



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Angus Robertson MSP
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(by e-mail)

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Dear Angus

Scotland's Census 2022

Having considered various aspects of this year's census, we attach for information a summary of the evidence we have heard from – as well as yourself – the National Records of Scotland (NRS) and representatives of the International Steering Group.

The Committee also notes that the Scottish Government is committed to ensuring maximum transparency in the interests of accountability and lessons learnt, with the NRS set to publish a review in 2024.

We trust the information set out in the Annexes attached with this letter may be helpful to this process of accountability and learning.

Yours Sincerely

Clare Adamson MSP, Convener of the Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee

Cc Paul Lowe, Registrar General, National Records of Scotland; Richard Leonard, Convener, Public Audit Committee; Ed Humpherson, Director General for Regulation, Office for Statistics Regulation; Stephen Boyle, Auditor General for Scotland; Ally McAlpine, Chief Statistician, Scottish Government; Professor Sir Ian Diamond, UK National Statistician, UK Statistics Authority

CONSTITUTION, EUROPE, EXTERNAL AFFAIRS AND CULTURE COMMITTEE

Scotland's Census 2022

Background

1. The Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee (the Committee) issued a [call for views](#) on 24 June 2022, the period for consultation ending on 12 August, an overview of which stated—

“The CEEAC Committee has agreed to carry out a short, focused inquiry on the outcome of the Census with the following remit:

To examine the outcome of the Census, focusing on the quality of the data collected, identifying any gaps and how they could be filled”.

2. We received [27 responses](#), which are published on the Parliament's website, a very brief summary of which can be found at Annexe B.

Themes

3. There were three key areas of focus arising from the Committee's considerations—
 - Reasons for no returns
 - How to ensure coverage of the hard-to-count
 - Next steps

Reasons for no returns

4. A sample poll of 1,200 people who had not returned their census forms found that—
 - 35% were too busy
 - 17% were not aware of the census
 - 14% did not realise they had to complete it
 - 7% did not see the point of the census
 - 6% tried to complete online but could not
 - 5% or less
 - wanted help but did not know where to get it
 - were concerned about privacy
 - had a general distrust in Government
 - did not want to answer some of the questions
 - thought the questions were too complicated
 - cited access to paper¹

¹ <https://www.scotlandscensus.gov.uk/media/u0jpl5he/data-collection-exercises-reasons-for-not-yet-completing-scotland-s-census-and-ccs-hard-refusals.pdf>

5. Paul Lowe, the Registrar General, told us the findings concurred with feedback that field staff were hearing at the doorstep. People failed to see the importance of the census or said they would do it later and never got round to doing so. He said NRS adapted the approach when they saw that this was happening—

“...we added in three additional layers of reminder letters, and we had to add in additional advertising activity...that our colleagues in the ONS had not had to run with.”²

6. Addressing the notion of “*survey fatigue*”, Sir Ian Diamond, the National Statistician, suggested the need for “*impeccable public engagement*” to ensure people knew why their opinions were being sought—

“It is incredibly important that we have feedback so that we can say, ‘You said this; we did that’.”³

How to ensure coverage of the hard-to-count

7. Professor David Martin, Deputy director of the UK Data Service, said NRS will have carried out a “*hard-to-count index*” informed by drivers from census responses in the past. Factors can include type of housing, areas where students are concentrated, and language obstacles. This is “*quite strongly aligned*” with the [Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation](#) (SIMD), but not exclusively with deprivation.⁴
8. This allows NRS to go back to areas where it is known that the census response will be difficult and “*twenty times more effort*” can be applied to survey these areas, which, in Scotland’s case, are spread across all council areas—

“That gives us a good picture of the way that different neighbourhood types in different council areas have responded and gives us a detailed matrix of the under-response.”⁵
9. The census coverage survey (CCS) and administrative data focus on precisely that under-response and so the system is designed to “*avoid bias and not just fill in the people who are easy to find*”.⁶
10. Professor Diamond outlined the issue of “*dependence*”, whereby people who do not respond to the census itself are also more likely not to respond to the CCS. He suggested this was something “*incredibly important*” for the administrative data to address, helping us estimate and adjust for that dependence.⁷
11. He explained that the initial aim was a response rate of 94% and therefore the “*design was for an under-enumeration of 6%*”. However, with the increase of

² Official Report, 23 June, Col 53.

³ Official Report, 8 September, Col 16.

⁴ Official Report, 8 September, Cols 10-11.

⁵ Official Report, 8 September, Col 11.

⁶ Official Report, 8 September, Col 11.

⁷ Official Report, 8 September, Cols 11-12.

under-enumeration, the “*confidence interval potentially increases*”. The further out you go, these intervals can increase “*dramatically*”—

“*When you get further out than we are in Scotland, they become as wide as an albatross’s wingspan.*”⁸

12. His view was that although we may have “*less precision*” than first estimated, Scotland could produce estimates on a par with those elsewhere. The situation was “*not impossible – it is hard*” and, with the advice of the [International Steering Group](#), informed by good administrative data, control for bias, maximising the accuracy of estimates, we can aim for “*useful population estimates ... comparable with those across the UK.*”⁹

13. Speaking about changes in census practice in recent decades, Professor Martin said “*plenty of countries*” had shifted from a conventional approach to relying almost entirely on administrative data supplemented by some surveys. With the three UK censuses, he said we were “*somewhere in the middle*”, drawing on “*administrative data at the aggregate level*” and matching it with what we can take from the census “*to fill gaps*”¹⁰—

“*...the general trend towards increasing the use of administrative data is clearly an international phenomenon.*”¹¹

Next steps

14. The census data collection period ended on 31 May 2022, the Cabinet Secretary said, the CCS on 22 August, concluding “*live operations*”, but other work still to be undertaken. He also referred to indications of “*shifts in public attitude*”¹² and a need to understand what this might mean for the future design and management of Scotland’s census—

“*The question is: what can we learn from our experience so that we can maximise the rate of return next time round?*”¹³

15. Asked whether he would commit to publishing the lessons-learned document when work on it was finished, the Cabinet Secretary said that was a matter for NRS to decide what it would publish. However, he expressed a wish for “*maximum transparency*” in the interests of accountability.¹⁴

16. Following the advice of the Steering Group, he said NRS was “*working at pace*” to secure access to administrative data for the purposes of “*estimation and*

⁸ Official Report, 8 September, Col 12.

⁹ Official Report, 8 September, Cols 12-13.

¹⁰ He provided the example of people not including babies on the census forms, the corrective to this gap being to use birth registration data to find out where numbers were missing.

¹¹ Official Report, 8 September, Col 14.

¹² Official Report, 22 September, Cols 28-29.

¹³ Official Report, 22 September, Col 32.

¹⁴ Official Report, 22 September, Col 38.

adjustment". This, he suggested, would put Scotland in a "*strong position*" for delivery of a "*high-quality set of census outputs*".¹⁵

17. NRS has published [a paper](#) on "*building in an administrative data solution with more statistical and estimation methodology*" and ways in which it was learning from colleagues in the UK as well as "*around the world*".¹⁶
18. It will publish a consultation on census outputs later in the year, giving users the opportunity to feedback on plans for the data published, when it is published, and the tools used. NRS will also publish more detailed information on the census statistical methodology in 2023 and – when the statistical methodology is finalised – update its Statistical Quality Assurance Strategy.¹⁷
19. Furthermore, Peter Whitehouse told us—

*"We will publish a review of the census for the Parliament; that is planned and will happen in 2024."*¹⁸

Conclusion

- 20. The Committee highlights to the Scottish Government and other interested parties the evidence we have taken; and awaits publication of the NRS consultation on outputs, the update of the Statistical Quality Assurance Strategy, and the review that has been promised for 2024.**

¹⁵ Official Report, 22 September, Col 29.

¹⁶ Official Report, 22 September, Col 39.

¹⁷ [securing-high-quality-census-outputs-and-population-estimates.pdf \(scotlandscensus.gov.uk\)](#)

¹⁸ Official Report, 22 September, Col 39.

Annexe B

1. This note provides a very brief summary of the findings of the [Call for Views](#) that the Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee [launched](#) to inquire into the outcome of Scotland's Census, focusing on the quality of the data collected, the identification of any gaps, and how those could be filled.
2. It follows the Committee's evidence session on [23 June 2022](#) with the National Records of Scotland.
3. On the closure of the Call for Views on 12 August 2022, the Committee received 28 written submissions [add link] – 25 from individuals (including 4 academics and 1 researcher) and 3 from organisations – all of which are available on the Parliament's website.
3. The range of views expressed in the Call for Views covered issues such as—
 - How the census was organised, including
 - guidance
 - publicity
 - timing
 - Concerns around specific questions, including
 - sex and gender
 - national and ethnic identity
 - Quality of the data
 - What were seen (by some) as missed opportunities in areas such as
 - volunteering
 - transport
 - neighbourhood initiatives

**CEEAC Committee Clerks
August 2022**