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The Scottish Parliament  
Edinburgh, EH99 1SP

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Dear Joan

I am writing to provide you with an update on our plans for Scotland's Census.

As you and the committee are aware, Scotland's Census provides people, businesses and organisations with high quality data and analysis which is used to inform key decisions in relation to policy making, investment and the planning of services. Therefore, it is vital that National Records of Scotland (NRS) delivers a census which ensures a high response rate and produces high quality outputs to meet the needs of its users.

Delivery of the census is a substantial logistical operation for NRS, with the preparations in the year leading up to census day particularly critical to its success. Whilst NRS had been on track to take a census on 21 March 2021, the unprecedented impact of COVID-19 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 COVID-19 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 COVID-19 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.

NRS considered a range of alternative options to mitigate the risks of COVID-19 and these were assessed against 10 criteria. These options included reducing the scope of the census. Other options had an estimated response rate that fell between 60% - 80%, far below the rate required for high quality census outputs.

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After this period of assessment, the conclusion from NRS was that the only option around which there is confidence of securing the high level of response rate required was moving the date of the census to March 2022. Therefore, NRS recommended to the Scottish Government that the census be taken in March 2022, as that would best secure a census that allows everyone to participate, and delivers its full benefit to the people of Scotland.

I remain committed to the delivery of a high quality census and, after careful consideration, the Scottish Government has agreed to NRS's recommendation to move Scotland's Census to March 2022. These are unprecedented times and this will be only the second time that a census of the population in Scotland has not been taken every ten years since 1801 (the other exception being 1941, when no census was taken).

Whilst Scotland's Census will now run to a different timescale to the censuses in the rest of the UK, NRS will work closely with the Office of National Statistics and the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency to minimise the impact on UK data coherence to ensure that high quality data is available to inform policy, investment decisions and the planning of services that affect Scotland. NRS will also continue to work closely with stakeholders and partners to support the needs of data users until the results from Scotland's Census become available.

Later this year, the Scottish Government will lay amendments to both the Census (Scotland) Order 2020 and Census (Scotland) Regulations 2020, to allow NRS to hold a census in March 2022 instead of March 2021. No other aspects of Scotland's Census will be affected.

This decision has not been taken lightly, but it does reflect the many significant challenges posed by COVID-19.

I greatly appreciate the Committee's engagement and interest the census over the past two years. Going forward, I will continue to update Parliament on the process to move census day and I look forward to the Committee's continued engagement to help ensure the successful delivery of a census that fully delivers for all of Scotland.

**FIONA HYSLOP**

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