

Covid-19

Implications for public finances in Scotland

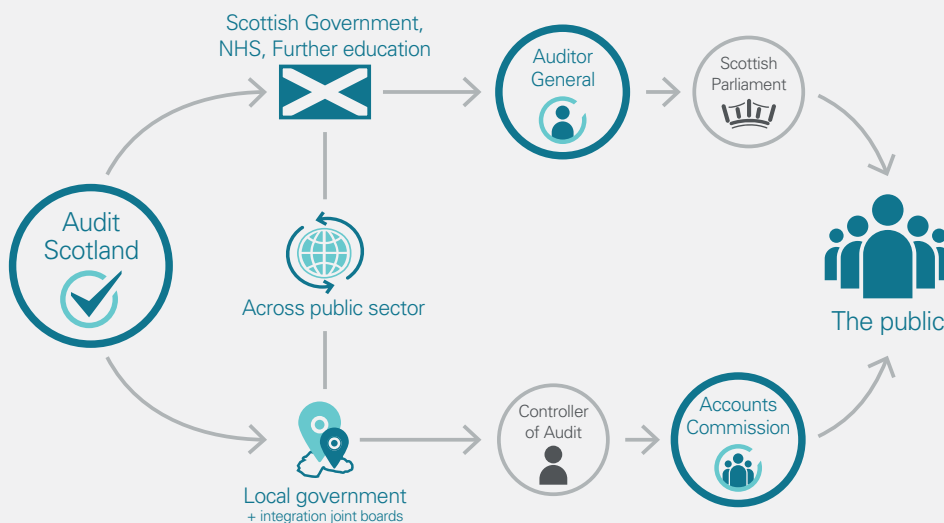


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Who we are

The Auditor General, the Accounts Commission and Audit Scotland work together to deliver public audit in Scotland:

- **Audit Scotland** is governed by a board, consisting of the Auditor General, the chair of the Accounts Commission, a non-executive board chair, and two non-executive members appointed by the Scottish Commission for Public Audit, a commission of the Scottish Parliament.
- The **Auditor General** is an independent crown appointment, made on the recommendation of the Scottish Parliament, to audit the Scottish Government, NHS and other bodies and report to Parliament on their financial health and performance.
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Our vision is to be a world-class audit organisation that improves the use of public money.

Through our work for the Auditor General and the Accounts Commission, we provide independent assurance to the people of Scotland that public money is spent properly and provides value. We aim to achieve this by:

- carrying out relevant and timely audits of the way the public sector manages and spends money
- reporting our findings and conclusions in public
- identifying risks, making clear and relevant recommendations.

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Team

The core team for this briefing consisted of Richard Robinson, Fiona Diggle, Lucy Carter and Daniel Melly, with support from other colleagues and under the direction of Mark Taylor.

Introduction

- 1.** The public health crisis caused by Covid-19 has had a significant and profound effect on every aspect of Scottish society. At the heart of this are the personal tragedies of the thousands of people who have died or lost loved ones.
- 2.** The pandemic has had wide consequences for public health in Scotland, including the impact on both physical and mental wellbeing. For many, this means dealing with increased financial uncertainty alongside health concerns. Public services have been drastically affected, requiring immediate changes to the way that services are provided to people in Scotland. For the economy, the lockdown has disrupted businesses and household incomes, leading to an economic downturn of a scale not seen in recent times.
- 3.** The impact on the public finances is unprecedented. The crisis has required the Scottish and UK governments to respond quickly, providing substantial additional funding for public services and support for individuals, businesses and the economy.
- 4.** The pandemic is not over, and it is unclear how the impact of the virus will develop over time. It is likely that further financial measures will be needed and that the effects on individuals, public services and the economy will last many years into the future.
- 5.** For the Scottish Government the challenges of managing public finances within this environment are significant and varied. The levels of spending required to meet future demands for services and necessary government interventions is unclear, as are the levels of funding and revenues available to support it.
- 6.** The fast-changing nature of government spending and funding related to the pandemic makes keeping track of how money is being spent a complex and difficult task. Alongside this, the financial and performance risks that the Scottish Government must manage are also developing quickly.
- 7.** This briefing brings together our analysis of the latest position of how public money is being spent and funded in Scotland, before considering the key financial and performance risks facing the Scottish Government. It has three sections:
 - Part 1 highlights the fiscal response to Covid-19 to the end of July 2020, setting out the tax and spending commitments made by the Scottish Government and how these have been funded, as well as summarising the UK Government policies that apply in Scotland.
 - Part 2 sets out the emerging financial and performance risks that the Scottish Government is facing as a result of Covid-19 and its economic consequences.
 - Part 3 considers what this means for Audit Scotland's work in providing assurance and aiding scrutiny of the Scottish Government's response during the current crisis.
- 8.** Public audit has a key role in providing scrutiny of how well public money is being spent to support people in Scotland. Audit Scotland will continue to audit public finances and the performance of services throughout the pandemic. More information is provided in [*Covid-19: How public audit in Scotland is responding.*](#)

Part 1

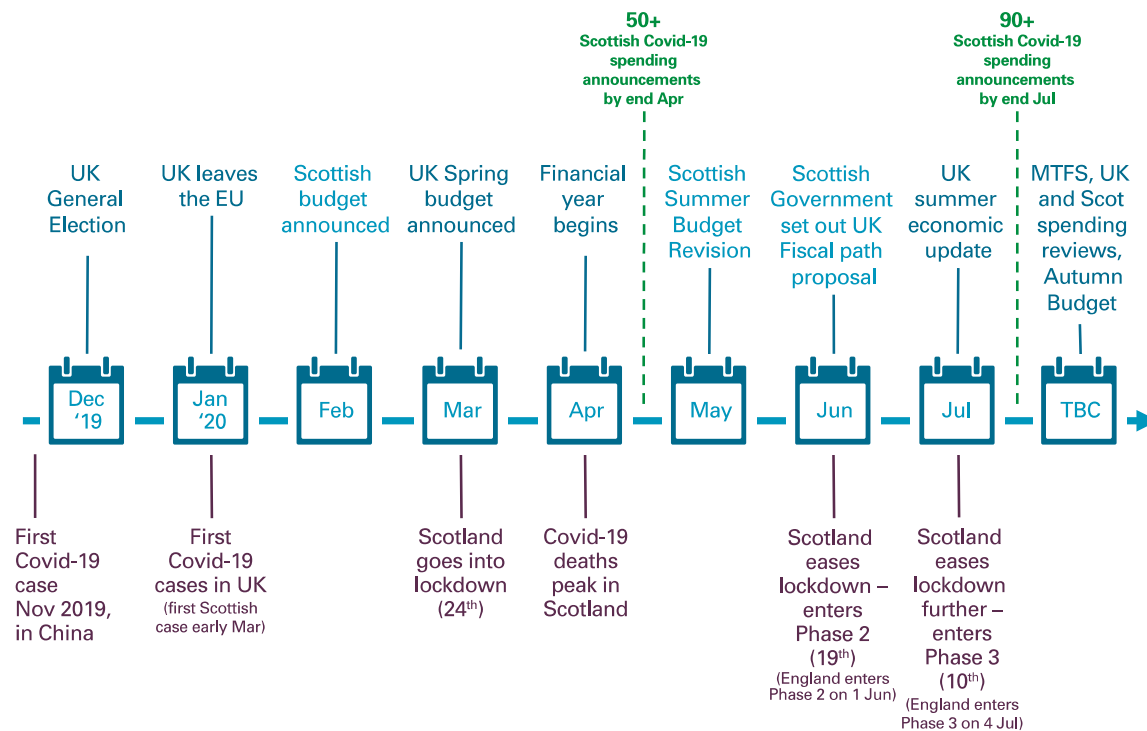
The fiscal response to date

The impact on Scottish public finances is unprecedented

9. The Covid-19 pandemic has been the biggest fiscal and policy challenge facing the Scottish Government over the past two decades of devolution. Expected devolved public spending has increased by around 15 per cent since the 2020/21 Scottish budget was first agreed in February 2020 and is subject to significant and continuing revision.¹ Before the pandemic hit, the budget had faced unusual uncertainty with the UK budget being delayed due to the general election, and remains subject to unprecedented uncertainty, volatility and complexity ([Exhibit 1](#)).

Exhibit 1 Fiscal events and Covid-19 timeline

The Scottish and UK governments have had to respond quickly to the emerging pandemic.



Source: Audit Scotland analysis

10. The speed at which financial changes have had to be made due to Covid-19 is highlighted by the fact that the Scottish budget, announced 6 February, included no reference to the pandemic. The UK budget, on 11 March, included spending of £12 billion to tackle Covid-19.² Significant additional spending was announced later in March once the UK entered lockdown, including the Coronavirus Job Retention and Self-Employment Income Support Schemes, forecast to cost £65 billion this

¹ Barnett consequentials related to Covid-19 as share of original consolidated budget for 2020/21.

² Chancellor delivers Budget 2020 – press release, HM Treasury, 11 March.

year.³ The Scottish Government announced spending of over £2.5 billion in March, including £2.2 billion of business support and £350 million for supporting communities.

11. Since then, both the UK and Scottish governments have made over 150 spending and tax announcements to respond to and manage the changing picture. The Scottish Government introduced a Summer Budget Revision on 15 May, adding an extra £4 billion to the Scottish budget at that point. The UK Government's summer economic update on 8 July announced spending of £30 billion to support economic recovery across the UK.⁴

Responding to the pandemic comes when the Scottish budget is already increasingly complex, volatile and uncertain

12. As a result of the new tax, social security and borrowing powers devolved to Scotland in recent years, the Scottish Government now has more choice over tax and spending. While this creates opportunities for the Scottish Government, it means the Scottish budget has become increasingly complex, and subject to more volatility and uncertainty.

13. At the start of 2020/21, nearly 60 per cent of the Scottish budget was funded by the block grant from the UK Government, driven by UK fiscal policy and spending decisions. The Scottish budget is also linked to Scotland's economic performance relative to the rest of the UK. This affects tax revenues from the devolved taxes and the corresponding Block Grant Adjustments (BGAs) which reflect the performance of the equivalent UK taxes. We explain this process in Part 1 of [Scotland's new financial powers, Operation of the Fiscal Framework 2018/19](#).

14. The Scottish Government is required to maintain a balanced budget, matching its spending to available funding each year. This can be challenging because funding can fluctuate significantly within the year:

- The total grant from the UK Government (the block grant) increases or decreases through the Barnett formula, based on UK department spending announcements. The total Barnett consequentials for any year are usually not confirmed until late in the year.
- Revenues for the fully devolved taxes (Land and Buildings Transaction Tax [LBTT] and Scottish Landfill Tax) impact on the budget in real time, as does spending on demand-led social security benefits. BGAs for the devolved taxes and social security are also updated in-year.
- Revenues are fixed for the year when it comes to the largest of the devolved taxes, Scottish income tax (SIT). The forecasts for SIT and its corresponding BGA are locked in for the course of the year, and a reconciliation between the forecast and outturn applies to the budget three years later once tax receipts are known.

15. In 2020/21, maintaining a balanced budget will be more difficult than in previous years because of increased volatility in some tax revenues and funding, and significantly increased demands on Scottish Government spending due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

The Scottish Government has announced over 90 spending and tax measures to tackle the pandemic, which total £5.3 billion

16. Between 18 March and 31 July, the Scottish Government has announced over 90 spending and tax measures to help support business, public services and individuals during the pandemic. A summary of all Scottish Government

³ Coronavirus policy monitoring database, OBR, 14 July 2020.

⁴ Policy paper: A Plan for Jobs 2020, UK Government, 8 July 2020.

announcements made as at 31 July is provided in [Exhibit 2](#), with more details in the Appendix. These announcements include:

- grants to businesses and charities (for example, the Small Business Support Grant)
- additional resource spending to support public bodies' day-to-day services
- capital spending (such as digitisation and construction projects)
- loans (for example, for farmers, housebuilders and private landlords)
- tax cuts and reliefs (such as business rates relief and temporarily raising the zero-rate threshold for LBTT).

Exhibit 2

Scottish Government spending announcements as at 31 July 2020

| Spending announcements | £m |
|---|--------------|
| <p>Business support</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • £1.202 billion for the £10,000 Small Business Support Grant and the £25,000 Retail Hospitality and Leisure Support Grants • £875 million to cover the cost of business rates relief • £824 million for 14 other grant and loan schemes for a range of businesses including small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs), creative, tourism and hospitality businesses, farmers, housebuilders, private landlords, oil, gas and energy businesses, the fishing industry and zoos. • £230 million 'Return to work' package to support construction, low carbon projects, digitisation and business support. • £31 million for the tourism and cultural sectors including hotels and self-catering businesses, cultural and sporting events and venues and museums. • £110 million for the third sector including charities, voluntary organisations, community-controlled housing associations and social enterprises that are supporting local responses. | 3,272 |
| <p>Public Services</p> <p>Health and social care</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • As of 16 June, the Scottish Government had committed to directly passing on £780 million Barnett consequential for health and social care. On 15 May the Scottish Summer Budget Revision outlined how £620 million of this would be allocated. <p>Local authorities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • As of 23 June, Parliament had approved £489 million additional funding for Local Government and communities. This included crisis grants, funding free school meals and council tax reduction schemes, as well as funding to support the return to school. <p>Other support for public services includes funding for transport operators, homebuyers, university research and employment support.</p> | 2,019 |
| <p>Other support for individuals</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In addition to the support for vulnerable individuals provided through local government and third sector grants, specific Scottish Government support packages for individuals include the Unpaid Carers Allowance supplement, hardship payments for students and discretionary housing payments for tenants. | 45 |
| Total | 5,336 |

The Scottish Government currently expects to spend around £4.8 billion on Covid-19 related measures in 2020/21

17. The Scottish Government expects that additional spending on Covid-19 related measures will be at least £4.8 billion in 2020/21. The expected spending in-year is different to the total cost of the announcements in [Exhibit 2, page 7](#) because:

- spending against some announcements depend on demand; any underspends can be used for other purposes. For example, lower than expected take-up for some business grants has meant that around £54 million can be reallocated to other support funds. This includes a £10 million fund for performing arts venues.⁵
- some announcements will be spent over more than one year. For example, the £100 million fund for school attainment is due to be spent over 2020/21 and 2021/22, and the energy transition fund is due to be spent over the next five years, with just over half of the £62 million fund committed for 2020/21.

18. The Scottish Government is required to manage spending against a balanced budget. The Summer Budget Revision is the latest balanced budget approved by the Scottish Parliament. £4.0 billion of the £4.8 billion expected additional in-year spending is set out in the Summer Budget Revision.

19. The Scottish Government will produce an Autumn Budget Revision later in the year which will incorporate changes since the Summer Budget Revision in a revised balanced budget for approval. Currently, the Scottish Government expects spending for announcements made since the Summer Budget Revision to be £571 million of day-to-day spending and £230 million of capital spending in 2020/21. These amounts will continue to be reviewed as the Autumn Budget Revision is prepared.

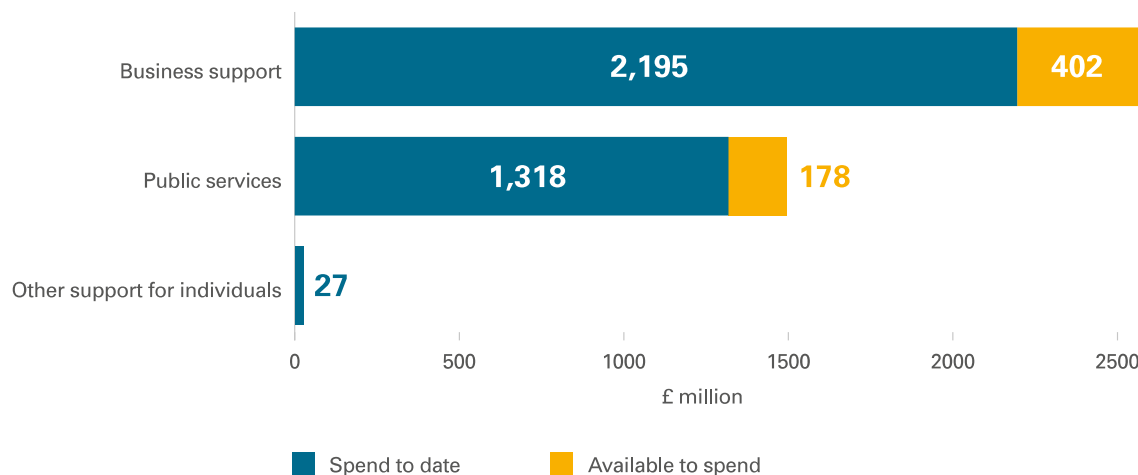
20. The Scottish Government has shared available information with us about how much of the Covid-19 spending announced in the Summer Budget Revision has already been committed as at the end of July – that is paid out or transferred to other public bodies. This indicates that of revised total spending of £4.11 billion now expected in relation to these measures, £3.53 billion (86 per cent) has been committed to date ([Exhibit 3, page 9](#)).

⁵ Lifeline support for Performing Arts Venues, Scottish Government, 3 July 2020.

Exhibit 3

Actual Scottish Government spend to date against announcements incorporated in the Summer Budget Revision – snapshot at end of July

Scottish Government data suggests most of the funding in the Summer Budget Revision has been spent.



Note: Based on information provided by the Scottish Government on 28 July 2020. Spending here includes spending committed to programmes, and spending transferred to other public sector bodies. For example, the £75 million spending for academic research has been passed from the Scottish Government to the Scottish Funding Council for onward transmission to the sector.

Source: Audit Scotland analysis based on information provided by Scottish Government

21. As at the end of July, comprehensive information on the amounts paid out to third parties by public bodies was not available to us. In some key areas the current levels of actual spending reported include:

- 89,000 grants valuing over £998 million (out of nearly £1.2 billion) have been awarded through two Business Grant Schemes⁶
- £160 million of grants have been distributed through the funds for the Pivotal Enterprises Resilience Fund, the Creative, Tourism and Hospitality Enterprises and Hardship Fund and the Newly Self-employed Hardship Fund.⁷ Originally worth £144 million at the time of the Summer Budget Revision, this has since increased to £184 million
- all £620 million of the Health and Social Care spending included in the Summer Budget Revision has now been committed.

Additional spending has been funded for the most part by Barnett consequentials

The Scottish Government has spent Barnett consequentials broadly in line with the UK, targeting some aspects to meet specific needs in Scotland

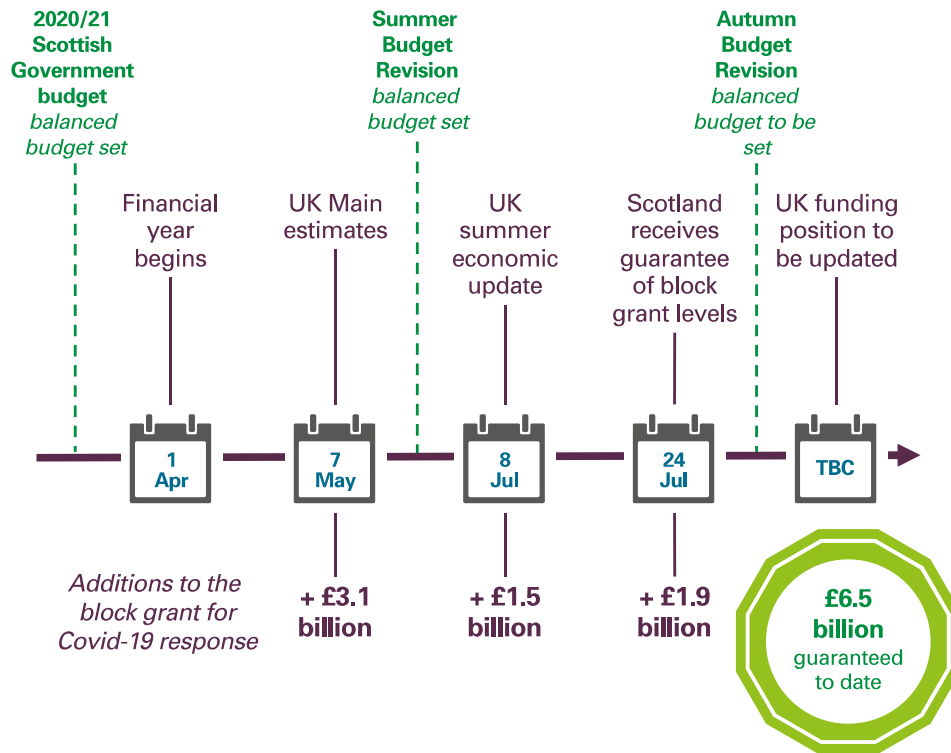
22. Most of the Scottish Government's spending and tax measures in response to Covid-19 have been funded by Barnett consequentials from the UK Government ([Exhibit 4, page 10](#)).

⁶ Coronavirus (COVID-19): business support fund grant statistics, Scottish Government, 4 August 2020.

⁷ Letter from Cabinet Secretary for the Economy, Fair Work and Culture to Convener of Committee on Economy, Energy and Fair Work, 6 August 2020.

Exhibit 4

Timeline for additions to the Scottish block grant in response to Covid-19



Source: Audit Scotland analysis

23. The Scottish Government decides how it spends Barnett consequentials. Our analysis suggests the Scottish Government's spending announcements broadly reflect those made by the UK Government. For example, £1.2 billion of Barnett consequentials for business support grants have been passed directly to fund business support in Scotland and £780 million so far has been passed directly to health and social care services.^{8,9}

24. In total, the UK Government has committed at least £6.5 billion additional funding for the Scottish Government since the UK Spring budget.¹⁰ There are often timing differences between the confirmation of UK funding and Scottish spending announcements. For example, in May 2020 the Scottish Government anticipated £518 million of funding in the Summer Budget Revision that had not yet been added to the block grant. The UK Government then confirmed Barnett consequentials of £1.532 billion on 8 July 2020 in its summer economic update.

25. Since then, the UK Government has confirmed a further £1.915 billion of funding. The majority of this is funding for health services but also includes an additional £800 million not attached to any specific spending announcement. This is the first time the UK Government has provided guarantees of block grant levels in advance of spending commitments being made, and it is unclear how this guarantee will align with eventual Barnett consequentials. The funding position will be updated when UK Supplementary Estimates are confirmed later in 2020/21.

26. At the time of publication, the Scottish Government had not announced specific spending plans for all funding recently confirmed by the UK Government. In many of the areas concerned (such as supply of Personal Protective Equipment and the

⁸ Budget Revision, Scottish Government, 15 May 2020.

⁹ Official report, Scottish Parliament, 16 June 2020.

¹⁰ UK Government news, 24 July 2020.

Test and Protect programme) activity is well under way, with costs already being incurred by the Scottish Government. The Scottish Government's spending position will be set out in the Autumn and Spring Budget Revisions later in the year.

27. The Scottish Government has taken a different approach to the UK Government for some of its detailed measures, including:

- In addition to UK-wide business rates relief and the £1.2 billion for business support grants, the Scottish Government's £185 million business support fund provides support for SMEs, creative, tourism and micro hospitality companies as well as newly self-employed people.¹¹
- The Scottish Government's package of support for the fishing industry is £22.5 million, compared to UK Government funding of £10 million based on its own support measures.¹²
- the UK Government temporarily raised the threshold for Stamp Duty to £500,000, the Scottish Government temporarily raised the zero-rate threshold for Land and Buildings Transaction Tax to £250,000 and added £50 million to the First Home Fund.¹³

Some planned spending has been reprioritised to support Covid-19 programmes

28. In addition to using Barnett consequentials to fund its spending commitments, the Scottish Government has identified a total of £855 million from the 2020/21 budget that could be redeployed for Covid-19 related spending.¹⁴ Of this, £255 million was confirmed in the Summer Budget Revision, including:

- **Repurposing funding:** £124 million of passenger subsidies for bus, rail and ferry operators repurposed to cover operators' revenue losses due to reduced services and passenger numbers in lockdown.
- **Transferring funding:** Due to anticipated reduced demand for energy efficiency projects, £105 million of Financial Transactions funding for domestic energy efficiency loans was transferred to fund emergency loans for housebuilders (£100 million) and private sector landlords (£5 million).
- **Delayed spending:** Following a re-planning exercise (resulting in a delay to the introduction of planned changes to some disability assistance benefits), £26 million for the Social Security Programme (mainly for staffing costs) was redeployed to provide additional funding for the Unpaid Carers Allowance supplement and the Scottish Welfare Fund.¹⁵

29. Following the Summer Budget Revision, the Cabinet Secretary for Finance identified £600 million from the 2020/21 budget that could be redeployed for Covid-19 support, including £450 million of capital and financial transactions.¹⁶ To date, £230 million of capital and financial transaction investment has been reallocated to fund the 'Return to work' package ([Exhibit 2, page 7](#)).¹⁷

¹¹ Help for businesses, Scottish Government, 20 May 2020.

¹² Support for Scottish seafood industry worth £22.5 million, Scottish Government, 17 April 2020.

¹³ Help for homebuyers and employment support, Scottish Government, 9 July 2020.

¹⁴ Letter from the Cabinet Secretary for Finance to the UK Chief Secretary to the Treasury, 24 June 2020.

¹⁵ Budget Revision, Scottish Government, 15 May 2020.

¹⁶ Letter from the Cabinet Secretary for Finance to the UK Chief Secretary to the Treasury, 24 June 2020.

¹⁷ Official report, Scottish Parliament, 16 June 2020.

The Scotland Reserve has been used to support the Scottish Government's response but remaining budget flexibility is limited

30. The Scottish Government can use the Scotland Reserve or borrow to help manage the budget. The Fiscal Framework sets out the rules and limits that apply to the borrowing and reserves powers. Audit Scotland has published briefing papers in the past setting out how the Fiscal Framework is operating.¹⁸

31. Before the pandemic hit, the Scottish Government had planned to use its borrowing and reserve powers to support its spending in the 2020/21 budget ([Exhibit 5](#)):

- The 2020/21 budget committed to drawing down £168 million from the Scotland Reserve.
- £207 million of resource borrowing, against a limit of £300 million available, has been used to account for forecasting error relating to 2017/18 Scottish Income Tax. This resource borrowing power can only be used to cover forecast errors.
- The Scottish Government had committed all £450 million of available capital borrowing in the budget.

32. Any additional drawdowns from the Scotland Reserve to meet spending needs in year are limited to £69 million for day-to-day spending and £56 million to support capital spending. £93 million of borrowing is available to manage the impact of any further forecasting errors in year.

Exhibit 5

Scotland Reserve use and borrowing 2020/21, £ million

The use of reserves and borrowing in the 2020/21 budget limits what is available to spend in response to Covid-19.

| | Resource | Capital | Financial Transactions | Total |
|---|-------------|------------|------------------------|------------|
| The Scotland Reserve | | | | |
| Reserves closing balance 2019/20 | 218 | 81 | 135 | 434 |
| Drawdown – set out in 2020/21 budget | 131 | 5 | 32 | 168 |
| Drawdown – Summer Budget Revision | 18 | 7 | 0 | 25 |
| Total drawdown 2020/21 | 149 | 12 | 32 | 193 |
| Planned closing balance 2020/21 | 69 | 69 | 103 | 241 |
| Remaining drawdown allowed in 2020/21 | 69 | | 56* | 125 |
| Borrowing powers (for use only to cover forecast error for devolved taxes and social security) | | | | |
| Borrowing – set out in 2020/21 budget | 207 | 450 | | 657 |
| Remaining borrowing allowed in 2020/21 | 93** | 0 | | 93 |

Notes: *£100 million draw down limit for capital applies to both general capital and financial transactions. **£93 million resource borrowing available to cover budget reductions due to forecasting errors. Further borrowing powers are available for up to £300 million in the case of a Scottish specific economic shock and/ or for cash management.

Source: Scottish Government, Audit Scotland analysis

¹⁸ [Scotland's new financial powers: Operation of the Fiscal Framework 2018/19](#), Audit Scotland, October 2019.

33. The Scottish Government has requested additional flexibilities to borrowing and reserves rules to help manage the pandemic. To date, we understand that the UK Government has not formally responded in writing to this request, but the Chief Secretary to the Treasury has stated that the flexibilities are not needed.¹⁹ If the flexibilities as requested are agreed at a future point, it could increase the overall budget in 2020/21 by up to £620 million, with an overall increase in revenue spending, and a decrease in capital. Any additional amounts would require to be repaid in future years.

UK Government measures in reserved areas include business loans and income support affecting nearly 900,000 jobs

34. In addition to the Scottish Government's Covid-19 response, there are also UK Government funded schemes that apply to Scotland:

- Four separate loan schemes for businesses to support small- and medium-sized businesses, large businesses, and innovative companies.
- Statutory Sick Pay Rebate Scheme.
- Covid-19 Corporate Financing Facility (Bank of England purchasing short-term debt from large companies).
- The Coronavirus Job Retention (including the job retention bonus) and Self-Employment Income Support Schemes.
- The Kickstart Scheme which creates work placements for those aged 16-24 who are receiving Universal Credit.
- Schemes to support work search, skills and apprenticeships.
- Reduced VAT for hospitality, accommodation and attractions until January 2021 and the Eat Out to Help Out scheme for August 2020.

35. Scottish people, public bodies and other organisations have also received support from, and can apply to, several UK-wide support mechanisms, including Ministry of Defence supported testing facilities, UK-wide charity funds, UK Research and Innovation funding and loans for universities that lose income from international students.^{20,21} In addition, some programmes have been planned on a UK-wide basis, including coordination around Personal Protective Equipment (PPE).²²

36. As at 30 June 2020, the UK Government has reported total spend on the Self-Employed Income Support Scheme in Scotland as £449 million, supporting 155,000 jobs,²³ and that 736,500 Scottish jobs have been supported through the Job Retention Scheme.²⁴ Loans and support worth more than £2.3 billion have been given to more than 65,000 firms in Scotland since the outbreak.²⁵ The UK Government has not yet published a breakdown of spend in Scotland for any of the other schemes.

¹⁹ Scotland 'does not need more fiscal power', UK Government minister insists, The Scotsman, 25th July 2020.

²⁰ COVID Support Force: The MOD's contribution to the coronavirus response, UK Government, 23 March 2020.

²¹ Government to protect UK research jobs with major support package, UK Government, 27 June 2020.

²² Press release: Government sets out plan for national effort on PPE, UK and Department of Health Social Care, 10 April 2020.

²³ Self-Employment Income Support Scheme (SEISS) Official Statistics, HMRC, 15 July 2020.

²⁴ Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme Official Statistics, HMRC, 15 July 2020.

²⁵ Coronavirus support measures help every region and nation in the UK – press release, HM Treasury, 6 August 2020.

Scottish public finances will face continuing and significant change during the remainder of 2020/21 and beyond

37. The change to the UK and Scottish budgets so far has been significant. Fiscal events later in 2020/21 are likely to change the budgets further and will reflect both governments' ongoing response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

38. The main fiscal events for the Scottish Government will be the Scottish Autumn and Spring Budget Revisions, and the 2021/22 budget. The Scottish Government medium-term financial strategy, and the NHS medium-term financial framework, are expected to be published later this year and should set the Scottish Government's approach to the recovery from Covid-19 in the medium term. The Scottish Government is also expected to publish its Scottish Capital Spending Review and Infrastructure Investment Plan later in 2020.

39. Two major UK Government fiscal announcements are anticipated in the autumn which will affect the Scottish budget in 2020/21 and subsequent years:

- An autumn budget is expected to include the conclusions of the Chancellor's review of the UK fiscal framework and a new set of fiscal rules. Forecasts suggest that the UK Government is on track to miss at least one of its current three rules in 2020/21.²⁶ Any changes could be significant for Scotland:
 - if the Chancellor loosened the current rules, this could allow more borrowing and spending, potentially increasing the Scottish block grant. There are also Scottish budget implications if the UK Government reduces tax rates for taxes that are devolved in Scotland, such as Scottish Income Tax.
 - if the Chancellor reduces borrowing and spending to meet current or tighter rules, this would potentially reduce or restrict the block grant.
- A comprehensive spending review is expected to set UK Government departments' resource budgets out to 2023/24, capital budgets until 2024/25, and devolved administrations' block grants for the same period. The Chancellor has said there will need to be difficult choices over areas of spending and departments have been asked to identify opportunities to reprioritise and deliver savings. This introduces uncertainty around UK spending plans and will have implications for Scottish budgets through the block grant.

40. The current situation remains fast moving and very unpredictable, and the timings, content and number of fiscal events could change, depending on the progress of the pandemic and economic performance. How these develop over the course of this year and into the longer term will be of critical importance to Scottish public finances.

²⁶ Fiscal sustainability report, OBR, 14 July 2020.

Part 2

Emerging risks

Covid-19 has brought significant risk to Scottish public finances and the performance of public services

41. Responding to the pandemic and the public health, economic and social problems it brings has been hugely difficult for people and governments around the world. Decisions have had to be made quickly by the Scottish Government as the situation has developed, impacting on the lives of us all. The crisis will have continuing and long-lasting effects that will affect government in Scotland for years to come.

42. Covid-19 will also have significant consequences for public spending programmes and services now and well into the future. With increasing pressures on public revenues and spending, and the Scottish budget subject to ever more volatility, uncertainty and complexity, it will be challenging to match spending to the available funding in the coming years. This will need to be done in a way that minimises the disruption to individuals, public bodies and services, ensures value for money is maintained and avoids unintended consequences.

43. In this section we analyse the emerging risks to the Scottish Government's management of the public finances and the performance of public services that have arisen from the pandemic. At this stage we do not comment on how well the Scottish Government is managing these risks. The response to the pandemic is continuing, and it is likely that many of the risks highlighted in this briefing will extend into the medium and long term.

Ensuring measures are effective, help people through the pandemic and provide value for money

The Scottish Government's priority has been reacting to an urgent public health crisis

44. Over a short period of time, the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic has led to a significant public health crisis, profoundly affecting people's lives. The Scottish Government's immediate priority has been responding to this urgent crisis quickly.

45. Covid-19 tax and spending measures have varied purposes, but broadly aim to support people, public health and the economy. From a public health viewpoint, this includes public spending to help slow the spread of the virus, to build enough capacity in the NHS to treat people affected, and to supply frontline staff with the equipment and support they need. From a social and economic perspective, interventions intend to support people through the consequences of the lockdown and an economic downturn, including business support and support for individuals and families.

There are immediate risks to people, public services and the economy, with some groups in society disproportionately affected

46. Because the impact on people has been immediate, public-spending measures had to be brought in swiftly. For example:

- the Scottish Government constructed the NHS Louisa Jordan Covid-19 treatment facility to ensure that the NHS could cope with increased demand for Covid-19 infections.

- NHS National Services Scotland increased supplies of PPE, from three million masks per year to 70 million masks since 1 March 2020.^{27 28}
- UK Government and Scottish Government interventions have helped to slow increases in unemployment in Scotland to date. The Office of the Chief Economic Advisor for Scotland estimates without the Job Retention Scheme, unemployment levels could have reached around 14 per cent.²⁹

47. In its *Equality and Fairer Scotland Impact Assessment: Evidence gathered for Scotland's route map* report, the Scottish Government has gathered evidence on how different sections of society may be disproportionately affected by the pandemic. It notes a variety of different risks facing different people, including the prevalence of the virus among older people, and the specific difficulties people with disabilities may face in accessing food and other essential supplies.³⁰ These include the way the pandemic is felt by different communities and socio-economic groups.

48. The Scottish Human Rights Commission (SHRC) has highlighted where it considers specific areas and rights need to be considered:

- while school closures have a direct effect on children's education, the absence of school meals impacts on the human right to food³¹
- 46 per cent of Covid-19 deaths registered to date relate to deaths in care homes. SHRC has considered how the impact of Covid-19 in care homes relates to human rights duties, including in relation to the human right to life.³²

49. The pandemic is still in progress, and the risks to health and the economy will change over time. The Scottish Government will need to consider what further financial measures should be implemented in response to changing circumstances, taking into account how these will affect different groups in society.

Risks will continue to people's health and wellbeing outcomes over the longer term

50. Directing efforts towards treating the pandemic and away from existing or planned programmes will likely result in negative consequences for some people. The impact of this is difficult to monitor and assess. For example, the NHS in Scotland has seen a significant drop in urgent cancer referrals, and screenings for breast cancer were paused from March until mid-July. There is also a backlog of postponed non-Covid-19 planned healthcare arising indirectly from the pandemic, with the Scottish Government announcing that the NHS Louisa Jordan will now be used to help address this.

51. The mental, physical and financial impact of the pandemic on people is likely to persist over the longer term. Ultimately, this could inhibit progress towards improving people's outcomes as set out in the National Performance Framework. There are 11 National Performance Framework outcomes which the public sector and its partners work towards – achieving these outcomes for people in Scotland relies on progress being made in areas such as tackling poverty, improving health and building an inclusive economy. More information on this is set out in our [Planning for Outcomes](#) briefing published in June 2019.

²⁷ Coronavirus (COVID-19): report on Personal Protective Equipment supplies, Scottish Government, June 2020

²⁸ Coronavirus (COVID-19): PPE distribution statistics, Scottish Government, 12 August 2020.

²⁹ Monthly Economic Brief, Office of the Chief Economic Advisor, Scottish Government, June 2020.

³⁰ Equality and Fairer Scotland Impact Assessment: Evidence gathered for Scotland's route map through and out of the crisis.

³¹ Covid-19: Implications for the human right to food in Scotland, SHRC, June 2020.

³² Covid-19: Care homes and human rights, SHRC, 14 July 2020.

Responding to the pandemic will affect the Scottish Government's wider aims and objectives, and public services will need to adapt

52. The implementation of restrictions has already led to some delays in both infrastructure spending and in implementing planned policies. The Scottish Government has delayed the expansion of early learning and childcare hours, as well as several new benefits, such as the Job Start payment and the Child Disability Payment. Managing the economic and social impact of such delays will remain important as the pandemic continues.

53. Budget decisions often involve trade-offs; choosing to prioritise spending toward the pandemic may mean that funding is not available to the same extent for planned spending programmes. The Scottish Government has announced some budget reprioritisations to commit funding to Covid-19 costs, but to date these have been relatively minor in the context of the overall budget. Further or deeper reprioritising of the budget may be required, and the Scottish Government must look across all the services they fund, to consider what is essential for meeting priorities and making the wider changes to services, society and outcomes envisaged.

Scottish Government responses need to work alongside UK Government and local government measures

54. Ensuring the effectiveness and value for money of Covid-19 financial measures is made more difficult, not just by the speed and frequency of Scottish Government decisions, but also because of the interplay with local government interventions and UK Government decisions which apply to Scotland. Having a clear picture of how Scottish Government and UK Government initiatives are working together to help people in Scotland is needed to properly understand the effectiveness of Covid-19 spending over time.

Keeping Scottish public finances on a sustainable footing

The economic impact of Covid-19 has been significant and will have long-term consequences for the public finances

55. Covid-19 has had a major impact on the Scottish and wider UK economy. In the three months to May, UK GDP has fallen by 19.1 per cent,³³ and Scottish GDP in May was 22.1 per cent below its February level.³⁴ How, and over what time frame the economy will recover is still uncertain, but the Office of Budget Responsibility assume there will be some permanent scarring and structural changes to the economy over the medium term in two out of their three scenarios.

56. While the Scottish and the UK economies have both faced a severe shock, Scottish budgets are directly affected by relative economic performance across the UK. Under the Fiscal Framework, the Scottish budget increases or decreases based on how devolved tax takes are faring compared to the equivalent tax in the rest of the UK:

- For the fully devolved taxes (LBTT and Scottish Landfill Tax) adjustments to the Scottish budget for relative performance are made, and must be managed, during and shortly after the financial year.
- Revenues for Scottish and UK income tax are known later, in 2022; until then, budgets will be adjusted for pre-pandemic tax outturns ([Exhibit 6, page 18](#)).

57. Similarly, the cost of devolved benefits to Scottish budgets will be determined by the relative impact across different parts of the UK. There has been a marked increase in Universal Credit claims since the pandemic, which will increase the number of people eligible for any benefits linked to these. For example, the Scottish Child Payment is planned to be introduced by the end of this year. This is

³³ GDP Monthly Estimate, UK: May 2020, Office for National Statistics, July 2020.

³⁴ GDP Monthly Estimate, Scotland: May 2020, Scottish Government, July 2020.

a Scottish-specific benefit, with no comparator in the rest of the UK, so any additional costs as a result of increased eligibility must be met solely by the Scottish Government.

Exhibit 6 Scottish income tax and the Covid-19 impact

| Tax outturn year | When published | Budget adjustment required (£m) | Year adjustment applied to | Figures impacted by Covid-19 |
|------------------|----------------|---------------------------------|----------------------------|--|
| 2017/18 | Jul 2019 | -204 (actual) | 2020/21 | ✘ |
| 2018/19 | Sep 2020 | -555 (forecast) | 2021/22 | ✘ |
| 2019/20 | Summer 2021 | -211 (forecast) | 2022/23 | ✓ Potential minor impact, but not reflected in latest forecasts |
| 2020/21 | Summer 2022 | Not yet forecast | 2023/24 | ✓ Potential impact will be reflected in SFC forecasts published at the same time as the 2021/22 Scottish budget |

Note: Budget adjustments relate to prior year's Scottish Income Tax outturns. We do not yet have forecasts for how Covid-19 has affected expected revenues.

Source: Audit Scotland based on Scottish Fiscal Commission figures in Scotland's Economic and Fiscal Forecasts, February 2020

Overall budgets will be determined by the UK Government's fiscal policy and Scottish tax and social security policies

58. The size of the Scottish budget available to spend on Covid-19 measures is largely dependent on UK fiscal policy. Barnett consequentials flow to the Scottish budget if UK spending is funded through increased taxes or borrowing. So far, the UK Government has funded most of the extra Covid-19 spending by borrowing.

59. To date, the overall effect of UK Government's policy decisions has been to increase the Scottish budget. Individual Barnett consequentials can also be negative, reducing the Scottish budget or offsetting funding increases with reductions elsewhere. This happens where UK spending measures are funded by reprioritising spending in a devolved area.

60. The Scottish budget is also affected by UK policy decisions related to taxes and social security powers that are devolved, for example:

- When the UK Government increased the Stamp Duty Threshold, the Scottish Government had to decide whether to change increased the threshold for its corresponding devolved tax, LBTT. The Scottish Government chose to increase its threshold, but by a smaller amount than the UK Government.

- The Job Retention Scheme and other interventions have reduced the increase in unemployment and Universal Credit take-up, meaning fewer people will be eligible for Scottish benefits policies that are linked to Universal Credit eligibility.

61. The effect of the pandemic on future devolved revenues and social security powers is still unknown. The Scottish Fiscal Commission will produce forecasts of the impact of Covid-19 on these powers alongside the Scottish budget. This, and the equivalent OBR forecasts for the rest of the UK will be important in determining the size of future budgets.

The financial impact of responding to Covid-19, increased costs and reduced tax revenues must be managed alongside existing pressures

62. Fluctuating levels of funding and continuing heightened levels of demand for services due to Covid-19 present risks to managing a balanced budget. These new budget pressures exist alongside other spending risks. These include pre-existing pressures on public finances, and other external events such as EU withdrawal, for which the effect on public finances is not yet fully known.

63. Before the pandemic, we highlighted the steps that the NHS in Scotland were putting in place through reform and medium-term planning to put the NHS on a sustainable footing.³⁵ The public health crisis puts additional pressure on the NHS to continue with these steps while also dealing with unprecedented demand and costs associated with Covid-19.

Fiscal flexibilities can help short-term budget management but can't insulate the Scottish public finances from the pandemic's effects

64. As shown in [Exhibit 5, page 12](#) the Scottish Government 2020/21 budget already planned to use much of the flexibility available from the tools set out in the fiscal framework. It will be difficult to manage the additional uncertainty and volatility as a result of Covid-19 through the remaining support available. The Scottish Government has requested additional flexibilities to borrowing and reserves rules to help manage the pandemic ([paragraph 33](#)).

65. Using borrowing and reserves to meet immediate spending pressures may help to balance the budget, but it also brings fiscal risks to manage over the medium term. The Scottish Government normally uses some of its Scotland Reserve balance to support the annual budget; if more of the reserve is used in-year this might not be possible. Higher levels of borrowing will also increase the repayments due to be met from future budgets. This will be alongside managing any adjustments arising from tax outturns.

66. The Scottish Government has requested extending the repayment period for borrowing from 3-5 years to 10 years, which would reduce the annual pressure in the medium term.³⁶ It has also requested that any negative reconciliations to budgets relating to devolved taxes should also be spread over longer time period.³⁷

67. If available funding including the use of borrowing and reserves is not enough to meet the costs of the Scottish Government's response to the pandemic, further reprioritisation of spending will be required. Some areas of the Scottish budget are harder to change quickly, such as those relating to key services and payroll costs. Understanding where the budget can flex quickly while minimising disruption to services is important to managing change through the budget.

³⁵ NHS in Scotland, Audit Scotland, October 2019.

³⁶ Letter from the Cabinet Secretary for Finance to the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, 24 June 2020.

³⁷ Letter from the Cabinet Secretary for Finance to the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, 22 May 2020.

Taking robust and transparent decisions

Decision-making is happening in a fast-moving environment

68. Scottish Government responses need to work alongside UK Government and local government measures. The frequency of spending decisions by the UK and Scottish governments and individual public bodies, such as NHS boards, local authorities and the police has made tracking how interventions are working together more complex. In such a fast-moving environment, it is inevitably more difficult to demonstrate how each measure has been chosen and how overall spending is being managed.

The rationale for tax and spending decisions and how programmes will work together must be clear

69. The Scottish Government's publication of a Summer Budget Revision was a positive step in maintaining transparency in spending during the pandemic. The challenge is to continue this transparency to aid scrutiny in future, as UK Government and Scottish Government spending and funding changes continue to be announced. The Cabinet Secretary has stated these will be captured in further formal budget revisions. An Autumn Budget Revision is expected in September.

Looking after public money properly

Protecting people and public money from error and fraud is critical

70. The Covid-19 pandemic has brought significant challenges across the Scottish public sector as bodies seek to deliver services for individuals, communities and businesses in an extremely difficult time.

71. Since the start of the pandemic, the risk of fraud and error has increased as organisations become stretched, and controls and governance are changing. Our briefing [Covid-19: Emerging fraud risks](#) published in July 2020, sets out more detailed information on a range of fraud risks emerging from the Covid-19 crisis, and what public bodies might do to help reduce these risks.

72. Additional risks will continue to emerge as criminals identify new ways to target public money and services. Public bodies and auditors should stay alert to new scams and approaches by fraudsters, and regularly review their controls and governance arrangements to ensure they remain fit for purpose.

Responding to the crisis places huge strains on public servants

73. Frontline workers across health and social care services have faced massive challenges in maintaining care during the pandemic, and public servants across the country have had to adjust to new ways of working alongside the disruption and restrictions we all face.

74. The workload of the Scottish Government has also increased significantly over a sustained and continuing period, as it deals with the virus alongside managing the normal business of government. Inevitably, this stretches the capacity of the public servants working within this environment.

Part 3

The public audit response

A substantial programme of public audit work is planned in response to the pandemic

75. Covid-19 will continue to have a major impact on all our lives. The world has already changed in response to the global pandemic in ways that no one would have thought possible even six months ago. Public audit has an important contribution to the recovery and renewal of public services. On behalf of the Auditor General for Scotland and the Accounts Commission, Audit Scotland is therefore planning a substantial programme of work on the Scottish public sector's response to Covid-19.

76. High-quality, independent and evidence-based audit supports accountability and learning about how the government and public bodies have responded to the crisis. Central to this will be providing transparency, supporting parliamentary scrutiny by the Public Audit and Post-legislative Scrutiny Committee and other relevant subject committees, and sharing good practice and innovation.

77. Our briefing paper [Covid-19: How public audit in Scotland is responding](#) published in June 2020, considers the impact of the pandemic on the work of public audit in Scotland. It provides information on our strategy and considerations, outlining the scope, timing and potential areas of focus of our audit work.

Audit Scotland's response will continue to be flexible

78. The Auditor General, the Accounts Commission and Audit Scotland are currently reviewing our work programme to reflect the changing context of Covid-19 and its implications for public finances, public services and outcomes for citizens. We will be engaging with stakeholders on this in the weeks and months ahead.

79. We will respond to the risks to public services and finances from Covid-19 that we have identified in Part 2 of this briefing paper across our range of audit work including our annual audits of the Scottish Government and other public bodies, and our programme of performance audits. We will use a range of approaches to report our Covid-19 work, including thematic briefing papers, round table discussions and blogs, alongside published audit reports.

80. The dynamic and unfolding nature of the Covid-19 pandemic means that we will need to remain flexible and agile. Our work programme may continue to change at short notice as new issues emerge, or current risks reduce or increase in significance. The First Minister has confirmed there will be a public inquiry into Scotland's response to the coronavirus pandemic, and we will ensure that our work will add value alongside the work of this and any other inquiries.

Appendix

Scottish Government Covid-19 spending announcements to 31 July 2020

| Theme | Name of fund | £m |
|--------------|--|----------------|
| TOTAL | | 5,336 |
| | Total business support | 3,271.8 |
| | Business | 3,130.6 |
| | Business support grants (total cost) | 1,202 |
| | Business rates relief (total cost) | 875 |
| | Pivotal Enterprise Resilience Fund | 120 |
| | Newly Self-Employed Hardship Fund | 34 |
| | Creative, Tourism & Hospitality Enterprises Hardship Fund | 30 |
| | Bridging bursaries fund | 1 |
| | Scottish Water Support for Business Water and Sewerage Bills | 60 |
| | SME Housebuilders Emergency Loan Fund | 100 |
| | The Private Rent Sector Landlord Covid-19 Loan Scheme | 5 |
| | Support for reopening zoos | 2.6 |
| | Total support for seafood and fishing industry (3 funds) | 22.5 |
| | Return to work package | 230 |
| | Community and Renewable Energy Scheme and Low Carbon Infrastructure Programme | 5.5 |
| | Energy Transition Fund | 62 |
| | Support and economic stimulus for Scottish newspaper industry through additional marketing spend | 3 |
| | Investing in Scotland's entrepreneurs and innovators | 38 |
| | Agriculture loan scheme | 340 |
| | Charity | 110 |
| | Wellbeing fund (Communities fund) | 50 |
| | Supporting Communities Fund (Communities fund) | 40 |
| | Third Sector Resilience Fund (Communities fund) | 20 |

| | | |
|--|--|----------------|
| Tourism and cultural sector (in addition to business support grants) | | 31.2 |
| | Events sector | 10 |
| | Museums Resilience Recovery fund | 4 |
| | Music venues | 2.2 |
| | Tourism | 15 |
| Total public services | | 2,018.8 |
| Health services | (as of 16 June) | 780 |
| Local authorities | (as of 23 June) | 488.6 |
| | UK Government Consequentials | 155 |
| | Scottish Welfare Fund (Communities Fund) | 45 |
| | Increased demand for social security benefits and Council Tax Reduction costs (Communities fund) | 50 |
| | Food fund (Communities fund) | 30 |
| | Free school meals | 27.6 |
| | Community justice coordinators | 0.4 |
| | Death registration service to work weekends and bank holidays | 0.6 |
| | Local Authority Hardship fund (Communities Fund) | 50 |
| | School attainment | 100 |
| | Digital inclusion for children and young people | 30 |
| Transport | | 310 |
| | Rail and ferry services | 234.3 |
| | Active Travel infrastructure | 10 |
| | Bus operators | 46.7 |
| | Emergency funding for Glasgow Subway and Edinburgh Trams | 9 |
| | Pop-up bus priority infrastructure | 10 |
| Education (in addition to local authority funding confirmed on 23 June) | | 140.2 |
| | Funding for university research | 75 |
| | Living Classrooms, Virtual Nature School programme | 0.2 |
| | Fund to help colleges and universities tackle digital exclusion | 5 |

| | |
|--|-------------|
| Additional £30 million to recruit teachers and £30 million for local authorities' education recovery | 60 |
| Other | 300 |
| Employment support and training | 100 |
| Homebuyers – LBTT threshold and £50m for First Home Fund | 200 |
| Individuals | 45.7 |
| Unpaid Carers Allowance Supplement – extra funding | 19.2 |
| Extra hardship payments for students | 5 |
| Early access to Higher Education Hardship Funds | 11.4 |
| Connecting Scotland – for clinically high-risk people | 5 |
| Women in prostitution | 0.1 |
| Additional Discretionary Housing Payments for tenants | 5 |

Source: Audit Scotland using Scottish Government funding announcements; Summer Budget Revision, Scottish Government, 15 May 2020; Local Government Finance Circular No.12/2020, 24 June 2020; and information provided by the Scottish Government

Covid-19

Implications for public finances in Scotland

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