Dear Convener

During the evidence session in respect of the Census Amendment (Scotland) Order you will recall that I agreed to keep the Committee updated with planning for Scotland’s Census 2022.

National Records of Scotland (NRS) have been undertaking an in-depth re-planning exercise, following the decision to move Scotland’s Census to 2022 due to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. I am pleased to report that this exercise is now complete and a baselined plan was approved by the Census Programme Board at their meeting in December. The focus of the Census Programme will now shift from re-planning activities to a more intense period of delivery as we move towards census day.

You will be aware that the Census Programme is subject to independent external assurance. This is provided by independent teams commissioned through the Scottish Government’s Digital Assurance Office and the Portfolio, Programme and Project Assurance team (DIAA). This review activity includes Digital First (D1) compliance, Technical Assurance Framework (TAF) and Office of Government Commerce (OGC) Gateway Reviews. NRS are also independently reviewed by the Office for Statistics Regulation as part of the National Statistics Accreditation process. In addition, ad-hoc assurance may be sought (for example Audit Scotland, or Independent Information Assurance). These lines of assurance are fully independent of the programme and comply with the Scottish Public Finance Manual’s guidance for Major Investment Projects.

As part of this independent external assurance regime, a Delivery Gate review was undertaken in early December 2020. This is the latest in a series of assurance reviews under both the Gateway and Technical Assurance Framework processes. This Delivery Gate assessed whether the delivery strategy remains appropriate, delivery is on track and standards are met.

The review found that the Census Programme had made significant progress in recent months and considers that there should be a good degree of confidence in the delivery of the...
Collect aspects of the programme, finding activities relating to Collection to be on schedule for completion.

The review also found that there had been good progress regarding the Census Outputs aspects. It was noted that the revised timeline has allowed the programme to bring forward significant improvements in the design of the analysis for Outputs which will lead to overall improved quality and benefits derived from the Census.

A delivery confidence assessment of AMBER was noted. Amber is defined as:

“Successful delivery appears feasible but significant issues already exist requiring management attention. These appear resolvable at this stage and if addressed promptly, should not present a cost / schedule overrun”.

This is an appropriate assessment for a programme at this stage of delivery. To provide some context, there are 20 projects across the Programme with only 2 of those projects currently reporting Red, neither of which are fundamental to the readiness of the operational Collect phase of census. I understand that the Office for National Statistics are reporting a Delivery Confidence Assessment of Amber as they continue to work towards a March 2021 census.

Scotland’s Census was moved to 2022 to ensure that it could deliver the benefits required by the people of Scotland. The impact of an extra year was expected to add to the programme lifecycle cost, with the major financial implications of the move to 2022 considered as:

- The cost of extending suppliers contracts
- The programme’s headcount would be maintained for an extra year
- Any major additional activities identified through the re-plan.

The re-planning exercise undertaken by NRS included significant engagement with the multiple census suppliers, with initial and final repricing exercises, interrogation of costs and an extensive resource planning exercise. This work assessed an additional cost of £21.6m for the delivery of Scotland’s Census in 2022, bringing the lifetime cost of the programme to £138.6m. The additional cost has been primarily driven by the financial impacts predicted, with some additional costs driven by improving the robustness of operational and IT testing. NRS will of course continue to bear down on costs wherever possible and are now refreshing arrangements for forward change and cost control.

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

Kind regards

Fiona Hyslop