

Agenda

Thursday 9 May 2024, 09.45am
Audit Scotland offices, 102 West Port,
Edinburgh, and online via Microsoft Teams
510th meeting of the Accounts Commission

1. Apologies for absence

2. Declaration of connections

3. Order of business

The Chair seeks approval of business, including proposing taking items 9 to 17 in private for the reasons set out on the agenda.

Business requiring decisions in public

4. Minutes of meeting of 18 April 2024

Secretary

Business for information in public

5. Local government policy update report

Secretary

Any other public business

6. Any other public business

The Chair will advise if there is any other public business to be considered by the Commission.

Chair

Business for discussion in private

7. LGBF National Benchmarking Overview Report 2022/23

[Item to be taken in private as it requires the Commission to consider confidential policy matters.]

Secretary & Executive
Director of PABV

Business for information in private

8. Chair's update

[Item to be taken in private as it requires the Commission to consider confidential policy matters.]

Chair

- 9. Controller of Audit's update** Controller of Audit
 [Item to be taken in private as it requires the Commission to consider confidential policy matters.]

Business for information in private

- 10. Council budget analysis: Draft output** Executive Director
of PABV
 [Item to be taken in private as it requires the Commission to consider confidential policy matters.]
- 11. Strategy and work programme: Impact monitoring and evaluation report** Executive Director of I&Q
& Director of I&T
 [Item to be taken in private as it requires the Commission to consider confidential policy matters.]
- 12. Year 3 Best Value theme – Transformation** Controller of Audit
 [Item to be taken in private as it requires the Commission to consider confidential policy matters.]
- 13. Accounts Commission Communications and Engagement Strategy 2024-28** Communications
Manager
 [Item to be taken in private as it requires the Commission to consider confidential policy matters.]
- 14. Commission business risk management update** Secretary
 [Item to be taken in private as it requires the Commission to consider confidential policy matters.]
- 15. Committees and governance** Secretary
 [Item to be taken in private as it requires the Commission to consider confidential policy matters.]
- 16. Quality of Public Audit in Scotland: draft report** Director of AQA
 [Item to be taken in private as it requires the Commission to consider confidential policy matters.]

Any other private business

- 17. Any other private business**
 [Item may be required if there are any confidential matters that require to be discussed out with the public domain. The Chair will inform the meeting in public at the start of the meeting if this item is required and what it covers.]

Minutes and matters arising from previous meeting

Secretary to Accounts Commission

Item 4
Meeting date: 9 May 2024

Purpose

1. This paper presents for the Commission's approval the draft minutes of the previous meeting of the Commission along with a summary of matters arising from those minutes.

Recommendations

2. The Commission is asked to:
 - Approve the attached draft minute of its previous meeting.
 - Consider any matters arising from the draft minute.

Minutes

3. The minute of the previous meeting is in Appendix 1.
4. Members should note that the action tracker – available on the member SharePoint site and provided to members monthly – provides updates on progress from previous meetings.

Minutes

Thursday 18 April 2024, 10.00am

Audit Scotland offices, 102 West Port, Edinburgh, and

online via Microsoft Teams

509th meeting of the Accounts Commission

Present:

Jo Armstrong (Chair)

Malcolm Bell

Nichola Brown

Andrew Burns

Andrew Cowie (online)

Carol Evans

Jennifer Henderson

Angela Leitch

Christine Lester

Ruth MacLeod

Mike Neilson

Derek Yule

In attendance:

Allan Campbell, Secretary to the Accounts Commission

Helena Gray, Controller of Audit

Pauline Gillen, Audit Director, Audit Services (items 6 and 11)

Gillian McCreadie, Senior Audit Manager, Audit Services (items 6 and 11)

Joe Chapman, Policy Manager to the Accounts Commission (items 7 and 13)

Antony Clark, Executive Director of Performance Audit and Best Value (items 12 and 13)

Carol Calder, Audit Director, Performance Audit and Best Value (items 12 and 14)

Kathrine Sibbald, Senior Manager, Performance Audit and Best Value (item 12)

Zoe McGuire, Audit Manager, Performance Audit and Best Value (item 12)

Christopher Lewis, Senior Auditor, Performance Audit and Best Value (item 12)

Blyth Deans, Senior Manager, Performance Audit and Best Value (item 13)

Jillian Matthew, Senior Manager, Performance Audit and Best Value (item 14)

Vicki Bibby, Chief Operating Officer (item 15)

1. Apologies for absence

There were no apologies for absence noted.

2. Declaration of connections

There were no declarations of interest.

3. Order of business

It was agreed that the following items be considered in private:

Items 9 to 17, as they required the Commission to consider confidential policy matters.

4. Minutes of Accounts Commission Committees

The Commission considered a report by the Secretary presenting the minutes of the Committee meetings on 22 February 2024.

With no comments, the minutes of the meetings were approved as a correct record.

5. Minutes of meeting of 7 March 2024

The Commission considered a report by the Secretary presenting the minutes of the meeting of 7 March 2024, including a summary of business arising from the minutes.

With no comments, the minutes of the meeting were approved as a correct record.

6. Best Value in Falkirk Council

The Commission considered a report by the Controller of Audit on Best Value in Falkirk Council.

Following an introduction by the Controller of Audit, the discussion was structured according to the following themes:

- Finances – savings and transformation, including:
 - likelihood of the council achieving its savings targets
 - previous reliance on reserves and non-recurring savings
 - progress and status of the Council of the Future programme
- Finances – sustainability and affordability, including:
 - projected budget gaps, year-by-year, and underlying assumptions
 - potential impact of not meeting gaps through planned savings
 - scale of borrowing and impact on revenue budgets
- Leadership, including:
 - commitment to making necessary difficult decisions
 - improvements in relationships and collaborative leadership
- Community engagement, including:
 - reasons for and impact of delays to community engagement strategy
 - examples and limitations of engagement including on the budget
 - capacity to incorporate views of communities in decision-making
- Performance, including:
 - extent to which performance reporting is used to inform decisions
 - relative poor performance against communities-related council priority
 - quality of public performance reporting including on council website
 - strengths and weaknesses of the performance management framework
- Strategic planning, including:

- self-evaluation, and consideration of audit recommendations
- status of service-level savings plans and operational plans
- updates on strategies including financial, workforce and digital
- Follow-up to previous reports, including:
 - partnership working and integration of services by the IJB
 - Christine Lester requested further information from the audit team
Action: Senior Audit Manager, ASG
 - community engagement by children's and family services
- Climate change, including:
 - update on approval and implementation of strategy and action plan
 - how the necessary savings will be made, and alternative actions

After discussion, the Commission agreed to consider in private how to respond to the Controller of Audit's report.

7. Local Government policy update report

The Commission considered a report by the Secretary to the Accounts Commission providing an update on significant recent activity relating to local government.

During discussion:

- Christine Lester suggested there could be an increased focus on housing in future Commission work, and possible comment on current housing-related issues.
- Derek Yule requested clarification on the mechanism used by Inverclyde Council to effectively freeze council tax, and the implications of this for future years. Joe Chapman agreed to pick this up with the team working on the council budget analysis.
Action: Policy Manager

Following discussion, the Commission noted the report.

8. Any other public business

The Chair, having advised that there was no business for this item, closed the public part of the meeting.

9. Chair's update report

The Commission considered an update by the Chair providing an update on recent and upcoming activity.

- Commission members discussed the potential opportunity to attend future Audit Scotland Board meetings as observers, and the possibility of Board members coming to the Commission. Allan Campbell confirmed the Board members would be coming

to the August meeting for an informal lunch and discussion and agreed to look into arranging Commission member attendance as observers at Board meetings.

Action – Chair and Secretary

- The Chair provided an update from recent Audit Scotland Board meetings and agreed to use this report to highlight anything of interest at future meetings.

Following discussion, the Commission noted the update.

10. Controller of Audit's update report

The Commission considered a written and verbal update by the Controller of Audit on recent and upcoming activity. During discussion,

- Helena updated the Commission on her recent presentation and discussion with the Improvement Service Change Managers Network, covering the integrated approach to Best Value and the key themes emerging from audit work. Three councils also provided feedback on the new approach, which was all positive, noting that it was streamlined but still in-depth, and therefore a proportionate approach.
- Helena highlighted she is considering the handling of Best Value thematic reports on individual councils which is currently reported in a separate management letter to Councils rather than within the Annual Audit Report which could give the impression that it is separate, rather than integrated, into the annual audit,
- Helena clarified that her meeting with the Chief Executive of Renfrewshire Council covered the Commission's current and upcoming audit work, including regarding Dargavel and the forthcoming Best Value report.

Following discussion, the Commission noted the update.

11. Best Value in Falkirk Council

The Commission considered its response to a report by the Controller of Audit on Best Value in Falkirk Council.

Following discussion, the Commission agreed to make findings to be published on 2 May 2024; the drafting of those findings would be delegated to the Chair and the Secretary on behalf of the Commission and would then be circulated to all members for comment, with responsibility for final sign-off resting with the Chair.

In discussing what the findings should include, the following general points were raised:

- The Commission noted it was pleased to see substantive improvement but agreed there is still work to be done.
- Acknowledged commonality with other local authorities in Scotland in relation to financial challenges, but has a track record of delivering savings, albeit it has a reliance on non-recurring savings. The Commission highlighted the budget gap which required large savings in 2024/25 and the following two years.

- The Commission highlighted transformational change programme as increasingly important, to provide recurring savings to ease the burden on future years. Additionally, the Commission welcomed the establishment of the joint officer and elected member Oversight Board for the Council of the Future programme. The Board will play a critical role in ensuring the delivery of the council's transformation programme and the associated savings.
- Members were assured that the collaborative leadership of the council, by both officers and elected members, has improved in recent years. It advised this consensual approach will be crucial in communicating difficult decisions which lie ahead for the council.
- It is also crucial that the council has effective community engagement arrangements in place. It was noted that consultation does take place, but it is concerned by the delays in production of the council's community engagement strategy. The Commission would encourage the council to accelerate this at pace.
- The council's overall approach to strategic planning, with clear priorities and linked commitments, is welcome. However, evidence of formal service plans is not available, although it is understood this work isn't far away from completion.
- The Commission was particularly pleased to see the council's approach to performance reporting, utilising both data from the Local Government Benchmarking Framework and its own indicators, and welcomed the council's compliance with the Statutory Performance Information Direction.

12. IJB financial and performance analysis: Emerging messages

The Commission considered a report by the Executive Director of PABV on the IJB financial and performance analysis: Emerging messages.

During discussion,

- The Commission provided a clear steer that the report should be relatively short that provides relevant and actionable recommendations for the sector.
- The Commission discussed the scope of this report, and the Commission's overall approach to reporting on IJBs, including how best to reflect and report on the overall financial status of IJBs. It was noted that Annual Audit Reports cover broad financial aspects, not just accounts, and that any sustainability concerns would be raised with the Commission by the Controller of Audit.
- The potential impact on service delivery of the finances of IJBs, and also of councils and NHS boards, was also discussed.
- Members raised a need for a sense of urgency, with a likelihood that the financial and demand position are likely only to get more challenging, but balanced with a call for long-term actions in relation to areas such as workforce planning.
- The proposed use of case studies in the report was welcomed, with a reflection on whether the improvements highlighted were achieved by or occurred irrespective of the creation of IJBs – Antony Clark explained this was difficult to answer, although many initiatives were attributed to joint working between councils and the NHS.

After discussion, the Commission:

- Noted that the work continues, and further significant messages may arise that will be set out in the draft report
- Noted the key themes from the stakeholder roundtable discussion
- Agreed the additional outputs to be published alongside the report.

13. SPI Direction update

The Commission considered a report by the Secretary and Executive Director of PABV on the SPI Direction update.

During discussion,

- The Chair indicated there was general agreement with the content of the paper.
- The potential for encouraging a move from inputs and outputs to a broad focus on improving outcomes was discussed.
- It was noted that Community Planning Improvement Board is working on reviewing indicators for Local Outcome Improvement Plans, and that Public Health Scotland fulfils a similar function in the health sector.

After discussion, the Commission:

- Agreed the proposed timetable and process for preparing and consulting on the new Statutory Performance Information (SPI) Direction.
- Agreed to form a short-life working group to provide ongoing oversight of the development of the new Direction. It was agreed the Chair and members Mike Neilson, Angela Leitch and Carol Evans, would form the working group pool.

14. Youth advisory panel update

The Commission considered a report by the Executive Director of PABV on the Youth Advisory Group (YAG) update.

During discussion,

- It was pointed out that membership of the YAG is currently quite focused around the central belt and cities, with Highlands and Islands communities not represented. Jillian explained that this was due to the approach taken to recruitment by the contracted agency, who also wanted to ensure balance in other ways such as deprivation levels. Additionally, recruitment was focused on areas where the consultant has existing networks which has helped with recruitment and does include rural areas too
- The Chair indicated that there is no objection to members of the YAG attending Commission meetings in the future, and suggested that individual members could approach the support team if they wanted to engage with the YAG. Members also expressed support for involving and engaging with YAG members in individual audits.

- Jennifer Henderson asked whether there was any exchange of information between the Youth Advisory Group and the Scottish Youth Parliament. It was explained that this is currently under consideration.

After discussion, the Commission noted the paper.

15. Commission Change Programme

The Commission considered a report by the Secretary and Chief Operating Officer on the Commission Change Programme.

During discussion,

- Commission members agreed that the actions within the Commission Change programme had mostly been completed, and those that remained would be picked up in other areas – for example, well targeted seminars with stakeholders will feature in the Commission communications and engagement strategy refresh.
- It was acknowledged the support team and Audit Scotland colleagues are working on progressing the livestreaming options with the current AV system available.

After discussion, the Commission noted the update on the programme and agreed to close the Commission Change Programme.

16. Strategy Seminar Review

The Commission considered a report by the Secretary on the Strategy Seminar Review.

After discussion, the Commission noted the following:

- Agreed the theme for the 2024-25 Best Value Thematic as “Transformation – How councils are redesigning services to maintain outcomes and deliver services more efficiently” as outlined in paragraph 15.
- Agreed to delegate arrangements for meetings outside of Edinburgh to the Chair and Secretary.
- Noted other actions set out in the paper.

17. Any other private business

The Chair, having advised that there was no further business, closed the meeting.

Close of meeting

The meeting closed at 13.45.

Purpose

1. This report provides updates on significant recent activity relating to local government. Similar updates are provided through the Weekly Digest, sent to members by Audit Scotland's Communications Team and available via the [members' SharePoint site](#).

Recommendations

2. The Commission is invited to:
 - Note this report and consider any implications for its work programme
 - Agree the recommendations regarding responding to consultations.

Recent publications and engagement

3. Below are details of the media coverage, download statistics and social media engagement for reports issued recently by the Commission.
 - **Best Value in Falkirk Council (2 May 2024)** – *published after this report was prepared and issued; details of media coverage and social media engagement will be provided in the next report.*
4. Quarterly download statistics for Commission publications are also provided, to supplement the usual monthly data. The figures covering the four quarterly periods up to and including March 2024 are provided in Appendix 1.

Media and Parliamentary monitoring

5. Jo Armstrong and Andrew Burns, along with Carol Calder, Blyth Deans and Lucy Jones from Audit Scotland, gave evidence to the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee on Tuesday 23 April. Questions and discussion focused on the Financial Bulletin 2022/23 and related issues including Commission priorities, councils' financial sustainability, and calls for transformational change.
 - See the [Official Report](#) (substantive transcript)
 - [Watch the recording](#) (the first 75 minutes of the session).
6. Meanwhile at its [meeting on Thursday 18 April](#), the Public Audit Committee took evidence on the Auditor General for Scotland's Work Programme from Stephen Boyle, Auditor General for Scotland, and Audit Scotland. The Accounts Commission was mentioned during discussions on care experienced children and fiscal sustainability. A [summary of the Work Programme](#) was provided to the Committee in advance by Audit Scotland, which briefly references the Commission in the introduction.

Local government finance issues

7. Unions warned that [Scotland faces a summer of strikes](#) if an upcoming pay offer from councils fails to meet their demands. It is understood councils are budgeting for a three per cent rise on average; however, unions are seeking an average of seven to eight per cent, and more for the lowest paid. Unions are also unhappy at the delay in COSLA making an offer for 2024/25, having submitted a pay claim in January. Council leaders discussed options for a pay offer at a meeting on 26 April.
8. The leader of the Scottish Trades Union Congress (STUC) warned that [councils will be “on the brink of collapse”](#) if budget constraints continue to lead to cuts to public services. Speaking at the STUC’s annual congress, Roz Foyer said local authorities were already struggling to function, due to cuts inflicted by the Scottish Government, and argued that strike action is inevitable as workers fight not only for pay and terms and conditions, but to protect jobs and services that are vital to their communities.

Policy area updates

Health and social care

9. Care workers in three council areas – Falkirk, Renfrewshire and West Dunbartonshire – [went on strike and held a joint rally](#) in a dispute over equal pay that unions claimed could bankrupt local authorities. The row comes after care workers, who are mostly low-paid women, rejected internal reviews of their pay grades, arguing that their responsibilities have significantly increased, and that their roles are undervalued compared with similar work done by male colleagues. The GMB union warned that councillors “have their heads in the sand” over the matter, which it says could have a “disastrous” impact on communities, with workers claiming up to five years’ back pay.
10. The Scottish Parliament [approved a 30% increase in the minimum unit price of alcohol](#) with the rate now set to rise from 50p to 65p per unit from the end of September 2024. The policy, which came into force in May 2018, was due to expire at the end of April but has now been extended indefinitely, and the rise is intended to reflect inflation. While doctors and alcohol recovery groups supported the increase, they expressed “grave concern” that prevention services for those at most risk are insufficient.

Housing and homelessness

11. The Scottish Government announced an [extra £80 million for affordable housing](#) over the next two years. The housing budget was previously cut by nearly £200 million; this new funding partly reverses that reduction, bringing the Affordable Housing Supply Programme budget to nearly £600 million in 2024/25. The funding aims to boost affordable housing supply by enabling councils to acquire properties, and to reduce homelessness, and comes after four councils have declared a housing emergency.
12. [Figures from Glasgow City Council](#) showed more than 2,600 homes in the city have been empty for more than six months, with more than 1,600 vacant for over a year. The council is working to reduce the number of vacant properties across the city through its Empty Homes Strategy, with almost 600 brought back into use in 2022/23. A number of Compulsory Purchase Orders have also been completed or are ongoing, with the council working with housing associations to buy empty properties. It is also writing to owners of empty buildings

such as offices, and considering offering grants, to encourage them to bring their properties back into use.

13. Scotland has nearly 10,000 empty council houses, equivalent to the number needed to end the child homelessness crisis, [according to research for the charity Cyrenians](#). Aberdeen City Council has 2,400 vacant homes – the largest number reported in the survey, which asked for the number of ‘voids’ in the past month. Voids include homes waiting to be re-let, and houses earmarked for demolition or major works. COSLA said councils are making every effort to reduce voids – which they say account for 3 per cent of their housing stock, of which “a good proportion” are due for demolition.
14. Almost all councils have implemented new powers to [charge double the rate of council tax on second homes](#) in 2024/25. Falkirk, Glasgow City and North Ayrshire are the only councils that have chosen not to double the tax. A second home is any home that is not used as someone’s main residence but is occupied for at least 25 days in a year. As well as giving councils flexibility to raise more revenue, the changes also aim to help increase housing availability by encouraging more homes to be used for living in.

Climate change

15. The Scottish Government is [scrapping its interim target](#) of cutting greenhouse gas emissions by 75% by 2030, as well as its annual targets – although the overall target of reaching net zero emissions by 2045 will remain in place. Annual progress will still be reported, and the country will adopt five-yearly carbon budgets. The Government also announced a new package of climate action measures including:
 - plans for more electric vehicle charge points
 - a "route map" for delivering a 20% reduction in car use
 - pilot projects to cut emissions from agriculture and boost peatland restoration
 - a national integrated ticketing system for public transport.
16. A new report by consultants has revealed last year's Storm Babet caused [five years' worth of erosion damage to Musselburgh's beaches](#) in two days, with around 4,000 cubic metres of sediment removed. The report says the storm has reduced the natural resilience of the beach, calls for short-term resilience measures, and warns about the impact of expected erosion on existing and proposed flood management structures.
17. Meanwhile, more than a million tonnes of sand could be used as part of a [coastal erosion plan for Montrose beach](#) in Angus. Experts have warned that flood corridors could swamp the town in the next 30-40 years if nothing is done, after seven metres of dunes were lost in the last year, including sections of the historic golf links.
18. Projects to install heat pumps in schools and leisure facilities in Dumfries & Galloway, Fife, Perth & Kinross and North Lanarkshire are among those to receive a total of £11 million in [Scottish Government funding to decarbonise buildings](#). The funding – the first of its type to be made in the form of grants to public bodies instead of loans – follows a recent consultation on the Heat in Buildings Bill, which aims to transition all buildings owned by Scottish public bodies to clean heating systems by the end of 2038.

Education, children and young people

- 19.** The Scottish Parliament passed the [Children \(Care and Justice\) \(Scotland\) Bill](#). As part of wider work to embed the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in law and Keep the Promise, the Bill contains a series of measures designed to improve children's experiences of the care and justice systems, whether victims, witnesses or children who have caused harm. It ensures children are kept out of prison, strengthens referral processes between courts and children's hearings, enhances secure and residential care arrangements, and improves regulation for cross-border placements.

Communities

- 20.** The Scottish Government is [revising the National Islands Plan](#) based on the results of a consultation held last summer. The Plan aims to improve outcomes for island communities, but some respondents expressed concerns about depopulation, fuel poverty, digital connectivity, housing, economic opportunities, education, health and social care services, environmental protection and ferries. In its survey response, Comhairle nan Eilean Siar highlighted both positive and negative aspects of the current Plan, stating that it has an "important, positive role" to play in highlighting and addressing challenges, but that the Plan's impact in achieving better outcomes for islands is unclear due to the lack of an effective performance monitoring framework.
- 21.** Communities in Shetland are being urged by the council to [create local place plans](#) (LPPs) to outline their development and land use aspirations. LPPs are a new type of statutory plan being introduced across Scotland, founded on the 'place principle', and are intended to ensure that a community's aspirations are taken into account in future planning and development decisions. The council says the LPPs will further support provisions already in place for community engagement, and it is providing a range of resources for community councils and hall committees who wish to launch an LPP.
- 22.** Falkirk Council has agreed to introduce [a new, formal way to present petitions](#). The process will allow campaigners to attend council or committee meetings to formally introduce and hand over their petition. The new process adds to the existing ability for members of the public to speak at council meetings, and aims to draw attention to community issues and signal the strength of local feeling.

Infrastructure

- 23.** Renfrewshire Council has [approved a contract for around £825,000](#) to be spent on remediation work to address the presence of reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete (RAAC) in the roof of the gym at Castlehead High School in Paisley. The work will include installing additional steelwork supports, renewing lighting, and removing and reinstating main heating and water pipework for structural installation. Councillors accepted it was a very large bill but one that is necessary to ensure public safety. Meanwhile, West Lothian Council has confirmed a £4 million programme of work to address RAAC panels discovered in 69 individual council homes and 15 blocks of flats is expected to begin in August and continue until December 2025.

Council leadership

- 24.** Argyll and Bute Council has a new ruling administration. The Argyll, Lomond and Islands Group, comprising Conservative, Liberal Democrat and independent councillors, has been replaced by what was known as the Strategic Opposition Partnership, which includes SNP,

Labour, and other independent councillors. After tied votes, [cuts of the cards](#) saw independent Cllr Douglas Philand named Provost, and the SNP's Cllr Jim Lynch named leader. The Liberal Democrat group, including former council leader Cllr Robin Currie, are now in talks to join the new administration.

Scottish Parliamentary committees

Local Government, Housing and Planning (LGHP) Committee

25. As well as its evidence session with the Accounts Commission and Audit Scotland, the LGHP Committee considered the following subjects recently:
- Building safety and maintenance, and Housing to 2040 – [evidence session with the Minister, Paul McLennan](#)
 - Community Wealth Building – consideration of the evidence heard in a [roundtable session on 26 March](#)
 - [Housing \(Cladding Remediation\) \(Scotland\) Bill](#) – Stage 2 proceedings
 - [Housing \(Scotland\) Bill](#) – consideration of its approach to Stage 1 scrutiny
 - Rural and island housing
26. The Committee also received an [update from the Minister for Housing](#) in relation to the Scottish Government's engagement with Aberdeen City Council since its decision to re-home tenants in properties affected by RAAC, as well as the Government's wider engagement with local authorities in relation to RAAC in their housing stock.

Public Audit Committee (PAC)

27. As well as the session on the Auditor General's work programme, [the PAC took evidence](#) on the Administration of Scottish income tax 2022/23.

Finance and Public Administration (FPA) Committee

28. The FPA Committee took evidence as part of its inquiry into '[Scotland's Commissioner landscape: A strategic approach](#)', including from a range of current Commissioners.
29. The Committee also considered its draft Stage 1 report on the [Aggregates Tax and Devolved Taxes Administration \(Scotland\) Bill](#).

Other committees

30. Antony Clark (Executive Director of Performance Audit and Best Value) wrote to the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee on 28 March to provide [follow-up information](#) following an evidence session by the Auditor General on climate change governance on 12 March. The information concerns examples of good collaboration between councils and the Scottish Government to deliver on climate change commitments, following a question on this which was not within the Auditor General's remit to respond to. The letter referenced the Commission's 2022 briefing on [Scotland's councils' approach to addressing climate change](#) and referred to the forthcoming joint performance audit on climate change adaptation.
31. Meanwhile, the following were the subject of Committee business recently (links to any specific evidence sessions are available on request):

- Abortion Services (Safe Access Zones) (Scotland) Bill – [Stage 1 report](#)
- Additional support for learning
- Climate Change Committee report
- Climate Change People’s Panel
- Disability employment gap
- Procurement Reform (Scotland) Act 2014 – post-legislative scrutiny
- Scottish Languages Bill
- Social Care (Self-directed Support) (Scotland) Act 2013 – post-legislative scrutiny
- Social Security (Amendment) (Scotland) Bill
- Suicide prevention in Scotland

COSLA and Improvement Service updates

- 32.** COSLA is inviting councils to submit their top projects and teams as nominees for the annual [COSLA Excellence Awards](#). The five categories are: Service Innovation and Improvement; Achieving Better Outcomes for the Most Vulnerable in Partnership; Tackling Inequalities and Improving Health and Wellbeing; Strengthening Communities and Local Democracy; and Just Transition to a Net Zero Economy. COSLA President, Cllr Shona Morrison, said the awards can help showcase the transformation and innovation councils are undertaking, and how they are adapting to changing needs.
- 33.** COSLA’s Health and Social Care Spokesperson, Cllr Paul Kelly, authored a [blog on “Leading in the digital age”](#).
- 34.** The Improvement Service published the following updates in April:
- [Local Government Connect Network for early career professionals launched](#)
 - [Updated briefing on integrating planning and public health](#)
 - [Shaping Places for Wellbeing Programme – April update](#)
 - [Bringing together our planning and place-based approaches](#)

LGiU and SPICe updates

- 35.** The Local Government Information Unit (LGiU) recently published the following briefings of relevance to Scotland:
- [Empowering futures: Services that support disabled children & families in Scotland](#)
 - [Through European eyes: Local government in the United Kingdom](#)
 - [Whatever happened to levelling up?](#)
- 36.** The Scottish Parliament Information Centre (SPICe) recently published the following blogs of relevance to local government:
- [How is Scotland Performing?](#) – latest quarterly data against national indicators
 - Scottish Budget 2024/25 – [All about the data](#) and [A review of the Budget process](#)
 - National Care Service – [Does the end of Stage 1 bring clarity?](#)

- Poverty and cost of living - [Below Average Resources – new poverty measure, Is Scotland going to meet its child poverty targets?](#), [Tackling the cost of living – Scottish Government policy](#) and [Additional Costs of Disability](#)
- Decarbonising heating in Scotland - [the proposals for a Heat in Buildings Bill](#) and [current Scottish and UK policy](#)
- [Public sector pensions and the McCloud remedy](#)
- [What's in the Scottish Elections \(Representation and Reform\) Bill?](#)
- [A changing climate? The Scottish Government's newly announced policy package](#)
- [Connecting deliberative practices in Parliament with participation and community engagement](#)

Updates on previous queries

- 37.** Members were provided with updates concerning Scottish Government engagement around the proposed Human Rights Bill, and the Government's response to the consultation on amendments to the Local Authority (Capital Finance and Accounting) (Scotland) Regulations, via email from Joe Chapman on 24 April.

Consultations

- 38.** The following recommendations are made by the Secretary and Audit Scotland staff regarding whether to respond to recently-opened consultations and calls for views:
- [Housing \(Scotland\) Bill](#) (*closing date: 17 May*)
Recommendation: To follow.
The Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee and Social Justice and Social Security Committee are seeking views on the Housing (Scotland) Bill, which (among other provisions) includes new homelessness prevention measures and places duties on local authorities to assess rent conditions in their area.
- 39.** Meanwhile, though not formally considered for response, members may be interested to note a call for views by the Equalities, Civil Justice and Human Rights Committee, asking members of the public about [how decisions about capital spending affect them](#). The call for views is part of the Committee's work looking at transparency in Scottish Government capital funding decisions, and their impact, ahead of the next Budget.
- 40.** The Secretary will advise verbally of any changes or updates regarding consultations.
- 41.** **The Commission is invited to agree to the recommendation above.**

Appendix 1: Quarterly publication statistics, April 2023 to March 2024

The table below shows the number of downloads of reports, or page views of blogs and web content, in each quarter of 2023/24, for publications issued during that period.

Publication	Date	Apr- Jun	Jul- Sep	Oct- Dec	Jan- Mar	Total
Best Value in Moray Council	28 Mar				564	564
Best Value in Orkney Islands Council	30 Jan				393	393
How we hold LG to account (blog)	18 Jan				116	116
S102 Renfrewshire: Dargavel	18 Jan				638	638
Local Gov Financial Bulletin 2022/23	16 Jan				1,376	1,376
Best Value in Dumfries and Galloway	11 Jan				429	429
Social care sustainability (blog)	14 Dec			181	201	382
Best Value in Dundee City Council	30 Nov			338	230	568
Best Value in South Ayrshire Council	2 Nov			431	196	627
20 years of Best Value (blog)	26 Sep		105	134	48	287
Best Value in Scotland	26 Sep		242	537	402	1,181
Adult mental health	13 Sep		1,341	1,820	1,144	4,305
S102 Glasgow equal pay	24 Aug		155	211	449	815
Accounts Commission annual report	29 Jun	60	229	259	252	800
City Region and Growth Deals	22 Jun	416	480	282	325	1,503
Public audit in Scotland 2023-28	20 Jun	249	453	600	478	1,780
Early learning and childcare	01 Jun	1,238	533	674	596	3,041
Local Gov Overview 2023 (web)	17 May	2,450	684	354	272	3,760
Local Government Overview 2023	17 May	1,881	1,159	1,470	1,230	5,740
Homelessness affects us all (blog)	27 Apr	696	102	59	48	905
Mainstreaming equality 21-23 (web)	25 Apr	590	124	57	79	850
IJBs financial analysis 2021/22	06 Apr	886	243	377	270	1,776

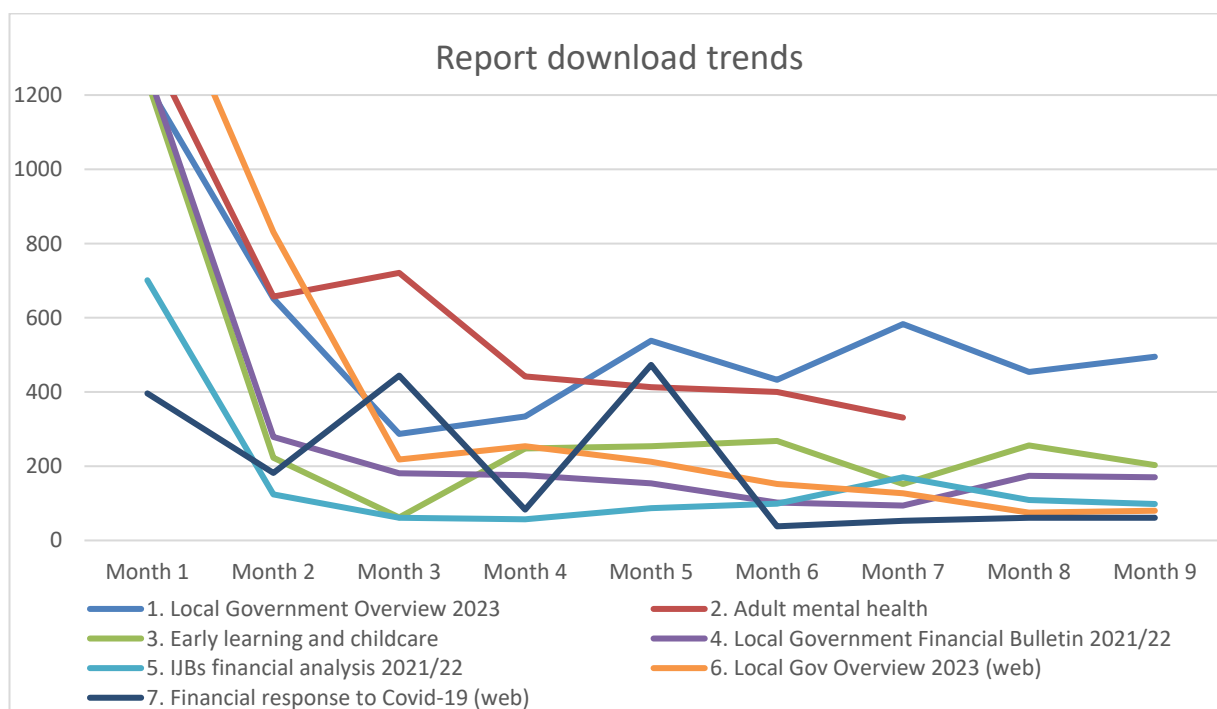
Downloads in first 6-9 months

The table below shows the outputs published since January 2023 that had the most downloads (or pageviews) for the first 6 calendar months following publication. This analysis helps to control for the fact that some reports have been available for less time.

Meanwhile, the graph below shows how six of the most popular outputs published in 2023 performed in terms of downloads or views in the months after their respective publication dates ('Month 1' is the month of publication, 'Month 2' is the following month, and so on).

The key is in order of the finishing position of each line, from highest to lowest.

Publication	Publication date	Approx D/L in first 6 months
Adult mental health	13 Sep	3,950
Local Government Overview 2023	17 May	3,450
Local Gov Overview 2023 (web)	17 May	3,300
Early learning and childcare	01 Jun	2,300
Local Gov Financial Bulletin 2021/22	12 Jan 2023	1,700
Financial response to Covid-19 (web)	29 Mar 2023	1,600
Local Gov Financial Bulletin 2022/23 (3 months only)	16 Jan 2024	1,400



Analysis

Both the table and graph above show that the Adult mental health and Early learning and childcare reports performed strongly for a period of time after publication, as did the Local Government Overview report. This may be due to continuing scrutiny by Parliamentary committees. Meanwhile, downloads of the Financial Bulletin rose again slightly during autumn 2023, coinciding with pre-budget scrutiny and budget planning for 2024/25.

As has been stated previously, these statistics are just one indication of our engagement and impact, alongside other sources of intelligence such as media and Parliamentary monitoring. The figures capture the breadth, but not the depth, of impact. For example:

- The Financial Bulletin may have a narrower audience than some other national reports, but be of particularly high value to that audience.
- Similarly, the Dargavel and Moray Council reports received a lot of attention and coverage locally, which is not reflected in this data.

LGBF National Benchmarking Overview Report 2022/23

Secretary to the Commission and Executive
Director of Performance Audit and Best
Value

Item 7
Meeting date: 9 May 2024

Purpose

1. This paper sets out some background information for the Commission's discussion with the Local Government Benchmarking Framework (LGBF) board and Improvement Service. The paper also sets out how this discussion will be used to inform the Commission's planned commentary on the LGBF which forms part of the Commission's new suite of local government overview reporting outputs.

Recommendations

2. The Commission invited to:
 - Note the National Benchmarking Overview Report 2022-23 and
 - Consider the implications for its work programme, in particular the forthcoming performance commentary output.

Background and purpose of session

3. The [Improvement Service](#) explains that the Local Government Benchmarking Framework "is a high-level benchmarking tool designed to support senior management teams and elected members to ask questions about key council services."
4. More information on the LGBF [can be found on the Improvement Service website](#), and in the National Benchmarking Overview Report 2022-23, also enclosed with papers for this meeting.
5. Members will be familiar with the LGBF from the Commission's ongoing Best Value work and local government overview reporting. Historically, the LGBF Board and Improvement Service have attended a Commission meeting once a year, in public, to discuss the overview report.
6. This year, given the number of new Commission members and the ongoing discussion on the SPI Direction, we have agreed with the LGBF Board and the Improvement Service to hold the discussion on the overview report in private.
7. This is to allow members the chance to ask any detailed questions on the data and have a full and frank discussion "in the round", with colleagues from Performance Audit and Best Value also invited to contribute to the discussion.
8. Kenneth Lawrie, Chair of the LGBF Board (and Chief Executive of Falkirk Council), will attend the meeting alongside Emily Lynch from the Improvement Service. Kenneth and

Emily will summarise the key messages from the report to introduce the discussion and then it will be open to all to contribute.

Accounts Commission LGBF output

9. When agreeing its new approach to local government overview reporting last October the Commission agreed to publish its own independent commentary on the LGBF, and the role it plays in supporting local government benchmarking and performance improvement activity.
10. Performance Audit and Best Value (PABV) staff and Commission sponsors (Jo Armstrong and Mike Neilson) are currently working on this audit output, which is due to be published soon after the Commission's meeting with the LGBF Board and Improvement Service.

This timing means that the content of this output can be informed by the Commission and PABV discussions with the LGBF Board and the Improvement Service. For example, this could be about reflecting any key points of emphasis which Commission members want to make about the role that the LGBF can and should play in supporting effective local government benchmarking and improvement planning activity. Or, it could be about commenting how the Commission intends to use LGBF data in future when assessing the performance of individual councils, or reporting nationally on the performance of the local government sector as a whole.