

News release

For immediate use

Scotland's delayed census making good progress but challenges remain

Scotland's census has faced considerable challenges and is expected to cost £21.6 million more than originally planned. Careful management is needed to ensure its successful delivery in March 2022.

In July 2020, Scottish Ministers decided to delay the next census from March 2021 to March 2022 due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

This has had a significant financial impact on the National Records of Scotland (NRS), the public body responsible for planning and running the census in Scotland. Overall costs have increased by £21.6 million (18 per cent) over the lifetime of the programme, against the pre-pandemic estimate of £117 million. The Scottish Government has provided funding to cover this increase.

The census is a complex programme and one of the Scottish Government's biggest current ICT projects. NRS has acted to improve the management of the programme but has faced considerable challenges, including the impact of the pandemic on programme costs and difficulties recruiting suitably qualified staff.

Stephen Boyle, Auditor General for Scotland, said:

"The Covid-19 pandemic significantly impacted NRS's plans for running Scotland's census, resulting in ministers' decision to delay by a year.

"The census programme began to face challenges in 2018. NRS took steps to strengthen the programme and is now in a better position to deliver the census successfully in March 2022. It is crucial that NRS continues to monitor and manage ongoing risks to deliver the census, which is a key source of information to help the public sector plan services and funding."

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Notes to editors

1. Audit Scotland has prepared this report for the Auditor General for Scotland under Section 22 of the Public Finance and Accountability (Scotland) Act 2000. This is a Section 22 report which allows the Auditor General to bring attention to Parliament and the public matters of wider interest arising from the annual audits of public bodies.

2. The census is a national survey of the entire population which takes place every 10 years. It is the most reliable source of information that we have about people and households in Scotland. The upcoming census will be the first primarily digital census. It normally relies on a field workforce, working door-to-door across Scotland to help achieve a high response rate and ensure statistical quality. The national lockdown and physical distancing rules in place to limit the spread of Covid-19 meant that the field workforce was not expected to be able to operate as usual in March 2021. NRS considered the lack of a field workforce to be one of a number of risks to the delivery of the census.

3. Censuses in other parts of the UK went ahead as planned in March 2021. The other census-taking organisations have access to alternative sources of administrative data which could be used to supplement the census data if necessary. This option is not available for Scotland.

4. Over the years, Audit Scotland has repeatedly reported on the challenges faced by public sector organisations when implementing major ICT projects and programmes. For example, in [Principles for a Digital Future](#), we highlighted the critical need for organisations to identify people with the right skills and experience as part of their planning for major IT projects.

You can find all our digital work, as well as further resources, on our [Digital e-hub](#).

5. Audit Scotland has prepared this report for the Auditor General for Scotland. All Audit Scotland reports published since 2000 are available at www.audit-scotland.gov.uk

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