



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

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By email only

Dear Conveners,

Drug and Alcohol Services: An update

On [31 March 2022](#), the Public Audit Committee took evidence from the Auditor General for Scotland (AGS) on the above [joint briefing by the AGS and the Accounts Commission](#). The Committee agreed to close its scrutiny of the briefing on 28 April, in recognition of the work your committees are jointly undertaking to consider the progress that has been made in implementing the recommendations of the Scottish Drug Deaths Taskforce.

It is also understood that the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee has been taking evidence on tackling alcohol harms in Scotland, including the evidence session held last week with the Minister for Public Health, Women's Health and Sport.

The Committee therefore agreed to draw your respective committees' attention to the key issues that arose during our evidence session with the AGS, to inform any future work on drug and alcohol services.

Lack of progress in addressing drug and alcohol challenges

Key message 1 of the briefing sets out the stark reality of the drug and alcohol crisis in Scotland as follows—

“In Scotland, 1,339 people died from drug-related causes in 2020 – the highest ever reported and the highest rate in Europe. Although the number of people dying from alcohol had started decreasing in the early 2000s, it began increasing again around ten years ago and there were 1,190 deaths in 2020.”

Key message 2 states that progress in addressing these challenges has been slow since Audit Scotland first [reported on drug and alcohol services in 2009](#). In particular, it is highlighted that there has been a lack of drive and leadership by the Scottish Government.

During the evidence session, the AGS reconfirmed the slow progress that has been made since 2009. He went on to add however that there have been increased efforts by the Scottish Government and its partners in recent years. As you will be aware, this includes a number of new developments, such as the Scottish Drug Deaths Taskforce, new medication assisted treatment standards and efforts to improve access to residential rehabilitation. These developments have been accompanied by a significant increase in funding in the past two years, after a period of reduced funding and no real-terms increase.

However, the AGS cautioned that “it is not yet clear what impact those new approaches and increased investment are having”. The AGS also highlighted the complex governance arrangements that exist for drug and alcohol services which continues to be difficult to navigate. For example, there is a role for Alcohol and Drug Partnerships (ADPs), integration authorities and community planning partnerships but accountability is not always clear.

The AGS is therefore calling on the Scottish Government to implement an overarching plan that is clear, transparent and measurable and which sets out what the most successful interventions are and what evidence supports the interventions that lead to better outcomes, and for the governance and arrangements across the country to support the delivery of improved services.

While the Committee is encouraged by these more recent positive developments, it is clear that a significant amount of work is still required to improve the delivery of drug and alcohol services in Scotland. The Committee therefore supports the AGS’s call for a clear and integrated overarching drug and alcohol plan to be published by the Scottish Government and asks your committees to monitor what work the Scottish Government plans to undertake in this regard.

Data issues

The lack of high-quality outcome data is a common theme emerging through our scrutiny of a number of recent Audit Scotland reports. This mirrors the experience of our predecessor Public Audit and Post-legislative Scrutiny Committee in Session 5.

The briefing highlights that there have been considerable delays in the implementation of the Drug and Alcohol Information System (DAISy) national database. As Members will be aware, this system was designed to help alcohol and drug partnerships in local areas to see how they are managing people with drug and alcohol use issues, to measure progress and to look at activity. During the oral evidence session, the Committee was told—

“It is clear that there is still a lot of work to do. Some of that relates to the quality and availability of data from alcohol and drug partnerships. Local work needs to be done in that regard, but there are also national developments relating to the data that is required.”

During the meeting, the Committee explored calls made by Audit Scotland in its [Drug and alcohol services: an update briefing published in 2019](#) to review the appropriateness of the national waiting time target¹ for access to drug and alcohol services and address high ‘did not attend’ (DNA) rates. The Committee notes that as things currently stand, the target has not been amended and that DNA’s remains an area where there is no regular data collection or reporting.

As you will know, the Scottish Government has recently announced a new target on the number of people who are in treatment, and how long they stay in it. The Committee understands however, that there continues to be a lack of data about people who have fallen out of the system but require treatment. As such, there is a significant risk that the scale of the drug and alcohol problem in Scotland is not being properly captured or understood.

The Committee therefore encourages your committees to actively monitor how the Scottish Government and its partners intend to move at pace to improve the quality and availability of drug and alcohol data, including how it seeks to measure the proportion of people falling out of the treatment system.

Transparency of funding

The briefing refers to concerns raised in the [2009 Audit Scotland report on drug and alcohol services in Scotland](#) regarding the complex and fragmented funding arrangements. The briefing confirms that these concerns remain in 2022, stating “the

¹ Currently this is 21 days

Scottish Government does not publish a full breakdown of all funding in one place and information is incomplete, disparate and presented inconsistently”.

We probed this issue further with the AGS during the evidence session. He stated that while ADPs prepare annual reports to the Scottish Government, “no follow through production of an overall report on how ADPs have functioned in Scotland. We think that that is a missing link.” He went on to explain that the absence of this information means that Audit Scotland do not have a clear picture of overall spending for drug and alcohol services, or of the outcomes and impacts of that spending.

The AGS recommends that “more transparency is needed by the Scottish Government on how much is spent overall on drug and alcohol policy and services”. We agree with this recommendation and urge your committees to encourage the Scottish Government to set out in one place the overall funding for drug and alcohol services and support, with a breakdown of the main funding streams and how much is going to ADPs and other agencies.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Richard Leonard". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

**Richard Leonard MSP,
Convener**