



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Public Audit Committee

Room T3.60

The Scottish Parliament

EDINBURGH

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Paul Lowe Registrar General for
Scotland/ Keeper of the Records of
Scotland; and
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Services / Accountable Officer
National Records of Scotland

Email:

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By email only

10 February 2023

Dear Paul and Linda

The 2021/22 audit of National Records of Scotland

On [15 December 2022](#), the Public Audit Committee took evidence from the Auditor General for Scotland (AGS) on the above section 22 report. The Committee received further written evidence from the AGS on [11 January 2023](#), and agreed to write to you with the following questions as part of its scrutiny of the section 22 report.

Administrative data

The AGS's section 22 report states that due to lower than anticipated return rates for the census and the census coverage survey, NRS will be more reliant on the use of administrative data than originally planned, in order to support the production of population estimates. In evidence, the AGS told us that "administrative data will play a more significant part than was originally planned."

The section 22 report states that the International Steering Group (ISG) is supporting NRS's application for enhanced access and use of administrative data. Audit Scotland stated that it understood NRS hoped to have secured the necessary permissions by the end of 2022. It is also Audit Scotland's understanding that data sharing agreements would also be put in place with the organisations that hold the data that NRS is seeking to access, including data from the electoral register, NHS register, and school pupil census data.

Can you confirm whether NRS has now secured the required permissions to access and use all the administrative data that it requires to produce high-quality census outputs?

Digital exclusion

The section 22 report states that the overall return rate for the census was 89%, compared to the 97% return rate in England and Wales. One of the key messages in the section 22 report states that:

“There is no single reason why the return rate was lower than planned but it is important that NRS learn lessons from the collection phase to inform planning for future censuses.”

During the evidence session, we explored with the AGS, the extent to which digital exclusion may have contributed to the lower-than-expected return rate for the census. The AGS stated that “it is now a key responsibility for NRS to understand what the reasons were and what barriers there were for household participation in surveys”.

Can you confirm that as part of its evaluation work, NRS will look specifically at the extent to which digital exclusion impacted on people’s ability to complete the census. In particular, to determine if there is a direct parallel between deprivation and digital exclusion and participation in the online census.

Costs

The section 22 report states that the census programme costs are estimated to increase by £6 million in 2022/23. During evidence, the AGS stated the importance of NRS keeping these costs under close review in order to keep further public spending on the project to a minimum.

What steps are NRS taking to monitor the ongoing expenditure in relation to the census programme to ensure that it keeps within the current budget?

Temporary staff

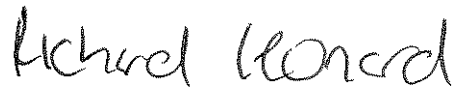
The section 22 report states that temporary staff costs have increased significantly, making up 42% of overall staff costs. The report explains that these costs are mainly attributable to high-cost contractors working on the census and specialist IT projects. The report concludes that as the census programme progresses through its later stages, it is important that NRS has knowledge transfer plans in place to build on the skills it has in-house.

Can you provide the Committee with information setting out—

- the arrangements NRS has in place to ensure that the specialist knowledge of temporary staff is transferred to permanent NRS staff?
- of the 42% of overall staff costs that are related to employing temporary staff, what is the split between the costs of census programme staff and those working on specialist IT projects.

I would be grateful if you could provide a response to this letter by **10 March 2023**.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Richard Leonard". The script is cursive and somewhat informal.

Richard Leonard MSP
Convener