund and the Levelling-up Fund. The Committee noted concerns raised by the Auditor General for Scotland around a lack of clarity for responsibilities placed on scrutiny of these replacement funds. The letters note the role of the Accounts Commission in the audit of local government and its separate accountability to the public. The Public Audit Committee is seeking clarity on how it would be able to fulfil its scrutiny role in relation to this funding, given the Accounts Commission is, unlike the Auditor General for Scotland, not required to report to the Scottish Parliament.

#### *Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee*

70. During March the Committee took evidence on and [considered](#): the Scottish Social Housing Charter, the Building Safety Bill (UK Parliament legislation), the Coronavirus (Recovery and Reform) (Scotland) Bill, National Planning Framework 4, Non-Domestic Rates (Coronavirus) (Scotland) Bill, the Annual Report of the Scottish Housing Regulator and subordinate legislation.
71. On 31 March, Marie McNair MSP replaced Graeme Dey MSP as a member of the Committee

#### *Finance and Public Administration Committee*

72. During March the Committee took evidence on and [considered](#): its work programme, the Resource Spending Review Framework, the Scottish Government's Framework for Tax 2021, Environmental fiscal measures for Scotland, subordinate legislation and its work programme.
73. On 28 February the Committee [launched an inquiry](#) into the role of the National Performance Framework in shaping actions in local and national government. It asks specific questions of organisations that help to deliver National Outcomes, looking at the current structures, processes and cultures that are in place and whether they can or should be improved. This consultation closes on Thursday 14 April. Considering how appropriate and effective the National Outcomes are, is not part of this inquiry. These will be reviewed separately by the Scottish Government later in 2022-23 and it is proposed that the Commission responds to that later consultation rather than the current consultation. Audit Scotland and the Auditor General also plan to feed into the later consultation.

#### *Health, Social Care and Sport Committee*

74. During March the Committee took evidence on and [considered](#): tackling alcohol harms, alternative pathways to primary care and subordinate legislation.
75. On 31 March, on behalf of the Auditor General and the Accounts Commission, Audit Scotland submitted a response to the Committee's inquiry into health inequalities. A copy of the response can be found on the [members' SharePoint site](#).

#### *Covid-19 Recovery Committee*

76. During March the Committee took evidence on and [considered](#): the Excess Deaths Inquiry, the Coronavirus (Recovery and Reform) (Scotland) Bill and subordinate legislation.

### *Social Justice and Social Security Committee*

77. During March, the Committee took evidence on and [considered](#): Domestic violence and violence against women and girls, the Department of Work and Pension's role in devolved Social Security, the Medium-Term Financial Strategy and Framework for Resource Spending Review, subordinate legislation and the work programme.

### *Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee*

78. On 17 March, Carol Calder, Senior Manager, Performance Audit and Best Value, Audit Scotland gave [evidence](#) to the Committee on the Scottish Government's Resource Spending Review and its provision for recreational, sporting and cultural activities. This was following the previous Interim Chair's [submission](#) to the Committee's call for views on funding for culture in Scotland (in September 2021). The Commission's Local Government Overview 2021 was referenced throughout the session, specifically in relation to community empowerment and budget reductions for non-statutory services such as cultural services.

### **Local government news**

79. On 15 March, GMB Scotland [published](#) details that members had voted to support strike action against Glasgow City Council following equal pay claims because the council have failed to resolve outstanding equal pay settlements and replace a "discriminatory" pay and grading system.
80. During March, all 32 local authorities in Scotland set their council tax rates for 2022/23, as [reported by the BBC](#). The table below outlines the rates for all councils. The increase in rates varied between 0% (Shetland Island Council) and 4% (Falkirk Council), with 22 local authorities opting for a 3% increase.

### **Scottish Council Tax 2022/23**

<b>Council</b>	<b>Rate increase</b>	<b>Band D rate</b>
Aberdeen	3%	£1,418.62
Aberdeenshire	3%	£1,338.83
Angus	2.95%	£1,242.14
Argyll and Bute	3%	£1,408.76
Scottish Borders	3%	£1,291.53
Clackmannanshire	3%	£1,343.77
Dumfries and Galloway	3%	£1,259.30
Dundee	2.90%	£1,419.03
East Ayrshire	3%	£1,416.61
East Dunbartonshire	3%	£1,348.25
East Lothian	3%	£1,341.69
East Renfrewshire	3.50%	£1,335.11
City of Edinburgh	3%	£1,378.75
Falkirk	4%	£1,274.60
Fife	3%	£1,319.22
Glasgow	3%	£1,428

<b>Council</b>	<b>Rate increase</b>	<b>Band D rate</b>
Highland	3%	£1,372.30
Inverclyde	1.95%	£1,357.81
Midlothian	2.38%	£1,442.60
Moray	3%	£1,362.56
North Ayrshire	3%	£1,382.97
North Lanarkshire	3%	£1,257.88
Orkney	3%	£1,244.73
Perth and Kinross	2.50%	£1,341
Renfrewshire	3%	£1,354.88
Shetland	3%	£1,206.33
South Ayrshire	2.90%	£1383.96
South Lanarkshire	2.50%	£1,233
Stirling	3%	£1,384.58
West Dunbartonshire	3%	£1,332.36
Western Isles	3%	£1,229.29
West Lothian	3%	£1,314.71

*Source: BBC, via Scotland's local authorities*

*Note: Band D is included for comparison purposes. The Band D figures do not include water and sewerage charges, so the final household bill will be bigger.*

### **Improvement Service**

81. On 4 March the Improvement Service [published](#) its annual national benchmarking overview report for 2020-21. This summarises the impact of the first year of the Covid-19 pandemic on local government services and communities across Scotland. The report reveals growing levels of poverty, financial hardship and inequalities.
82. On 10 March the IS [published](#) a research paper on local authority-funded money and welfare rights advice services during 2020/21. The report found the provision of money and welfare rights advice services had become more complex since the start of the pandemic but that outcomes continued to be achieved for service users.

### **SOLACE**

83. On 23 March SOLACE UK [published](#) a statement commenting on the UK Chancellor's spring statement. It raised concerns that local authorities will struggle to meet an increase in demand from the households unable to meet their financial needs as household budgets are squeezed. It argues for the sector to be funded more sustainably.

### **Standards Commission**

84. On 4 March the Standards Commission issued a new advice note for members, on [distinguishing between strategic and operational matters](#). The Standards Commission also updated the [guidance](#) on the model code of conduct (at paragraph 54 of the guidance), with regard to how members can raise any concerns they may have about a public body's Chief Executive.

### ***Scottish Public Sector Ombudsman (SPSO)***

85. On 23 March the SPSO published their [March](#) newsletter, outlining statistics on complaints and the publication of two detailed investigation reports concerning the water provider Water Plus. It also includes statistics on Scottish Welfare Fund reviews, case studies, reference to the new complaints KPI guidance and information about a future webinar.
86. During March the SPSO [wrote](#) to all chief executives of public sector organisations advising of their refreshed Key Performance Indicators (KPI) [Guidance](#) on complaints handling which applies to local authorities, registered social landlords, colleges, universities, Scottish Government, Scottish Parliament and associated public authorities (including the Commission and Audit Scotland). It advises that the revised KPIs should be collected from 1 April 2022.

### ***Care Inspectorate***

87. On 21 March the Care Inspectorate [published](#) its new quality framework for day-care of children, childminding and school-aged childcare. The framework focuses on children's wellbeing and sets out the elements that will help the Care Inspectorate answer key questions about the impact of care and learning on outcomes for children.

### **Scottish public policy news**

88. On 2 March the Mental Health Foundation [published](#) a report which estimates the cost of mental health problems to the Scottish economy is at least £8.8bn per annum. Most of the cost is due to lost productivity and costs incurred by unpaid informal carers.
89. On 9 March the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) Scotland [published](#) a report on financial security for families. It highlights the high costs of childcare and transport, particularly for lone parent households, as a key barrier to families reaching a living income. The report sets out the current policy approaches for each area and considers the potential for a universal basic services approach, identifying a number of proposals and recommendations for the Scottish Government to consider.
90. On 10 March the Scottish Leaders Forum [published](#) a report on improving accountability and incentives to deliver the National Performance Framework (NPF) outcomes and live the values. The report considers accountability at various levels and for different organisations, including local government. It considers what would incentivise leaders in relevant organisations to use the NPF effectively. On 11 March, a SPICe [quest blog](#) was published summarising the report. This was followed up by a second [quest blog](#) from Dr Ruby Roberts, Research Fellow of Industrial Psychology at Aberdeen Business School, who considers the psychological factors that can influence change.
91. On 10 March the Royal Bank of Scotland [published](#) findings that show demand for new staff accelerated last month with a near record-rise in hiring activity in Scotland. The rate of increase in permanent placements increased slightly in January and remained the third highest on record. Scotland has continued to see a quicker rise in placements than the UK-wide average.
92. On 11 March Glasgow Disability Alliance [published](#) a report about the experiences of disabled women during the Covid pandemic. The report emphasises the importance of taking an intersectional approach when looking at the impacts of the pandemic and recommends more consultation with disabled women to ensure solutions are joined-up.
93. On 14 March Shelter Scotland [published](#) research that indicates there are up to 7,500 homeless children throughout Scotland. Shelter Scotland accuse councils of failing to



deliver social homes and call for the issue to be tackled as a matter of urgency. Shelter's analysis indicates a minimum of 7,000 social homes are needed over the next five years in Edinburgh, 3,675 in Glasgow, 853 in Aberdeen and 655 in Dundee

94. On 15 March the Fraser of Allander Institute (FAI) [published](#) an article considering child poverty ahead of the Scottish Government's publication of its second tackling child poverty delivery plan on 31 March.
95. On 16 March Our Scottish Future [published](#) findings from a poll indicating the cost of living and inflation are twice as important to households than any other economic issue in Scotland. Around 63% of respondents ranked the matter as a top three concern, against 30% for pensions, which was the next highest. Meanwhile, 48% of respondents agreed there is a need for greater cooperation between the four nations as part of Covid recovery.
96. On 23 March the FAI [published](#) its response to the UK Chancellor's Spring Statement. The main policy measures announced were a 5p fuel duty cut and a rise in the national insurance contributions thresholds. There was no targeted support to the lowest income thresholds or significant rise in benefits.
97. On 25 March the health and care news channel [healthandcare.scot](#) [reported](#) that the Scottish Care Chief Executive, Donald Macaskill, wrote to the Lord Advocate calling for the Crown Office-led inquiry into Covid care home deaths to be suspended for up to 22 months. He claimed the process is affecting the morale of care home staff, given the uncertainty around potential prosecutions.
98. On 28 March Our Scottish Future [published](#) a report on Scotland's low carbon transport network saying more should be done to encourage the use of buses and other low carbon alternatives to private car travel. Recommendations include: advocating for a maximum £2 bus fare; creating a single fare card; reducing road building in favour of supporting bus transport (to support the cost of living crisis); and progress towards net zero.
99. During March IPPR Scotland [published](#) research on the effectiveness and future of the Scottish Child Payment and Scottish Welfare Fund. It found the Scottish Child Payment will lift upwards of 30,000 children out of poverty by the end of 2022, but this falls short of the Scottish Government's interim targets for child poverty. It warns the removal of a £20 uplift in Universal Credit has muted the impact of policies in this area and sets out a number of recommendations.

## **UK public policy news**

100. On 1 March the Resolution Foundation [published](#) a report into the impacts of the net zero transition on households and consumption. The report assesses how families will face up to the challenges of reducing household consumption in relation to home heating, surface transport, diets and flying. The report evaluates where government policies are lacking and how policy makers should assess the challenges as the net zero policy moves forward.
101. On 10 March the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) [published](#) its final report on a market study on children's social care provision. The report found there is a shortage of appropriate places in children's homes and with foster carers and this means high prices are often being paid by local authorities. The CMA recommends the UK, Scottish and Welsh Governments create or develop national and regional bodies to support local authorities with their responsibilities.
102. On 15 March the Office for National Statistics (ONS) [published](#) figures on the labour market for the UK in March 2022. The figures show that Scotland experienced a 0.6%

increase in employment between November 2021 and January 2022, to 74.5%. This compares to a UK average of 75.6%. Unemployment in Scotland was down 0.5 points to 3.8% in the period, and inactivity down 0.3 points to 22.4% among those aged between 16 and 64 years.

103. On 22 March the Royal College of Psychiatrists [published](#) findings from a nationwide survey that reported one third of adults in the UK said their mental health had deteriorated as a result of the pandemic.
104. On 28 March Action for Children [published](#) findings from its research report into childhoods across the UK. It found that many families believe that childhoods are getting worse and children do not have a brighter future than previous generations. It also found children saw their own mental health as an issue had increased from 29% in 2019 to 42% in 2022 and that three in ten children worry about their family having enough money to live comfortably.

## **Conclusion**

105. The Commission is invited to:

- a) Agree that it does not respond to the consultations highlighted at paragraphs 39, 44 and 73
- b) That it respond to the upcoming consultation highlighted in paragraph 73 when this goes live.
- c) Note this report.

**Paul Reilly**  
**Secretary to the Commission**  
**1 April 2022**

**Appendix 1 Accounts Commission reports/blogs in past 12 months:**  
**Downloads and views**

Report / Blog	Date	Report downloads/ blog views
<a href="#">Blog: The value of independence and scrutiny across local government</a>	24 Feb 22	36
<a href="#">Social care briefing</a>	27 Jan 22	1,854
<a href="#">Falkirk Council Best Value Assurance Report</a>	13 Jan 22	771
<a href="#">Blog: Public performance reporting – why it matters</a>	21 Dec 21	267 (+76)
<a href="#">Blog: Assurance and scrutiny on Scotland's housing benefit services</a>	25 Nov 21	225 (*)
<a href="#">Community empowerment: Covid-19 update</a>	28 Oct 21	2,363 (+176)
<a href="#">South Ayrshire Best Value Assurance Report</a>	27 Oct 21	621 (+53)
<a href="#">Auditing climate change: An update</a>	21 Oct 21	652 (+66)
<a href="#">The role of sponsors in our reporting work</a>	14 Oct 21	192 (*)
<a href="#">The impact of Covid-19 on Scottish Councils' benefit services</a>	7 Oct 21	355 (+36)
<a href="#">Blog: Christie – it really is now or never</a>	4 Oct 21	679 (+32)
<a href="#">East Dunbartonshire Best Value Assurance Report</a>	29 Sept 21	504 (+50)
<a href="#">Accounts Commission Strategy 2021-26</a>	23 Sept 21	678 (+65)
<a href="#">Blog: Digital exclusion</a>	16 Sept 21	973 (+101)
<a href="#">Blog: Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services</a>	31 Aug 21	1,208 (+47)
<a href="#">Blog: Public Services and Scotland's Voluntary Sector during Covid-19?</a>	25 Jun 21	549 (*)
<a href="#">Best Value Assurance Report: Aberdeen City Council</a>	24 Jun 21	1,006 (+63)
<a href="#">Social Care: social care reform questions remain</a>	3 Jun 21	1,891 (*)
<a href="#">Accounts Commission annual report 2020/21</a>	3 Jun 21	442 (*)
<a href="#">Local government in Scotland Overview 2021</a>	27 May 21	3,509 (+228)
<a href="#">Equality Outcomes 2021-25</a>	27 Apr 21	691 (+47)
<a href="#">Mainstreaming equality and equality outcomes: progress report 2019-21</a>	27 April 21	552 (+34)

**Note:** Figures are reported as at the end of February 2022.

**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
<b>Mar 22</b>	831 (+23)	33,100	2,800	118	77	61	12	5
<b>Feb 22</b>	807 (+2)	8,000	1,100	60	34	32	1	1
<b>Jan 22</b>	805 (+13)	12,600	839	103	27	38	6	2
<b>Dec 21</b>	792 (+4)	6,500	108	48	20	25	2	0
<b>Nov 21</b>	788 (+10)	6,600	499	32	29	35	0	1
<b>Oct 21</b>	778 (+13)	22,500	316	93	47	97	6	6
<b>Sep 21</b>	765 (+8)	13,600	584	43	35	39	0	3
<b>Aug 21</b>	757 (-1)	11,200	339	48	3	13	0	0
<b>Jul 21</b>	758 (+18)	7,700	24	5	16	26	0	0
<b>Jun 21</b>	740 (+14)	56,900	513	348	113	174	8	1
<b>May 21</b>	726 (+22)	46,300	836	122	95	148	9	1
<b>Apr 21</b>	704 (+3)	3,300	n/a	1	1	0	0	0
<b>Mar 21</b>	701 (+15)	36,100	2,100	76	66	138	10	1

Figures as of 25 March 2022.

Change on previous month shown in brackets.