

News release

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Full transparency on NHS recovery needed

The Scottish Government needs to be clearer about how long it will take the NHS to recover from the Covid-19 pandemic and to reform services.

The government's NHS recovery plan aims to reduce the healthcare backlog and change how services are delivered. But the plan does not contain the detailed actions that would allow progress to be accurately measured. It also lacks robust modelling to understand demand and capacity. The backlog has continued to increase in the 18 months since the plan was published as the NHS deals with a range of pressures.

Workforce capacity remains the biggest risk to the recovery of NHS services. Health boards are continuing to find it hard to recruit the doctors, nurses and other health professionals needed to make sure NHS services are sustainable in the long-term. Key recruitment targets, such as recruiting 800 GPs by 2027, are unlikely to be met. The NHS workforce remains under severe pressure and there are concerns over staffing levels, wellbeing, and retention.

The Scottish Government is moving ahead with the innovation and reform essential to NHS sustainability. But it is too early to gauge the impact of this work. In the meantime, every NHS board is facing significant financial challenges which could limit how much they can invest in recovery. And the Scottish Government also needs to make information on how long people will have to wait for treatment clear and meaningful.

Stephen Boyle, Auditor General for Scotland, said:

"NHS staff remain under severe pressure and the Scottish Government is facing tough choices.

Money is tight but investment is needed in recovery. That means ministers have to prioritise which NHS aims can realistically be delivered. And they need to be more transparent about the progress they're making.

"The Scottish Government has set out the big challenges facing the NHS. But it also needs to clearly explain to the public what those challenges mean for the level of service they can expect, including waiting times."

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Notes to Editor:

1. The NHS in Scotland faces significant and growing financial pressures. These include inflation, recurring pay pressures, ongoing Covid-19 related costs, rising energy costs, a growing capital maintenance backlog, and the need to fund the proposed National Care Service.
2. The backlog of care that built up in the pandemic continues to grow. More people are being added to waiting lists than are being removed from them, and people are waiting longer for treatment.

3. There have been delays to opening three new National Treatment Centres - a key element in increasing activity levels.
4. Some progress has been made against the recruitment targets set out in the NHS Recovery Plan, but boards are finding it challenging to grow their workforce numbers to the required level.
5. Audit Scotland has prepared this report for the Auditor General for Scotland. All Audit Scotland reports published since 2000 are available at www.audit-scotland.gov.uk
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