

21 August 2023

By email

Richard Leonard MSP
Convener
Public Audit Committee
Scottish Parliament

Dear Convener

Draft work programme

Thank you for your letter of 1 June providing feedback on my work programme and enclosing the responses you received from other Committees to your invitation to identify specific themes or areas they would welcome further audit examination.

The opportunity to brief the Committee on my priorities and the audit work in the pipeline for the next two years and receiving feedback from you and other Committees is very valuable. This helps me ensure that my longer-term work programme considers key areas of interest to the Parliament and is focusing on those topics that will add greatest value in supporting effective parliamentary scrutiny.

It is of course very welcome that the Committee has indicated its general support for the areas of work that I have set out and that it recognises my work programme affords the flexibility to respond to the risks, issues and challenges faced by the public sector. I continue to keep my pipeline of future audits under review.

In doing so I will continue to use the feedback received from Parliament and other key stakeholders to refine my longer-term work programme. I set out my response to the specific requests and suggestions made below.

Ferguson Marine

The Committee requested an update as soon as possible on potential and statutory reporting routes that would enable me to undertake a forensic analysis of FMEL's records to identify how it spent significant sums of public money.

I have written to the Committee separately to provide an update on each of the Committee's previous requests in relation to Ferguson Marine and the completion of vessels 801 and 802. This includes an update of the position in relation to the scope for me to undertake a forensic analysis of FMEL's records.

Equalities

The Committee suggested that the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic is considered as part of audit work on how the public sector is addressing digital exclusion.

I can confirm that this is an important consideration in the digital exclusion performance audit which I am currently undertaking jointly with the Accounts Commission. This audit recognises

that the Covid-19 pandemic deepened the risks of digital exclusion, with public services shifting online and will be looking at how well public bodies are assessing and managing these risks moving forward. This audit is now underway and information on its scope and timing is available here - <https://www.audit-scotland.gov.uk/publications/digital-exclusion-audit-scope> .

Climate change

The Committee asked that as part of upcoming work on climate change I give consideration to the performance, value for money and progress of current policies that are in place to tackle climate change.

As the Committee notes my pipeline of future work includes audits of different aspects of public bodies' responses to climate change. Audit Scotland published its strategy for auditing climate change in December 2022 and this is available here - https://www.audit-scotland.gov.uk/uploads/docs/report/2022/as_221209_auditing_climate_change_strategy.pdf. This describes the role of public audit and why we are prioritising this area. As part of this approach, I will give consideration to performance, value for money and progress across the audits I undertake in this area.

Audit Scotland's strategy for auditing climate change strategy recognises several organisations have a role in monitoring and reporting on progress towards national climate change targets and objectives (for example the Climate Change Committee). I will look to complement the work of other public bodies and parliamentary committees and use and add value to existing tools and evidence wherever possible.

Parliamentary supported officeholders

The Committee asked that I consider undertaking audit work on the role of Parliamentary supported officeholders as a whole, to determine if value for money is being achieved.

You highlighted evidence from the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body (SPCB) to the Finance and Public Administration Committee (FPA) about the potential implications of proposals to increase the number of Parliamentary supported officeholders. I also note that the FPA Committee expressed "concern regarding the potential for a significant increase in the number of officeholders with their associated costs" in its report on the 2023/24 budget¹. The Report also stated that the FPA Committee would "further reflect on the matters raised by the SPCB as part of [its] scrutiny of Financial Memorandums for Bills seeking to create additional Commissioners."

The evidence from the SPCB highlighted ongoing discussions between it and Scottish Government officials in relation to this issue. I note that there have also been some relevant papers recently published by public bodies. For example, the Scottish Government published a report on the findings of research exploring the role of commissions and commissioners in supporting rights in Scotland in May 2023². And the Scottish Human Rights Commission published a discussion paper which considered prospective approaches to protection of human rights in Scotland in June 2023³.

I am also aware that SPCB is reviewing the governance arrangements in place between it and Parliamentary supported officeholders. The Presiding Officer noted this in her letter to you of 11 May 2023, in relation to my section 22 report on the 2021/22 audit of the Commissioner for Ethical Standards in Public Life in Scotland⁴. The Committee, of course, is continuing its own consideration of this report.

I will continue to monitor developments in all these areas. I will also assess the outcomes of the annual audits of each of the Parliamentary supported officeholders and consider further reporting of any issues that emerge.

I have carefully considered the current position in response to the Committee's request. In view of the range of ongoing activity in this area I do not plan to undertake audit work looking at the value for money of existing officeholders as a whole at this stage but will monitor developments in all these areas as I keep my work programme under review.

Culture in Communities

The Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee suggested that I may wish to consider the outcomes of its Culture in Communities inquiry as part of my future work programme, once its report is published later in the year.

I await publication of this inquiry report with interest and look forward to reading it once it is available. I will reflect on its outcomes as I keep my future work programme under review. I would also anticipate that the Accounts Commission, which is responsible for the audit of local government, will have an interest in any findings in relation to the role of local authorities in their role as providers and commissioners of local cultural services.

Finally, I acknowledge the Finance and Public Administration's request that I keep them informed about the progress of my work in the range of areas where they have helpfully expressed their interest. I will write to the FPA Committee separately to provide relevant updates.

I hope that Committee members find this information helpful.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Stephen Boyle', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Stephen Boyle
Auditor General for Scotland

¹ - Budget Scrutiny 2023-24, Finance and Public Administration Committee, 25 January 2023 - available [here](#).

² - The Role of commissions and commissioners in Scotland and the UK: Final report, Research Scotland, March 2023 – available [here](#).

³ - At a crossroads – which way now for the human rights system in Scotland, Scottish Human Rights Commission, June 2023 – available [here](#).

⁴ - Letter from the Presiding Officer to the Convener, 11 May 2023 – available [here](#).