Dear Convener

SCOTLAND’S CENSUS 2022

Thank you for your letter dated 21 September regarding Scotland’s Census.

Various indicators can be used to assess the quality of Scotland’s census data. An important indicator is the overall response rate which in 2011 was 94 per cent. Of the 5.3 million estimated people in Scotland in 2011, about 340,000 were thought to be missed and subsequently adjusted for during data processing. The 2011 Coverage Assessment and Adjustment (CAA) methodology was able to derive census population estimates that represented 100 per cent of the population, by using the Census Coverage Survey (CCS) and other statistical techniques to estimate the numbers and characteristics of the people who were missed.

In 2011, for every Local Authority in Scotland, with the exception of Glasgow (89 per cent), the person response rate was over 90 per cent with the highest rate in the Scottish Borders at 96 per cent. Table 9.3 on page 140 of Scotland’s Census 2011 – General Report shows the person response rates for each Local Authority in 2011. In 2001 the response rate for Scotland was 96 per cent.

In 2011, ONS achieved its response rate targets. The overall response rate was 94 per cent with at least 80 per cent in all Local Authority areas. Fewer than 5 per cent of Local Authority areas had a census response rate of less than 90 per cent. NISRA estimated that in 2011, responses were received from 94 per cent of households.

In November 2019 we published a Statistical Quality Assurance Strategy which provides an overview of how we will assess and measure the level of quality being achieved throughout the collection and processing of census data and the production and dissemination of statistical outputs. Key quality assurance activities we are developing include:

- Assurance of processes
- Validation of Population Estimates
- Topic-based Analysis
- Internal and External Assurance Panels
- National Statistics Accreditation
We continue to work closely with our colleagues in ONS and NISRA to harmonise our approach to statistical quality assurance where possible. To support this, a UK Statistical Quality Working Group has been established to meet quarterly to share methodologies, best practice and lessons learned. Regular communication continues between meetings to keep up to date on work in the respective offices, and to identify areas for potential alignment and joint working.

The census offices across the UK also continue to work closely with our colleagues from international census organisations in Canada, the Republic of Ireland, United States of America, Australia and New Zealand to share statistical quality assurance best practice and lessons learned across census operations.

As I advised during the evidence session on 17th September, NRS are making significant progress to conclude a detailed re-planning exercise which will produce a revised Programme Plan. Considerable work has gone on throughout the programme over this period, including substantial engagement with our suppliers.

As part of the re-planning exercise we are updating the full lifecycle resourcing plan and supplier costs to the Programme to inform the overall financial impact assessment and subsequent costings. Thereafter there will be further engagement with Ministers in relation to our analysis. I am happy to write to the committee and update them on this work once concluded.

Turning to ONS’s approach, as part of its long term work to develop the use of and maximise the value of administrative data held by the public sector, the ONS has been progressing data sharing agreements over some years to access data with departments such as HMRC (e.g. Self-Assessment Data, Migrant Workers Scan – United Kingdom, Pay As You Earn Real Time Information) and DWP (e.g. Benefits and Income Datasets, Customer Information System).

This work which uses a range of datasets including those above is progressing. We understand that ONS plan to use such data to support the English and Welsh Census Design and to contribute to a statistical solution, should the English and Welsh census return rate be low, miss sections of key population groups or geographical areas of these two countries. I have regular updates with colleagues in ONS, who are confirming their continued confidence in delivering a Census 2021, however they continue to recognise that there are still challenges in accessing and using these data to support their census. These include the availability of timely data covering the census period and also the technical and methodological challenges of linking these data.

The ONS have invested considerable resources over a number of years to understand the HMRC and DWP datasets, and to make them more useable for supporting operational decisions on census. They are now beginning to use this expertise to think about how they may potentially augment their census data through this route.

The sharing of data with ONS is enabled through section 47 of the Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007 and by amendments made to the 2007 Act by the Digital Economy Act 2017. These amendments also provide a route for data from UK and GB.
departments to be shared with devolved administrations, and progress is being made in Scotland. However, it is long-term, complex and challenging work which was not part of Scotland’s Census design.

The Scottish Census design, which was on track to deliver a successful census in 2021 prior to the pandemic, did not include the use of the UK datasets mentioned above. The Scottish Census Design solution was not developed with the intention of using administrative data to mitigate for a low and bias response rate. As mentioned above, while legislative gateways are available which could provide access to this data, that access would not deliver in the timescales required for a 2021 census. Altering the legislative competence of the Scottish Parliament (using an order under section 30 of the Scotland Act 1998 or otherwise) would not change this position.

You may be aware that NRS as part of our Census design is making use of some Scottish administrative data such as the National Health Service Central Register (NHSCR) to support the work to quality assure Census Output estimates. This is an important part of providing census users with assurance regarding the quality and use of Census Outputs in Scotland.

You may be interested to know that NRS is working with ONS, NISRA and the Welsh Government to issue a consultation paper to users to seek feedback on timescales for the next set of national population projections (NPPs). These are produced by ONS, on behalf of the National Statistician and Registrars General, for each part of the UK and for the UK as a whole. The consultation paper will update users on the change in the timing of the Scottish Census and consider when Census data is available across the UK and how this impacts on timescales for publication of the next set of projections. Census data will be used to provide the latest base population for the projections and to rebase the back series of population estimates. Analysis of these data then helps to inform the assumptions on future levels of fertility, mortality and migration which feed into the production of the NPPs.

Finally, please find attached my letter to Professors Paterson and McVie in which I clarified a point in my letter to them of 21 July 2020. As the Census (Scotland) Order 2020 and the Census (Scotland) Regulations 2020 are now in force, NRS is proceeding with delivering a census in accordance with the legislation which has been made. That will include issuing guidance on the sex question as was indicated to the committee during its consideration of what became the Census (Scotland) Order 2020. Scotland’s Census 2022 will follow the same model and question set as had been planned for 2021. This includes a binary sex question with guidance for a self-identification basis of response.

I hope that you have found this letter to be helpful.

Yours sincerely

Paul Lowe
Registrar General for Scotland
16 September 2020

Dear Professors Paterson and McVie

Guidance on sex and gender questions in 2021 census

Thank you for your letter dated 31 August 2020.

To clarify the point in my letter of 21 July 2020, the Cabinet Secretary confirmed to the Culture, Tourism, Europe and External Affairs Committee in her letter of 26 February 2020 that, subject to the Census Order and Census Regulations being in force, Scotland’s Census will ask a binary sex question with guidance that provides for a self-identification basis of response. This followed careful consideration of testing and feedback from stakeholders. Both pieces of legislation are now in force and as such NRS considers this issue to be settled.

During an evidence session on 30 January, the Cabinet Secretary noted that while the Committee had no legal responsibility in respect of the guidance, she recognised that the Committee had become heavily involved in the guidance. Following a request from the Committee, the Cabinet Secretary agreed, in her oral evidence to the Committee on 27 February, to consider whether further clarification of the legal status of the Census guidance was required.

The Cabinet Secretary’s letter of 28 April to the Committee addresses this issue and details the additional text to be added to the guidance documentation which covers the full census.

All of the correspondence between the Cabinet Secretary and the Committee can be found on the Scottish Parliament website.

Scotland’s Census 2022 will follow the same model and question set as had been planned for 2021. This includes a binary sex question with guidance for a self-identification basis of response.

Yours sincerely

PAUL LOWE
Chief Executive