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The Scottish Parliament
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Dear Ms Marra

Data collection and planning for outcomes

Thank you for your letter of 15 February highlighting key issues in the Committee's work under its *data collection and planning for outcomes* theme.

Like the committee and those who participated in the roundtable session you held on this theme in November 2020, I am keen to ensure the Scottish Government makes the best possible contribution to the issues raised.

I agree with the witnesses who noted that collaboration and humility – acknowledging that no one organisation will have all the answers – must be central to our response in improving outcomes for Scotland. The outcomes in the National Performance Framework were given a statutory basis in 2015 and, following a review and relaunch in 2018, the National Performance Framework moved from being positioned as a performance framework primarily for the Scottish Government to a framework for all for Scotland. This recognised that it will require the contribution of us all, regardless of what sector or organisation we work in or for, to progress Scotland's National Outcomes for citizens now, and for future generations.

Collaboration and partnerships are vital, and the Scottish Government and Scottish Parliament have strong roles to play in terms of supporting and incentivising collaboration, the collection and analysis of data to inform decisions, and as leaders on outcomes-based policy making in Scotland. I welcome the opportunity provided by your letter to set out the Scottish Government's approach on these matters, and I have provided a response to the questions in your letter below.

The Scottish Government's overall strategy for data collection in relation to each new policy development, project or initiative; in particular, how it determines what data to collect; who by and for how long.

The Scottish Government's overall strategy for policy development flows from Scotland's National Performance Framework. Policy developments, projects or initiatives must be able to clearly evidence their contribution to the National Outcomes.

Data is essential to evidence this contribution and to support decisions to be informed by evidence. The approach to data collection to support this is not uniform, but tailored to the particular circumstances of the policy, project or initiative. The principles upon which the approach is based are:

- data collection is proportionate to the scale of and risk associated with the decision;
- start with the existing sources of data and evidence and assess whether there are evidence gaps;
- review regularly whether existing data collections continue to be required;
- collect data in an efficient way, building upon existing platforms for the collection of data where possible;
- enable an understanding of how policy developments will affect people from different backgrounds;
- focus on achieving high quality data;
- allow the data to be reused for understanding related policies where this is legal, efficient, and ethical to do so.

To deliver this approach, and support judgements about the appropriate collection and use of data in decision-making, the Scottish Government employs analytical professions including statisticians, social researchers, economists and operational researchers. Staff are recruited to high standards based on professional competency frameworks, and work to professional codes, such as the [code of practice for official statistics](#) and the [code of practice for Government Social Research](#). This mix of analytical professions allows us to draw together different kinds of data – quantitative and qualitative – depending on the nature of the policy question.

Analytic staff typically operate in Analytical Service Divisions (ASDs) across the Scottish Government with each ASD head leading on decision-making in their area. Cross-government issues are discussed by ASD heads together in the Analytical Leadership Group. Other cross government analytical groups exist – such as a survey managers group – to ensure consistency of approach on specific issues.

The development of data collection and use are taken forward in collaboration with public sector organisations that provide the data. This is to make sure data collections are designed to minimise burden and cost and that the data collected is used as widely as possible.

Who in the Scottish Government has overall responsibility for ensuring that data is collected in accordance with the above strategy.

The Heads of Profession for the Analytical Services are ultimately responsible for ensuring data is collected to the high standards described above. These are Gary Gillespie as Chief Economist, Roger Halliday as Chief Statistician and Audrey MacDougall as Chief Social Researcher with responsibility for Operational Research.

Scottish Ministers devolve the decision-making of how to collect and present data. Ministers will wish to make decisions about the use of resources on different data collection and will take decisions on whether to allocate spending to the collection of new data, based on advice in line with the principles above.

How the Scottish Government determines the intended outcomes, including long-term outcomes, of each new policy development, project or initiative and how this informs the data collected to measure progress.

The National Performance Framework sets out the long-term outcomes at the national level for Scotland. Under the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015, Scottish Ministers are required to consult with the people of Scotland on the development of the National Outcomes. They must also have regard to the outcomes when carrying out their functions.

These are the longer-term outcomes that Scottish Government policy developments, projects and initiatives will contribute towards. As these outcomes are at a strategic national level, individual Scottish Government policies/projects developed within and across Cabinet Secretary led portfolios should:

- set clear policy or project specific outcomes at a level appropriate and proportionate for the policy;
- demonstrate and evidence in what manner these policy specific outcomes are expected to contribute to the strategic National Outcomes;
- gather appropriate and proportionate data to monitor progress and evaluate whether the anticipated policy outcomes are being realised.

The recently published [initial monitoring framework](#) of the Scottish Government's Environment Strategy is an example of a policy development where contribution to National Performance Framework outcomes are articulated and relevant measures defined.

As your November 2020 roundtable witnesses discussed, setting out the ways in which varied policies contribute to high level and longer-term National Outcomes in a complex and changeable world is an inherently challenging process. The Committee, Audit Scotland and others provide valuable challenge and scrutiny to drive improvements in the above approach across government, and beyond.

We recognise that there is scope to improve our approach to policy-making and are committed to improving our capability in this respect. Policy professionals in the Scottish Government have a competency framework comprising eighteen Standards,

with several of the Standards relating directly to the committee's focus, including on Impacts and Outcomes; Data and Analysis, Designing Services and Systems, and Cross Sector Collaboration. To embed these Standards into practice, our curriculum provides a platform for resources that reflect current and emerging priorities, enabling the relevant policy teams across Scottish Government to provide guidance and set expectations of best practice under the relevant Standards. As we improve our approach, new guidance and resources will be embedded into our curriculum, meaning they will be accessible to all colleagues across the Scottish Government, and included in our induction resources for new staff.

How the Scottish Government collaborates with other organisations on data collection and planning for outcomes so it can both share good practice and learn from the experiences of others.

The National Performance Framework is a single framework and agreed set of outcomes to which all public services in Scotland align. It is in itself both a symbol and a product of collaboration on outcomes-based working in Scotland, being jointly relaunched in 2018 with the Scottish Government and COSLA as co-signatories. It is part of a transformative shift in how policy is made, and is a key enabler of public service reform.

Progress at the national level against the National Performance Framework can be found on the nationalperformance.gov.scot website. The website is updated as new data becomes available, and reports on progress towards the National Outcomes openly and transparently. The website is maintained by the Scottish Government in our stewardship role of the framework and we share case studies and best practice examples through the website, and actively promote these resources in our engagement with other organisations. The Scottish Government raises awareness of the framework and shares learning, practice and resources within the public sector and through other key organisations and forums within Scotland and internationally.

The Scottish Government sets professional standards for public bodies around Scotland, for example on the definitions used for collecting standard data items, or ways of transferring data. It leads in building a community of practice for statisticians, supporting recruitment to high standards, organising a wide range of analytical training. The Scottish Government also leads on providing platforms, such as ProcXed, which is used to collect data from public bodies, or statistics.gov.scot which is used to publish data in open formats.

An important element of our strategy is widening access to the data we already have, to avoid the need to collect new data – this saves resource (both in terms of money and the burden placed on those data is collected from) and also saves time for those filling in requests to access data.

In this area it is important to help researchers and analysts across Scotland to understand what data we have collectively and make arrangements so that this data can be shared where legal and ethical to do so and where this saves time and money. The Scottish Government has set up [Research Data Scotland](https://researchdata.scot.nhs.uk) to support this ambition. This has been done on COVID-19 where we have linked data from the

2011 census with COVID-19 testing, NHS activity and vital events data. This has enabled a better understanding of the risks of getting COVID-19 without collecting new data.

Analysts in Scottish Government also work collaboratively with their counterparts across the UK. A recent example of on this is the COVID-19 infection survey. This is run by the Office for National Statistics on behalf of the nations of the UK. We have been able to collaborate on the content of the survey and arrangements for making the results available. Another example is the weekly Opinions and Lifestyle Survey of households on how COVID-19 has affected life across GB, and the fortnightly Business Impact and Conditions Survey (BICS) covering a range of issues affecting businesses across the UK countries and regions. The Scottish Government publishes its own weighted business analysis from the BICS survey. In addition, we are collaborating with the Office for National Statistics on making better use of administrative and financial data – for example, from weekly credit and debit card transactions data.

A further example in collaboration is the Scottish Public Sector Analytical Collaborative (SPACE Programme) which brings analysts from Scottish Government, Public Health Scotland, National Records of Scotland and Registers of Scotland together with the aim of helping people better produce, find and use statistics about Scotland, making services more efficient and increasing impact. Cross-organisational collaboration has delivered tangible benefits such as comprehensive user research, design principles, a peer publication review process and the procurement and administration of shared training. It also fosters and supports innovative data science projects through the Data Science Accelerator Programme, which is now in its third year and attracts analysts from across the public sector.

SPACE also aims to build shared infrastructure to support all producers of Official Statistics in Scotland. This capability is being realised through a platform to allow quick, easy and secure access to suites of analytical tools and the ability to collaborate across organisational boundaries to share resources, code and ideas.

How the Scottish Government is actively encouraging and facilitating collaborative and partnership working across the public sector on data collection and planning for outcomes.

The Communities Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015 places a duty on public bodies to have regard to the national outcomes in carrying out their functions. Both the Scottish Government and public bodies are explicitly committed to the alignment with outcomes as set out in the National Performance Framework. This is reflected in the already existing extensive governance structure which governs the relationship between the Scottish Government and public bodies, the setting of policy direction and the reporting mechanisms. The direct and continual engagement of Director Generals and SG sponsor teams – on behalf of ministers – with the Chairs and the public bodies, as well as the annually issued strategic direction letter ensure that public bodies are contributing as fully as possible to delivering the National Outcomes.

The Scottish Leaders Forum (SLF) has been relaunched with a new focus on engaging and supporting leaders to progress the National Performance Framework. The SLF is now poised to accelerate embedding the framework across the public sector and beyond and collaboratively designed ideas for system-wide transformation should emerge. The SLF Planning Group, is co-chaired by the Scottish Government and COSLA, and involves members from across the public sector, including Audit Scotland, civil society, local government, NHS and public bodies, providing strong and collaborative system-wide leadership for the National Performance Framework.

In terms of facilitating collaboration and partnership working on data collection, an example of our approach is the Scottish COVID-19 Data and Intelligence Network established by the Scottish Government that:

- makes accessible and links data from health and social care, the wider public and private sector and research projects;
- mobilises a network of data intelligence expertise across local authorities, health boards, Public Health Scotland, Health and Social Care Partnerships, other public bodies, Scottish Government and academia;
- engages with local and regional delivery teams to co-produce actionable insights, integrating activity across Local Resilience Partnerships and the underpinning agencies to ensure sustainability;
- informs policy making in Scottish Government and wider public services;
- informs effective and ethical pandemic response at national, local, and sectoral levels.

To achieve this the Network requires a scale of partnership and trust not seen before working across organisations, along with public engagement. We therefore have defined values consistent with Open Government. The network of expertise operates to FAIR (Findability, Accessibility, Interoperability, and Reuse) data principles, and within the constraints of data governance, contributing to make data more useable for all.

The programme will build the capability to provide near to real-time relevant intelligence for local and national decision makers and the public. The network works to minimise the spread of COVID-19 in Scotland by quickly identifying COVID-19 resurgence, clusters, outbreaks and detecting co-circulation with winter respiratory viruses, protect vulnerable populations and evaluate the impact of COVID-19 on health, care and society across the [Four Harms](#) (direct health impacts, indirect health impacts, societal impacts and economic impacts). The Scottish Government is currently considering how to use the benefits seen through this network to have a wider impact across the public sector.

The Scottish Government also works in partnership with Local Government, both generally and in specific cases. An example of this is the joint work to develop and collect data on employability support delivered as part of the No One Left Behind strategic approach to employability services.

The steps the Scottish Government is taking to address resistance to and challenges with measuring long-term outcomes.

The Scottish Government has an important role in championing the National Performance Framework and the principles of outcomes-based working. One of the most important aspects of this is to encourage and support organisations to consider their impact on the longer-term outcomes set out in the National Performance Framework.

Our understanding is that for many organisations who have difficulty in articulating their contribution to longer-term outcomes, this stems more from the challenges in doing it in a proportionate and valid way, rather than through resistance to the idea. As noted by witnesses in the Committee's November 2020 meeting, organisations can experience challenges in capturing evidence on the impact of longer-term outcomes (rather than inputs or outputs) in evaluation of their projects or policies. There is a need for a "golden thread" which people and organisations working across different levels and regions of Scotland can follow and help them understand how their work contributes to the whole.

The Scottish Government is taking a range of steps to support organisations to work in this way, including our work with leaders in public services through the Scottish Leaders Forum, where Scotland's senior leaders come together to agree individual and collective action in pursuit of Scotland's national purpose and outcomes as set out in the National Performance Framework.

Through our work championing an outcomes-based approach with partners, we publish a range of tools and guides (for example a recent resource on [Outcomes-focussed policymaking](#) we produced along with collaborating organisations) to better support organisations to work in an outcome-based way.

To support understanding of our performance towards longer-term outcomes we publish evidence on performance openly and transparently on the National Performance Framework website as soon as new data becomes available. We also produce periodic analytical reports to inform other organisations in Scotland as to how Scotland is performing at the strategic level. In 2019 we published a National Performance Framework report looking at [longer-term strengths and challenges in Scotland's performance](#) and in December 2020 we published, jointly with COSLA, an analysis of [COVID-19's impact on Scotland's National Outcomes](#).

How the Covid-19 pandemic has affected the Scottish Government's approach to data collection and planning for outcomes.

Our report on the impact of COVID-19 on Scotland's National Outcomes describes the ways in which the pandemic has deeply affected progress towards some outcomes. It also highlights that the impact of the pandemic has been highly unequal, tending to fall on already disadvantaged groups. Prior to the pandemic, the Scottish Government had existing policy commitments to improve outcomes that have been impacted by COVID-19, including our commitment to tackle child poverty,

improve public services and deliver a net zero society. As the First Minister has stated, COVID-19 means the starting point is different but the urgency is greater.

As the Committee will be aware, the pandemic resulted in the suspension or substantial alteration of important data gathering exercises relied upon by the Scottish Government and others who plan for outcomes, particularly impacting face-to-face research. However the Scottish Government and partners have mobilised in response to the demand for timely and relevant data to inform decision-makers and the public in a range of ways. As described above, the Scottish COVID-19 Data and Intelligence Network was launched in direct response to the pandemic and has contributed to responding to this demand.

In order to understand the impact on the economy and the speed of recovery in real time, the Scottish Government has introduced monthly measures of business sentiment and GDP (economic output) available only a few weeks after the reference period. These regular short-term indicators will be essential in gauging the longer-term impacts on people, businesses and on the economy as a whole.

The Office of the Chief Economic Adviser also utilise existing business and labour market datasets such as the Interdepartmental Business Register and the Labour Force Survey to track COVID-19 impacts.

The Scottish Government knows through evidence we have [reviewed and published ourselves](#) and from the work of others that, while the pandemic has been easy for no-one, its harms have fallen most severely on already disadvantaged groups. In response to this, the Scottish Government is prioritising data collection and research to make sure the difficult decisions we have to make during this crisis are the right ones, particularly for those who have felt the impact of the pandemic most acutely.

Alongside [research](#) on people's experiences of coronavirus restrictions, we have been conducting a small number of focus groups in collaboration with third sector organisations. These conversations have provided an opportunity to hear what some groups have found particularly challenging, as well as reflect on what has gone well and consider what could be further improved.

We have listened to the recommendations of [The Expert Reference Group on COVID-19 and Ethnicity](#) and are [taking forward actions to](#) improve data and evidence in this area in response. We are actively publishing data on the impact of the pandemic on people with other equality characteristics, including on people with a disability and by gender. For example, in [December we published evidence](#) on how time was used in Scotland in 2020 with a focus on gender differences. Informing policy with the best possible evidence on how decisions affect different groups of people in Scotland was vital before the pandemic, and experiences over the past year have only served to underscore the importance of this.

How the Scottish Government is ensuring that the right data is being collected now to enable it to measure the long-term impacts of Covid-19.

It is important that the Scottish Government understands the long-term impacts of both COVID-19 and the interventions that the Scottish Government has introduced to

reduce opportunities for transmission and protect public health. The impacts of COVID-19 are likely to be felt for many years and ensuring that we have the right data in place now will be essential in terms of informing our long-term understanding of the outcomes associated with the pandemic and our policy response.

The short-term differential impacts of COVID-19 have been well evidenced and a key focus for longer-term learning will be understanding the varied impacts of the pandemic on different groups, communities and geographies.

Scottish Government population surveys such as the Scottish Household Survey and the Scottish Health Survey will provide rich representative data across a wide range of topics and will allow us to track changes in outcomes over time.

A number of COVID-19 evaluations are currently underway or have been recently completed. This includes an evaluation of the Shielding Programme (Scotland) and an evaluation of the delivery of COVID-19 Vaccination conducted by Public Health Scotland, an evaluation of the COVID-19 Business Support Measures in Scotland and an evaluation of the Supporting Communities Fund being taken forward by the Scottish Government. Whilst these evaluations are focused around short to medium term learning they will also provide good baseline data which will help us to understand the long-term impacts of COVID-19.

In addition to the evaluations above a number of surveys and qualitative studies have been introduced to understand, for example, the experiences of particular groups such as children, or to track mental health outcomes to enhance our understanding of the impact of restrictions on population mental wellbeing.

There are also other COVID-19 specific research being undertaken which are able to track behavioural effects and the public attitudes through time in the post Covid world and that will provide a baseline for longitudinal analysis in the future. These include:

- [weekly surveys of public attitudes and opinion](#), conducted since March 2020, by YouGov that include information about public health and wellbeing, worries about the short and longer-term impacts of the virus, and changes in behaviours;
- [three waves of telephone surveys](#) (in May and December 2020 and March 2021) carried out by Ipsos Mori, to understand the impact of the virus and control measures on societal wellbeing and differences and inequalities across sub-groups of the population;
- [qualitative research](#) with the public and stakeholder organisations to understand the impacts of the pandemic and the priorities for the future
- the [Scottish Contact Survey](#) which looks weekly at the nature, volume and pattern of interpersonal physical contact in Scotland.

The Scottish Government is currently undertaking work to map out the range of COVID-19 evaluation work that is currently underway and consider how gaps in our understanding and evidence base could best be addressed.

I thank the Committee for their interest in this important area and I hope members find these responses helpful. As the Committee's witnesses discussed at your November 2020 meeting, aspects of this work are challenging long-term endeavours that require meaningful collaboration if we are to hold true to the National Performance Framework and improve outcomes. I value the work of the Committee in this area and look forward to future engagement on these issues. I am copying this letter to the Auditor General for Scotland for his information.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Alyson Stafford". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, stylized 'S' at the end.

ALYSON STAFFORD