

Covid-19

Strategic Scrutiny Group

Scrutiny responses to Covid-19

Prepared on behalf of the Strategic Scrutiny Group
November 2020

ACCOUNTS COMMISSION 

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Introduction

1. Covid-19 has changed our lives. Responding to it has changed how public services are delivered and how we scrutinise them. This paper sets out:

- the key areas of risk facing the sectors we scrutinise
- how we have adapted our approaches to scrutiny in response to Covid-19
- how we plan to capitalise on the advances made in our working practices
- how we can build on the increased joint-working that has taken place by collaborating more extensively and effectively in future.

2. I am grateful to all members of the **Strategic Scrutiny Group (SSG)**  for contributing to our consideration of what Covid-19 means for the sustainability of the public services we scrutinise and to inform a discussion about the role of scrutiny in the future.

3. Responding to Covid-19 has placed immense demands on the people who work in Scotland's public services. That response has been impressive. They have adapted and changed very quickly, in some cases, overnight. Organisations have coordinated and empowered their staff to support communities. Changes and developments, previously considered almost impossible, have been made in a matter of weeks.

4. Covid-19 has led to changes in SSG members' planned programmes of scrutiny. This has required new ways of thinking and working. In some cases, it led to scrutiny bodies working with new powers created specifically in response to Covid-19. All SSG members have given the organisations they audit, inspect or regulate time and space to respond to the crisis. Where appropriate, they are collaborating with them to provide support and reassurance. However, high-quality, independent, evidence-based scrutiny remains critical. Striking the right balance between supporting public bodies and ensuring effective scrutiny will be important in the long-term recovery and renewal of public services.

Covid-19 has accelerated change in public services and magnified risks

5. Covid-19 has been a catalyst for rapid change in many public services. We have seen a significant shift to more digitally-delivered services, such as online GP consultations, e-care, school, college and university education and virtual courts. This shift brings real benefits to service users and providers, and



Strategic Scrutiny Group

Scrutiny coordination in local government is led by the Strategic Scrutiny Group (SSG). The SSG comprises Scotland's main public sector scrutiny bodies and aims to deliver efficient and effective, well-coordinated scrutiny that supports improvement. It is convened and chaired by the Accounts Commission.

Public services scrutinised include education, health, social care, housing, fire and justice.

SSG members' individual contributions can be found on the [Audit Scotland website](#) .

we expect many of these changes will become permanent. But the rapid pace of change and shifts in ways of working have also increased risks to the delivery of public services and exclusion of certain people.

6. As scrutiny bodies, we see several key issues across the public services we scrutinise including:

- public finances under acute pressure, amplifying serious questions about the financial sustainability of some sectors, including social care
- backlogs where public services have been disrupted, for example the NHS, courts and maintenance of social housing
- the disproportionate impact of Covid-19 on some groups, for example, the black, Asian and minority ethnic community and more deprived communities have experienced more acute effects in areas such as health and education. Digitally-delivered services have exacerbated, in some cases, inequalities of access to digital technology and connectivity with regard to geography and deprivation
- concerns around staff burnout in delivering critical services, with some services reporting critical shortages, often associated with the need for staff to self-isolate
- adjustments to governance systems to enable rapid decision-making. Although this has led to more empowerment of local staff and communities, it may also have reduced scrutiny and oversight by non-executives and councillors.

7. We are already seeing these risks, and others, escalating as we enter the second wave of Covid-19.

We have responded to Covid-19 by changing how we work and what we do

8. Most colleagues in SSG member organisations moved to working at home from March 2020. The majority of our scrutiny since then has been done remotely. Where staff were on secondment, they have generally been released back to their home organisation to support the delivery of frontline services.

9. In March 2020, SSG member organisations suspended planned audit, inspection and regulation plans in favour of monitoring and supporting those in the relevant sectors. This involved prioritising activity around areas of highest risk, such as care homes, and supporting frontline services by sharing good practice. For example, Education Scotland shared examples of effective approaches to supporting learning at home in the wake of school closures. The majority of on-site inspection work was replaced by more extensive use of intelligence and technology for support and performance monitoring. We have individually adapted our systems for gathering information, assessing risks and providing public assurance around service quality. We have utilised technology where possible, conducting 'virtual visits' to services and digitally signing off accounts. We are continuing to work on developing ways of accessing key information, such as case records, remotely.

10. Some SSG members, such as the Care Inspectorate, HMICS, HMIPS, HMFSI and HIS, have restarted work programmes that include on-site activity. Where this is the case, they have adjusted and redesigned how they do their inspection activity. This will be subject to continuous review to take account of the changing understanding of the risks posed by the virus.

We will capitalise on advances we have made due to Covid-19

11. We have learned a lot as a result of Covid-19. Our colleagues can be flexible and operate incredibly well in a rapidly changing environment. We have learned to work remotely and our colleagues have embraced new ways of working. Remote working has inevitably brought challenges for some people and for some elements of our work. It has also brought efficiencies that we will adopt into our standard working practices for the future.

12. We have broadened and enhanced the way we gather intelligence about services to accurately assess service quality and any improvements required. We are working to improve further how we share the information that we gather about the sectors we scrutinise, and how this can help inform policy and decision-making. We are also using our data and intelligence to help develop risk-based plans for our scrutiny programmes, which will take account of the impact of the second wave of Covid-19.

13. In addition to sharing information, we have been sharing examples of effective practice across Scotland. In education, Education Scotland staff engaged with early learning and childcare providers and school and council staff across Scotland to share effective practices around assessment, adapting the curriculum and providing motivating learning activities for children and young people to support learning at home.

14. We will capitalise on the advances we have made in response to Covid-19, including our learning experiences in sharing information and good practice and using digital technology. This will underpin our scrutiny activity in future and ultimately help shape service design and delivery.

We will build on the increased joint-working resulting from Covid-19 by collaborating further in future

15. Covid-19 has led us to work together more regularly. This is particularly evident between scrutiny bodies in the justice and health sectors. For example, the heads of justice inspectorates (HMICS, HMIPS, IPS, HMFSI and PIRC) have been meeting as frequently as every two weeks during the pandemic, leading to effective and timely sharing of information about the justice sector. HIS has been carrying out care home inspections in collaboration with the Care Inspectorate, providing expertise in the inspection of infection control. There is a commitment among SSG members to learn from each other's experiences to inform their own organisation's work.

16. Covid-19 has also led to many SSG members increasing engagement with our counterparts elsewhere in the UK. This is most apparent in policing, education and public sector audit. For example, Audit Scotland has developed a shared commitment with other UK audit agencies to coordinate, collaborate

and share learning in the collective audit response to Covid-19, including looking at potential areas to collaborate on audit work in relation to personal protective equipment (PPE) procurement and distribution.

17. The immediate impact of Covid-19 on our work provides us with an opportunity to examine our scrutiny approaches for the future. We need to strike the right balance between scrutiny and support to improve public services. Clearly, we need to focus on where the risks to the delivery of public services and the wellbeing of the public are greatest. External scrutiny also has an important role in encouraging public services to work together collaboratively in the pursuit of better outcomes for communities.

18. The effects of Covid-19 have reinforced some views that, as scrutiny bodies, we look at some issues too disparately. Public service reform places more emphasis on looking at public services from a citizen perspective, adopting, for example, victim-centred and patient-centred approaches. We can collectively examine this in a much more coordinated and overarching way in future.

19. We will strive, where possible, to collaborate and coordinate our scrutiny activity and support around key common themes that either present risks or can support improvement to the delivery of services and our communities. Some of these issues have been exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic but others are increasing in risk as a result of wider demographic and environmental changes. These issues include:

- addressing inequalities
- recovery from Covid-19
- the provision of and access to digital services
- human rights and balancing protection/safety
- climate change
- mental health
- community and organisational resilience.

Conclusion

20. Covid-19 has changed society and the economy in profound ways. It has required public services to change radically how they work at pace and under extreme pressure. Recovering from the effects of Covid-19 will take a long time. The regulation, inspection and audit of public services will play a key role in learning lessons from the past few months and supporting improvement, so that the renewal of public services in Scotland is as strong and inclusive as possible.

**Elma Murray, Interim Chair
November 2020**

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