

News release

Embargoed until 00:01 hours, Thursday 25 October 2018

Urgent action needed to tackle mounting pressures in the NHS

Immediate action is needed to shift the NHS towards long-term, fundamental change.

In her annual review of the NHS, the Auditor General for Scotland finds that performance continued to decline in 2017/18 and the NHS is not financially sustainable in its current form. Pressure is building in several areas, including major workforce challenges, rising drug costs and a significant maintenance backlog.

In 2017/18 the health budget was £13.1 billion – 42 per cent of the total Scottish budget. Taking into account inflation, this was a 0.2 per cent decrease from 2016/17. NHS boards struggled to achieve unprecedented savings of £449.1 million, relying heavily on one-off savings.

No NHS boards were able to meet all eight key national targets and performance against these targets declined nationally. More people waited longer for outpatient and inpatient appointments. Only one of the eight key performance targets was met nationally.

The NHS also faces significant workforce challenges, with difficulties recruiting and increases in sickness absence and staff turnover. There is evidence that the NHS is struggling to recruit and retain the right people, and ensure they have the time and support they need. Boards are also considering the potential impact of EU withdrawal on areas such as staffing, the supply and cost of drugs, and food prices.

The Scottish Government wants to transform the healthcare system so that everyone can live longer, healthier lives at home or in a homely setting by 2020. Significant activity is underway to work towards this, but progress is too slow.

The Scottish Government's recent health and social care medium-term financial framework and other measures are welcome steps, but more needs to be done. Audit Scotland will be carrying out further work to understand how this new approach will work in practice.

Caroline Gardner, Auditor General for Scotland, said: "The performance of the NHS continues to decline, while demands on the service from Scotland's ageing population are growing. The solutions lie in changing how healthcare is accessed and delivered, but progress is too slow.

"The scale of the challenges facing the NHS means that decisive action is needed now to deliver the fundamental change that will secure the future of this vital and valued service. Alongside longer term financial planning, this must include effective leadership, and much more engagement with communities about new forms of care and the difference they make to people's lives. This will help to build support among the public and politicians for the changes required."

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Notes to editors

1. In 2017/18, the NHS in Scotland employed almost 140,000 (whole-time equivalent) staff, conducted an estimated 17 million GP consultations, conducted four million outpatient appointments and responded to 764,201 emergencies.
 2. Between 2016/17 and 2017/18, the overall health budget increased by 1.5 per cent in cash terms. Taking inflation into account, the budget decreased by 0.2 per cent. Revenue funding for day-to-day spending increased by 0.8 per cent in real terms; capital funding, for example for new buildings and equipment, decreased from £524.5 million to £408 million, a real terms decrease of 23.5 per cent. (See exhibit 2).
 3. In 2017/18, NHS Boards delegated £5.8 billion, 46 per cent of their budget, to integration authorities to fund health services such as primary and community care.
 4. While health funding has increased over the past decade, funding per head of population has increased at a slower rate. In 2017/18, health funding in Scotland was £2,409 per person. This compares to £2,333 in 2008/09, a 3.3 per cent increase in real terms.
 5. The NHS met only one of eight key national performance targets in 2017/18, for 90 per cent of patients referred for drug and alcohol treatment to receive treatment within 21 days (Exhibit 7). No boards met all eight targets. NHS Western Isles met six indicators, while NHS Lothian did not meet any targets. Appendix 3 shows performance against the national standards by NHS board.
 6. Performance declined against all eight key national targets between 2016/17 and 2017/18. The greatest reduction was in performance against Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services' (CAMHS) patients seen within 18 weeks
 7. In Autumn 2019 we will be producing our second NHS workforce report. This audit will involve more detailed audit work on the community based workforce, including its changing role, challenges and working arrangements, and provide an update on the first [NHS workforce planning report](#).
 8. In November we will be publishing our [audit of health and social care integration](#).
 9. 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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