

F/T: 0300 244 4000
E: scottish.ministers@gov.scot

Kenneth Gibson
Convener
Finance and Public Administration Committee
The Scottish Parliament
Edinburgh
EH99 1SP

By email: FPA.committee@parliament.scot

25 March 2024

Dear Kenneth,

I thank the Committee once again for their report *Effective Scottish Government Decision Making* and for the recommendations within. As a government, we remain committed to supporting the building blocks of more effective decision making and of means of learning lessons – with others - in delivering improved outcomes for the people of Scotland.

Thank you also for your letter of 19 September, to which I have already responded in part in my letter of 2 November 2023. In your correspondence, you also request a progress update, by March-end, on three areas relevant to the Committee's recommendations, ahead of the Committee's annual evidence session with the Permanent Secretary in May.

These three areas cover:

- i. My commitment to explore how reflective learning and sharing, including more transparent monitoring and evaluation can be more fully embedded in Scottish Government to improve the accountability of government decision making;
- ii. update in relation to how the Scottish Government assesses the quality of its engagement and progress with our review of the effectiveness of these arrangements;
- iii. and update on how continuous improvement activity across our Corporate Transformation programme has led to improvements in the culture of robust challenge and provision of full and frank advice to Ministers.

In this letter, I set out a response to each of these points in turn.

- i. **My commitment to explore how reflective learning and sharing, including more transparent monitoring and evaluation can be more fully embedded in Scottish Government to improve the accountability of government decision making.**

Reflective learning and sharing exercises are regularly conducted across different parts of government, with partner organisations and the public. Further to our actions detailed in my previous letter, the Scottish Government Policy Profession is introducing new resources for

reflective learning and sharing as a direct response to the Committee's report. These activities also support the use of evaluation to improve practice.

This work will enhance promotion of reflective learning events that share recent policy practice from across the UK Civil Service. The profession will gather case studies from the full range of Scottish Government activities. These illustrate the application of professional skills in practice and codify tacit and historical knowledge. They will be made available to all staff for the first time via the professional standards curriculum. The profession will also utilise reflective and reflexive learning designs to create new training from these case studies.

Each of these resources increases the reach and impact of learning generated in specific policy areas, supporting the embedding and mainstreaming of this into practice. As with other policy profession activity, these resources are free and available to colleagues in all professions across Scottish Government, supporting everyone to operate effectively and develop within the policy making environment.

The new resources complement existing activity to share best practice and develop new skills and knowledge. These include new training created by expert teams for the profession's curriculum, alongside annual learning events series such as 'Evidence in Policy Fortnight' and 'In the Service of Scotland'.

COVID-19

In November 2021 a COVID-19 Learning and Evaluation Oversight Group was convened to inform Scotland's recovery from COVID-19. The group is chaired by Professor Linda Bauld, Chief Social Policy Adviser, and includes a mix of Scottish Government directors and senior external stakeholders from the public and third sectors, research organisations and Scottish universities.

The Group will meet for a final time early in 2024. To date the Group has funded and published seven expert reviews, drawing together evidence on many aspects of COVID-19 in Scotland. The Group has also reviewed and identified cross cutting themes arising from evaluations of COVID-19 interventions in Scotland into a report which was published in November 2023.

Key themes relate to the need to collect better evidence on how policies are experienced by disadvantaged and marginalised groups; the importance of public trust to Scotland's national resilience and future pandemic preparedness; and ways in which organisations collaborated around a shared sense of purpose.

A lessons learned exercise led by the COVID-19 Modelling and Analysis Hub was conducted in April 2023 to reflect on UK-wide data sharing practice used to inform modelling and analysis during the pandemic. This highlighted successes in working and collaborating on modelling across the devolved nations and with Public Health England but identified a lack of formal structures supporting the way data was gathered and shared.

Social Security Experience Panels

In 2017, the Social Security Experience Panels were established as part of the work to design and implement devolved social security powers. The Experience Panels are made up of people with lived experience of the UK social security system. Through an extensive programme of research, the Experience Panels have helped to shape all aspects of the

social security system in Scotland, from the development of policy to practical aspects of service delivery. To date, the programme has produced over 100 published research reports and summaries.

The Experience Panels will close in April 2024 as the relevant benefits have now transferred to Social Security Scotland. Research with the Panels will also conclude as work gets underway to reflect on and capture learning from the programme.

This work will explore the impact of the Panels, including their effectiveness in embedding lived experience into system design. This work will also share learning about the Panels' approach to research and as a way to work with people with lived experience to inform and shape policy and delivery.

Learning from the Experience Panels has also provided the template for ongoing research with Social Security Scotland clients. Research with the Social Security Scotland Client Panels informs the development and improvement of Social Security Scotland's systems, processes, and policies. The Client Panels are an important example of how lived experience will continue to be embedded in the ongoing development and improvement of the social security system in Scotland.

Ukraine Warm Scottish Welcome Programme

There has been a culture of reflection, review and continuous improvement throughout the Ukraine Warm Scottish Welcome Programme. The Chief Social Policy Adviser, Professor Linda Bauld, led a rapid [review](#) of the scheme, the outcome of which was published in late 2022. The review was conducted with engagement from subject matter experts across local government, the third sector, and academia, and benefited from the lived experience of recently arrived Ukrainians. A series of lessons learned activities followed policy and operational changes to the delivery of the programme.

Separate to this, the Digital Directorate led a piece of debrief work focused on the role of data. This aimed to help the Scottish Government learn and improve internal processes and communications in the event that a similar crisis should occur in the future.

The Digital Transformation Division also presented lessons learned to the Digital Scotland conference in November 2023 – this will form the basis of a digital delivery playbook that is in development. The SG Central Analysis Division conducted a COVID-19 and Ukraine debrief exercise to explore lessons learned and will be producing an analytical playbook to be used in future crises.

ii. Update in relation to how the Scottish Government assesses the quality of its engagement and progress with our review of the effectiveness of these arrangements.

The Policy Profession curriculum promotes the Scottish Government's expert support for effective engagement via the Participation Framework, a guide to good practice in participation work across Scottish Government, as part of standard 1.3. The framework is designed to support decisions about participation within policy areas. Embedding this resource within the Profession's curriculum locates it alongside related training and learning resources. This provides enhanced support for better participation practice for over 10,000 colleagues across Scottish Government and its agencies.

Scottish Government officials are working with the Executive Team to improve engagement with research organisations. This work explores the extent to which research organisations

find it challenging to identify the correct contacts or groups within SG; barriers to accessing SG data; and the convening of rapid response mechanisms that the research community can access. The Committee has already been updated on the work of SG to support the Scottish Policy and Research Exchange (SPRE).

To facilitate and widen access to government by research organisations, the SG has seconded academics into internal roles. In addition, Heads of Profession have research organisation engagement as part of their role and job objectives.

There is an active programme of consolidation and improvement underway to improve access to data. Research Data Scotland is a not-for-profit charity created in 2022 and funded by the Scottish Government. It is building a Researcher Access Service that is now being launched in stages. This will offer researchers “a streamlined end-to-end pathway to apply for and gain access to secure data for research”, improving on a currently fragmented system. The existence of the new service has been widely disseminated among research organisations. User feedback will be collected as it develops.

The Chief Scientific Adviser in the Scottish Government, Professor Julie Fitzpatrick, has been instrumental in establishing ScotSCIENCE, a platform which provides support and coordinates key activity for science functions across SG.

A ScotSCIENCE-Network has been created to bring together senior science advisers to build connections across portfolios. The Network meets regularly to discuss strategic issues and priorities with a science/evidence element and to agree actions. This complements long standing mechanisms for bringing additional expertise into government and convening experts in the form of working and advisory groups on specific topics.

iii. An update on how continuous improvement activity across our Corporate Transformation programme has led to improvements in the culture of robust challenge and full and frank advice to Ministers.

My earlier letter noted that, taken together, our In the Service of Scotland (ITSOS) vision and values provide an important basis for the kind of culture described in the report - one that is supportive of full, frank, and informed advice, robust challenge and learning from mistakes.

As an important example of actions the SG is taking to help make our vision and values a reality, I referenced work via Corporate Transformation to enable a culture of continuous improvement.

For example, the SG is currently piloting approaches to delivery of LEAN Six Sigma training in relevant areas of the organisation, to help teams apply proven techniques to identify issues in our business processes and then to take effective action to improve their efficiency and effectiveness. A similar methodology is being applied to improve, for example, FOI performance.

The SG also supports several internal staff networks representing the rich diversity of SG's employee workforce. These networks help to share lessons learned and provide staff at all grades with the opportunity to shape programmes of change before they are implemented. They provide additional challenge to the formal governance forums of the organisation. SG staff events as part of ITSOS week in October 2023 similarly included sessions on how staff engagement and the Continuous Improvement cycle can support improved working practices and highlighted, for example, where automation has improved productivity and reduced timescales.

The recently formed Strategy, Performance, Delivery & Resilience Directorate is developing a strategic approach to support the delivery of outcomes, which is driving improvements across the organisation. Through their work, I receive regular updates on the three missions outlined in the First Minister's Policy Prospectus. This rigorous approach to performance management promotes stronger collaboration with all Cabinet Secretaries and is encouraging a more holistic view to be taken across portfolios and budgets and will enable effective delivery of Mandate Letter commitments.

As Deputy First Minister, I remain grateful to the Committee for leading the Inquiry and for the opportunity to contribute further to this important discourse. I trust the responses set out here and in the accompanying letter from the Permanent Secretary provide assurance around our continued commitment to address the report's key themes and recommendations.

I and my Cabinet colleagues remain committed to supporting the work of the Committee and undertake to provide further update upon request.

Kind regards,

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