

**CONSTITUTION, EUROPE, EXTERNAL AFFAIRS AND CULTURE COMMITTEE**

**17<sup>th</sup> Meeting, 2022, Session 6**

**23 June 2022**

**Scotland's Census**

1. The Committee is taking evidence on Scotland's Census from the National Records of Scotland (NRS).
2. SPICe have prepared a briefing at **Annexe A**.
3. A briefing paper from NRS will be circulated in due course.

**CEEAC Committee Clerks  
June 2022**

The logo for SPICe, featuring the letters 'SPICe' in a white, sans-serif font on a dark purple background.The text 'The Information Centre' and 'An t-Ionad Fiosrachaidh' in white, sans-serif font on a dark blue background.

# Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee

## 23 June 2022

## 2022 Census

### Introduction

The Committee will be taking evidence on the 2022 Census. The situation is still evolving, and the Committee will initially be taking evidence from the National Records of Scotland.

The purpose of this short briefing is to sketch out potential areas of discussion. This will cover:

- The delay of the census and the associated costs
- The undertaking of the census and the response rate
- How the census is used

### Delay of the Census

The 2022 census was originally intended to take place in its usual place in the cycle, 2021. In July 2020, the then Cabinet Secretary for Economy, Fair Work and Culture wrote to the Culture, Tourism, Europe and External Affairs Committee explaining that the decision had been made to delay the census in Scotland from 2021 to 2022. This was to manage the risks posed by the pandemic. Her letter stated—

“Whilst NRS had been on track to take a census on 21 March 2021, the unprecedented impact of COVID19 severely disrupted essential community engagement, testing plans, procurement and operational priorities. In light of this, and in the likelihood of further sustained impacts, NRS conducted a comprehensive options assessment on the risks of COVID19 to the delivery of the census in March 2021. This work highlighted that a response rate of at least 90% needs to be achieved to produce the high quality census outputs

required by users; the response rate for Census 2011, for example, was 94%. NRS has advised the Scottish Government that the disruption caused by COVID19 placed delivery of next year's census at considerable risk, with particular concern focussing on the impact of achieving the comprehensive response necessary for the production of high quality outputs." (see page 36 of the [pdf of the Culture, Tourism, Europe and External Affairs Committee papers for the meeting of 17 September 2020](#))

The NRS gave evidence to that Committee on [17 September](#) 2020, and that Committee considered the Census (Scotland) Amendment Order 2020 on [29 October 2020](#). A key issue in the decision to delay the census was that restrictions may limit or entirely prevent NRS staff from engaging with people face-to-face. Pete Whitehouse from the NRS told the predecessor Committee on 17 September 2020 that an option would have been to have an online-only census, but that "would miss 20 or 30 per cent of our population" and possibly some of the most vulnerable and "would miss the very people for whom the census is the most important tool in gathering that information". (Cols 32-33)

In England, Wales and Northern Ireland, the census took place in 2021. The risk posed by the pandemic to the delivery in the rest of the UK would have been mitigated by the ONS' access to and use of a variety of other data sources. The [2021 census in England and Wales had a response rate of 97%](#) and the ONS expects the first outputs [to be released later this month](#). In a letter to the predecessor Committee, Paul Lowe explained—

"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). ...

"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."

In early 2020, prior to the pandemic, there was confidence that the census would be successfully completed, albeit the programme was judged as being "amber". Paul Lowe explained this rating to the session 5 Committee on 17 September, saying—

"An amber assessment means that delivery of the programme is seen to be feasible but there are challenges. It is based on assessment of what needs to

happen over the period ahead. It would be common for a major programme a year or more before delivery that was in a reasonable position to have an amber or at best an amber-green assessment.” (col 28)

The decision, the additional costs and the management of the census more broadly was the topic of a [section 22 report by Audit Scotland](#). This noted that the “overall lifetime costs for the census programme have increased by £21.6 million (18 per cent) due to the delay, from a pre-pandemic forecast of £117 million.”

This report also noted that concerns had been raised about the delivery of the census in 2018 and 2019. The S22 report stated—

“Delays in procuring key components meant that NRS was unable to deliver a full census rehearsal in autumn 2019 as planned. NRS developed a recovery plan which included reducing the scope of the census rehearsal. The revised rehearsal was delivered successfully.”

The [Public Audit Committee took evidence on the s22 report in December and January](#) last winter.

## Undertaking the Census

The census was launched on 28 February 2022. Census day was 20 March, and responses should have reflected circumstances on that day. On 28 April, the Cabinet Secretary for the Constitution, External Affairs and Culture Angus Robertson announced that the deadline for census returns would be extended to the end of May.

As is noted above, the expectation was that the census would attract a response rate of over 90%. Mr Lowe told the PAC in January,

“Nationally, we look for a response rate in excess of 90 per cent, but we also have to be mindful of response rates at the local community level, because that local data is part of the census’s unique nature.”

[The Cabinet Secretary told Parliament in a statement](#) on 9 June that the extension would cost an estimated £6m which he said represents around 4.3% of the lifetime costs of census 2022. The Cabinet Secretary also set out some of the activity undertaken to support a higher return rate, such as media campaigns, letters and postcards, and visits by census staff. On the same day, [NRS reported](#)—

“The national return rate currently stands at 87.9%, which represents an 8.7 percentage point increase in returns since the start of the extension period”

NRS also published local authority level data. This is reproduced below with the authorities ordered from the lowest estimated response rate to the highest.

Glasgow City	81.70%
West Dunbartonshire	82.40%
Inverclyde	84.20%
Dundee City	84.40%

North Lanarkshire	86.00%
Renfrewshire	86.20%
North Ayrshire	86.90%
Aberdeen City	87.80%
Fife	88.10%
South Lanarkshire	88.20%
Argyll and Bute	88.30%
Clackmannanshire	88.60%
East Ayrshire	88.60%
East Renfrewshire	88.70%
Shetland Islands	89.00%
Perth and Kinross	89.10%
City of Edinburgh	89.40%
Midlothian	89.60%
West Lothian	89.60%
Stirling	89.70%
Scottish Borders	89.80%
Falkirk	89.90%
Highland	90.00%
East Lothian	90.10%
Moray	90.10%
East Dunbartonshire	90.10%
Angus	90.20%
Dumfries and Galloway	90.50%
South Ayrshire	90.50%
Aberdeenshire	92.70%
Orkney Islands	93.10%
Na h-Eileanan Siar	93.40%

On 2 June, [NRS released a quote from the chair of its International Steering Group on the response rates following the extension](#). Professor James Brown, ABS Professor of Official Statistics at University of Technology Sydney said—

“While the overall return rates are lower than originally planned, NRS’s extension has improved consistency and returns across the country. With this solid foundation it is now time to move to the next phase and conduct a high quality coverage survey. The coverage survey, combined with innovative use of administrative data, will allow NRS to estimate the size, shape and characteristics of the population as planned. The statistical methods for this are designed to be robust in a range of scenarios. This will ensure the census estimates are representative of both Scotland as a whole and its local communities, as well as enable comparisons across the UK.”

The Census Coverage Survey [began on 13 June](#). The NRS state that this survey is the “second largest social research exercise in Scotland after the census itself” and data collection will be carried door-to-door. Paul Lowe stated—

“Along with other administrative data, the CCS enables statisticians to estimate for the nature and volume of missing census returns, and deliver the statistical dataset used to deliver strong outputs.”

Members will note that, broadly speaking, in the list of local authorities above, those authorities with higher proportions of their communities in the 20% most deprived in Scotland by SIMD are nearer the top. How the CCS will fill these gaps is not yet clear. Another area that is not clear is how the NRS will use administrative data and whether this will include UK Government administrative data. As quoted above, Mr Lowe had previously described this as “complex and challenging work”.

During the 9 June statement the Cabinet Secretary outlines work NRS had undertaken to understand why people had not returned their census form. He said—

“There was a wide range of reasons. The headline responses were as follows: 35 per cent of those who were asked stated that their being too busy was the reason, or one of the reasons; 17 per cent stated that they were not aware of the census; and 14 per cent stated that they did not realise that they had to complete it. Concerns about privacy, trust in Government, the nature of the questions and access to a paper copy all came out at 5 per cent or less.”

## Use of census data

The purpose of the census is to support policy decisions at all levels. In answer to a question on [16 June, the Cabinet Secretary stated](#)—

“The census remains the best way to gather vital information that Government, councils, the national health service and a range of users in the public, private and third sectors need. The results help local authorities, businesses and Government to plan a wide range of vital public services to improve the lives of people who live and work in Scotland.”

The NRS [published case studies of how data in the 2011 census has supported effective service planning](#). A key theme through these case studies is the value of the combination of accurate data covering small geographical areas and the characteristics of people in those areas (e.g. age, languages spoken, the vehicles owned).

**Ned Sharratt, Senior Researcher (Education, Culture), SPICe Research**

**16 June 2022**

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