



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

By e-mail only

**Public Audit and Post-legislative
Scrutiny Committee**

Room T3.60
The Scottish Parliament
EDINBURGH
EH99 1SP

Direct Tel: (0131) 348 5390

Email: papls.committee@parliament.scot

15 February 2021

Dear Alyson,

Key audit themes: Data collection and planning for outcomes

In September 2019, the Public Audit and Post-legislative Scrutiny Committee published a report, [Key audit themes](#), which set out the key areas that continued to feature in the audit reports that it had considered: leadership and workforce challenges; governance and accountability; data collection and planning for outcomes and managing ICT projects.

As part of its work on the key themes, the Committee has been holding roundtable sessions with stakeholders to explore the underlying causes of these issues and to seek to identify solutions.

At its meeting on [Thursday 19 November 2020](#), the Committee held an roundtable session on data collection and outcomes. A summary of the evidence is attached in the **Annexe**. The Committee agreed to write to the Scottish Government on a number of issues raised in the session.

Key issues

Absent data

The [Key audit themes report](#) underlined that a number of audit reports that the Committee had scrutinised had revealed that key policy developments had not been underpinned by basic data and that, in some cases, absent or underdeveloped data had meant that it was not possible to know with any accuracy how much was being spent on key areas of service provision.

During the roundtable session, witnesses again highlighted a lack of data collection at the outset of projects and policy development, emphasising that this can lead to significant knowledge gaps further down the line. It was pointed out, for example, that it was not known how much is currently being spent on Scotland's youngest children, meaning that it is not possible to begin to analyse whether funding is being spent in an effective way.

Meaningful geographical data

On a related issue, witnesses pointed out that even where data is being collected, it is not always meaningful or useful. It was commented, as an example, that often data is collected in administrative boundaries which do not resonate with people in the same way because "people live in towns and cities and places that they themselves relate to". In particular, a lack of constituency level data was highlighted.

Short-term focus

The [Key audit themes report](#) noted that data to demonstrate improved outcomes or progress towards longer-term reforms was often "absent or underdeveloped." Witnesses similarly commented on the challenges of focussing on long-term targets, when public services and finances are under short-term pressures.

Impact of COVID-19

Witnesses emphasised the increase in public demand for accessible, timely and accurate sets of large data as a result of the public health crisis. However, the Committee heard concerns that the impact of pressures on public services and its finances has shifted efforts towards short-term pressures, resulting in a reduced focus on long-term equality outcomes and the importance of being able to measure them. As noted, this is an issue which pre-dates, but has been exacerbated by, the pandemic.

What needs to change

The overarching message from witnesses for improving the collection, use of and access to data was better collaboration, partnership-working and communication.

Witnesses emphasised the importance of openness and honesty in such partnerships, highlighting the benefits of exchanging "tips and tricks" for how to manage progress and the need for humility in acknowledging that no one organisation has all the answers. It was noted that such collaboration would improve the kind of data being collected and establish an agreed understanding as to why it was being collected.

Communication across organisations was considered essential, as well as working with those on the frontline collecting data in order that they know why they are being asked to collect such data and what it will be used for.

The Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of accessible, quality data to help support members of the public respond to the pandemic and to drive decision-making, but also to be able to track and monitor impacts in the short- and, importantly, in the long-term.

Please set out:

- **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;**
- **Who in the Scottish Government has overall responsibility for ensuring that data is collected in accordance with the above strategy;**
- **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;**
- **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;**
- **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 steps the Scottish Government is taking to address resistance to and challenges with measuring long-term outcomes;**
- **How the Covid-19 pandemic has affected the Scottish Government's approach to data collection and planning for outcomes;**
- **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.**

I look forward to hearing from you **by Monday 8 March.**

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Jenny Marra', with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

**Jenny Marra MSP
Convener of the Committee**