

# NHS in Scotland 2020



AUDITOR GENERAL 

Prepared by Audit Scotland  
February 2021

traced for the system to work well (95 per cent between 26 October and 24 January). On average, over the same timeframe 84 per cent of contacts of positive cases were traced within 72 hours.<sup>13</sup> The Test and Protect strategy will remain central to suppressing Covid-19 until the Covid-19 vaccinations are fully rolled out.

#### **Demand for PPE has been unprecedented with shortages early in the pandemic, but the situation has since improved**

**14.** There has been huge global demand for personal protective equipment (PPE) since the start of the pandemic.<sup>14</sup> The Scottish Government had a pandemic PPE stockpile in place, as part of a UK-wide approach, but the PPE requirements during the Covid-19 pandemic were unprecedented. For example, in late January 2020, NHS NSS shipped 5,649,635 items weekly, however by 6 April this figure was 24,551,324 weekly. Therefore, the pandemic PPE stockpile was not enough to fully meet the demands of the NHS. For example:

- Some NHS boards reported shortages of certain items of PPE early in the pandemic. NHS boards set up PPE groups to monitor and manage PPE availability. Local supply chains were disrupted during the pandemic, so the National Distribution Centre supplied the majority of PPE.<sup>15</sup> In some instances, however, NHS boards had to procure some items directly.
- In a survey of Scottish members carried out in late April 2020, the British Medical Association (BMA) reported that some doctors did not have access to correct and sufficient PPE. This was highlighted as the most concerning issue for 16 per cent of respondents.<sup>16</sup> Those working in higher-risk areas reported shortages of a number of items of PPE, including full-face visors (29 per cent) and long-sleeved disposable gowns (16 per cent).
- The Royal College of Nursing (RCN) surveyed its members in Scotland in April 2020.<sup>17</sup> It found that, of those respondents working in high-risk environments, 25 per cent had not had their mask fit tested and 47 per cent were asked to reuse single-use equipment.

#### **NHS National Services Scotland has played a vital role in securing and distributing Scotland's PPE supply throughout the pandemic**

**15.** Initial difficulties in supplying and distributing sufficient PPE across the NHS in Scotland have since been resolved and supply is now meeting demand. The central coordination by NHS NSS has been vital in supplying the health and social care sector with PPE throughout the pandemic. Its remit was extended to include distributing PPE directly to General Medical Services, such as GP surgeries and community pharmacies, and social care settings, including private providers. From April 2020, NHS NSS established 48 regional hubs, where PPE has been stored and distributed to social care providers and unpaid carers. Councils and IAs manage the hubs. Between 1 March 2020 and 27 January 2021, NHS NSS had distributed more than 800 million items of PPE to health and social care services throughout Scotland.<sup>18</sup>

**16.** Because of the unprecedented need for PPE and how quickly it was required, NHS NSS procured PPE under emergency regulations, rather than through a competitive tender process as normal. The cost of PPE increased globally because of increased demand. In March 2020, the World Health Organization called on industry and governments to increase PPE manufacturing by 40 per cent to meet demand. In response, NHS NSS worked with a multi-agency team, including Scottish Enterprise and the Scottish Government, to establish new

# Pandemic preparedness



## Not all actions from previous pandemic preparedness exercises were fully implemented

The Scottish Government based its initial response to Covid-19 on the 2011 UK Influenza Pandemic Preparedness Strategy

**41.** In its consideration and assessments of risks to Scotland, the Scottish Government rated the risk of an influenza pandemic as highly likely to occur with a potentially severe impact.<sup>45</sup> This aligns with the risk classification of an influenza pandemic in the UK National Risk Register of Civil Emergencies, 2017.<sup>46</sup> However, the Scottish Government did not include an influenza pandemic as a standalone risk in its corporate or health and social care risk registers. This meant that there was not adequate corporate oversight of this risk, and it is therefore unclear how it was being managed and monitored.

**42.** The Covid-19 pandemic was caused by a new virus with unknown characteristics. Initially, there was insufficient evidence internationally to show how the virus behaved and was transmitted, who was at risk and what the incubation period was. The Scottish Government had no plan in place to manage this specific kind of outbreak, so its response was informed by the 2011 UK Influenza Pandemic Preparedness Strategy. This was developed jointly by the four governments of the UK. The Scottish Government's response was also informed by the 2017 Management of Public Health Incidents: Guidance on the roles and responsibilities of Incident Management Teams. The Scottish Government's response to Covid-19 had to be adapted frequently as new information emerged.

**43.** In the five years prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, Scotland was involved in three pandemic preparedness exercises:

- **Exercise Silver Swan** was conducted across Scotland in late 2015 and sponsored by the Scottish Government.<sup>47</sup> It involved a range of partners, including the Scottish Government, NHS boards, councils and Health and Social Care Partnerships (HSCPs), and consisted of a series of four separate desk-based exercises. The exercises focused on health and social care, excess deaths, business continuity and overall coordination nationally. Seventeen recommendations for further action were identified. A review exercise was conducted in November 2016.
- **Exercise Cygnus** was held in October 2016.<sup>48</sup> It was a three-day, UK-wide simulation of a severe pandemic and involved the Scottish Government. The exercise identified 22 ways in which the 2011 UK Influenza Pandemic Preparedness Strategy could be improved.

- **Exercise Iris** was delivered by the Scottish Government in March 2018.<sup>49</sup> It involved territorial NHS boards, NHS 24, Health Protection Scotland and the Scottish Ambulance Service. It assessed the readiness of the NHS in Scotland to respond to suspected outbreaks of a Middle East respiratory syndrome coronavirus (MERS-CoV). Thirteen actions were identified.

**44.** Each of these exercises highlighted a number of areas that required improvement. They defined specific actions to be implemented, with some common themes, including the need to:

- clarify roles and responsibilities in the event of a pandemic
- increase the capacity and capability of social care to cope during an outbreak
- ensure the availability and correct use of PPE, including through fit testing and procurement processes.

#### **Progress in addressing recommendations from pandemic preparedness exercises has been slow**

**45.** Progress in implementing the actions identified during these pandemic planning exercises has been slow. The Scottish Government set up the Flu Short Life Working Group (FSLWG) in early 2017. In November 2017, the group set out priority actions following the recommendations from the Silver Swan and Cygnus exercises. While the exercises conducted were not in preparation for the specific type of pandemic that arose, some of the areas that were identified for improvement became areas of significant challenge during the Covid-19 pandemic. For instance:

- Concerns about the capacity and capability of social care to cope during a pandemic. Flu pandemic guidance published in 2012, designed for health and social care in England, was issued to health and social care in Scotland.<sup>50</sup> One of the priorities of the FSLWG was to develop a Scottish version of this guidance for consultation by March 2018. This guidance was drafted and issued for consultation between July and September 2019. The draft guidance was not updated following consultation and has not been published. The Scottish Government is now reviewing this guidance to incorporate lessons learned from the Covid-19 pandemic.
- Access to, and training in, the use of PPE were identified as areas requiring improvement. The FSLWG identified a priority action in relation to clarifying access to the PPE stockpile. This was required to be completed by March 2018. The Scottish Government planned to include this in the flu pandemic guidance that was being developed for health and social care. The FSLWG also identified raising awareness of the type of PPE required and fit testing for staff as priorities. In March 2018, however, findings from Exercise Iris again highlighted the need for substantive progress in the area of PPE availability and use across Scotland.

**46.** As a priority, the Scottish Government should update and publish national pandemic guidance for health and social care. The scope of this guidance should not be limited to covering only an influenza pandemic. It should include lessons learned from the Covid-19 pandemic and the previous pandemic exercises.