

News release

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Census lessons must be learned

Lessons must be learned after a low response to the 2022 census led to increased costs and additional work.

Wide concerns about an initial return rate of 79 per cent saw the 2022 census extended by a month, increasing the rate to 89 per cent. The original target had been at least 90 per cent to ensure the census data could be used to produce the most accurate population statistics. National Records of Scotland (NRS) estimates that the extension will cost it £6 million in 2022/23.

In response to the low response, the Registrar General for Scotland established an independent group of census and data experts to provide extra assurance. It concluded that NRS had a “solid foundation” to continue to the next phase of Scotland’s census. This involved an additional survey and drawing on administrative data such as the electoral register. However, the low response rate means the NRS is more reliant on the use of this administrative data than planned.

Population statistics produced from the census are used by government and other public bodies to plan services for the future and allocate funding. NRS reports that the first data outputs will be available in summer 2023. But significant work remains to be done during 2022/23 to ensure that the census delivers robust statistics.

Stephen Boyle, Auditor General for Scotland, said:

“The census is a vital data gathering tool that allows public services to be planned properly.

“It’s important that National Records of Scotland establishes why the return rate was significantly lower than the other countries in the UK.

“Those lessons should be shared and will be crucial to planning for future censuses and surveys.”

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Notes to Editor:

1. The Auditor General has prepared the report on National Records of Scotland's audited accounts for 20 under Section 22 of the Public Finance and Accountability (Scotland) Act 2000. This allows the Auditor General to bring to the Parliament and the public's attention matters of public interest related to the financial statements of public bodies.

2. The census is a national survey of the entire population which takes place every ten years. The Scottish Government, councils and other organisations use census data to help plan services and allocate funding. The Registrar General is responsible for planning and running the census in Scotland.

3. At the start of June 2022, NRS forecast that the actual additional costs would be around £6 million, increasing the projected lifetime costs of the census programme by four percent from £138.6 million to £144.6 million. However, the actual figure will not be known until the end of 2022/23 and will need to be carefully managed.

4. The extra costs relate to additional supplier costs of £3 million, along with £1.7 million for field workforce and £1.1m additional funding for the Census Coverage Survey.

5. The census in England and Wales was carried out in March 2021 and reported an overall return rate of 97 per cent. The census in Northern Ireland was also carried out in March 2021 and similarly reported an overall return rate of 97 per cent.

6. Due to the low response rate NRS will be more reliant on additional administrative data such as the Electoral Register, information from the NHS Central Register on people who have registered with a GP in Scotland, the School Pupil Census and student data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency.

7. Section 22 reports are submitted to Scottish Ministers for laying in the Parliament along with the accounts of the relevant body. While there are statutory deadlines for these reports, the actual timing of publication is determined by when the report is laid in the Scottish Parliament by Scottish Ministers.

8. 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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