

## Audit Scotland report: Local government in Scotland overview 2021

**Committee**            Audit and Standards

**Date of meeting**    4 June 2021

**Date of report**     27 May 2021

### Report by Assistant Chief Executive

#### 1. Object of report

To advise the committee on the issue of an Audit Scotland report titled '*Local government in Scotland overview 2021*' and outline SPT's response to the key messages contained therein.

#### 2. Background

Audit Scotland have reported that Scotland's councils reacted quickly, working alongside communities and partners, to address the unprecedented challenges created by Covid-19 and that many challenges remain significant, made more urgent by the multiple impacts of Covid-19 on communities and services.

The report adds that many council services were disrupted, stopped or reduced, in particular education, social care and culture and leisure, the impact on some service users was severe and unequal. This included carers who lacked access to respite care, people with learning disabilities who were unable to access critical services and support, those receiving care at home and school children whose education was disrupted.

The report further concludes Covid-19 has exacerbated and laid bare fundamental issues that need to be addressed to ensure services are maintained and that councils can tackle the multiple challenges ahead. To help achieve this, longer-term financial certainty for councils will be vital. Whilst the Scottish Government has provided significant financial support to councils to assist in managing the net cost of Covid-19 in 2020/2021, considerable amounts of funding took the form of one-off payments. Furthermore, funding for councils beyond 2021/2022 remains uncertain. Addressing this issue is vital.

The report can be found at:

<https://www.audit-scotland.gov.uk/report/local-government-in-scotland-overview-2021>

#### 3. Outline of findings

The key messages outlined in the '*Local government in Scotland overview 2021*' report are:

- the Covid-19 pandemic is having a profound impact on all aspects of society, including the economy, jobs, and the physical and mental health of the public;

- relationships with communities have been vital;
- levels of service disruption have varied;
- some services were delivered virtually;
- the workforce demonstrated the versatility to take on new roles;
- there were significant changes in council governance structures and processes;
- councils continue to face significant financial challenges, and these have been exacerbated by the pandemic;
- the Scottish Government has provided substantial additional financial support, but the nature and timing of funding has created further challenges for councils;
- Councils have started to plan for longer term recovery from the crisis;
- there has been some on-going learning resulting from the emergency response to the pandemic.

Throughout the pandemic SPT has continued to operate the Glasgow Subway, all bus stations, and provide bus services for key workers to commute to and from their workplace and maintaining essential community links, as well as key links to vaccination centres.

During 2020/2021, SPT business has continued to be conducted in line with Government (Coronavirus) legislation, Partnership approved procedures and standing orders, scheme of delegated functions and financial regulations.

A Chairs committee (Chair and Vice-chairs of the Partnership and the Chair of the Audit & Standards committee) met regularly during the initial lockdown period (April and May 2020) to note business continuity arrangements and approve the award of contracts.

From June 2020, SPT has held a full committee cycle for all members. Meetings have been held via video conferencing, and with effect from March 2021 meetings have been recorded and placed on the SPT website to ensure full transparency. No significant changes were made to governance structures and processes.

The workforce has continued to deliver vital services to our communities and has shown versatility to support these services.

SPT continues to face financial challenges, exacerbated by the pandemic. The Scottish Government has provided additional financial support to offset reduction in subway income during 2020/2021.

SPT has medium and long-term financial plans in place which are regularly reviewed.

#### **4. Conclusions**

Audit Scotland published a report titled '*Local government in Scotland overview 2021*' highlighting the significant challenges faced by local government but stressing that it sets a platform for dealing with the post Covid-19 environment.

Throughout the pandemic SPT has successfully maintained all services and a robust governance framework, although as reported to the Partnership has also faced significant financial challenges.

## 5. Committee action

The committee is asked to note the contents of this report and the Audit Scotland report titled '*Local government in Scotland overview 2021*'.

## 6. Consequences

Policy consequences	<i>None.</i>
Legal consequences	<i>None.</i>
Financial consequences	<i>None.</i>
Personnel consequences	<i>None.</i>
Equalities consequences	<i>None.</i>
Risk consequences	<i>As detailed in the report.</i>

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