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Dear Ed,

I'm writing to you as Director General for Regulation to update you on NISRA's financial position and to inform you of our intention to consult users about changes to our statistical outputs.

Our role

As you are aware, NISRA is the primary source of statistics, analysis and research on the economy, society and population of Northern Ireland. We conduct surveys, collect data and interrogate administrative data to produce, present and disseminate key statistics and analysis. We conduct the Census in Northern Ireland, and are responsible for the registration of all births, deaths, marriages, civil partnerships and adoptions in Northern Ireland through the General Register Office.

Alongside these functions, we support policy-makers by providing them with high-quality, timely and robust analysis and research to ensure that they can make informed, evidence-based decisions. These services are integral to ensuring that policy design is evidence based: that realistic expectations of policy impacts can be reached before implementation and that a sound evaluation can be made once a policy has been enacted.

To deliver these services, NISRA manage a network of around 500 statisticians and other staff across 24 government departments, executive agencies and arms-length bodies in Northern Ireland. We employ a professional and high-performing field force and we produce many statistics designated by the Statistics Authority as meeting the National Statistics standard.

Financial position

The challenging financial position for public services in Northern Ireland has been well publicised. As the Northern Ireland Fiscal Council has [set out](#), compared to the outturn for 2022-23, resource expenditure across the NI departments will fall by around 0.9% in cash terms in 2023-24. This compares with a 1.8% rise for Whitehall departments over the same period.

This relatively modest fall in overall expenditure impacts [to different degrees](#) across the public sector. The Department of Finance (DOF) – of which NISRA is a part – has seen the largest nominal resource budget reduction of the government departments in Northern Ireland. For NISRA, this means that our funding from DOF is expected to fall by £1.9m in nominal terms or 14.3% this year compared to our budget allocation for 2022-23. Reductions in funding for NISRA statisticians based in other departments are also expected, although the size of these remains a matter of discussion.

Planned actions, consultation and OSR input

The reduction in funding has required us to develop a broad package of measures to maintain our services for users as far as possible. This includes developing new income streams and accelerating efforts to reduce our costs. Notably, we will second NISRA staff to ONS shortly to enable high profile work on Public Service Productivity to go forward. I'm grateful to colleagues at ONS for their assistance in this matter.

However, the size of the budget reduction also requires that we consider our portfolio of activities. To this end, we plan to consult with our users, seeking their view on changes to our statistical releases, including a range of National Statistics. We expect our consultation to be published on the NISRA website on 23 August 2023; it will run for seven weeks and close on 15 October 2023, enabling NISRA to effect changes which will impact our budget position this year. Our consultation will include:

- Publications which we intend to suspend until further notice;
- Statistical releases which we intend to scale back: delivering either less commentary, less detail or both, focusing our publications on key messages and/or reducing their frequency; and
- Outputs which we intend to delay to later in this financial year or beyond.

Following the close of the consultation, NISRA will publish a summary of the responses that we receive and confirm what changes we plan to take forward. We expect to release this on or before 10 November 2023. Changes in statistical outputs arising from spending reductions at other departments will be consulted on separately when they arise.

I wanted to give you sight of these proposals and to invite you as regulators to provide feedback on our plans. Alongside our formal consultation document – which will be advertised through our regular releases and social media – NISRA will also be engaging proactively with users to ensure their views can be considered. The Code of Practice for Statistics is clear about our obligations as producers in these circumstances – setting out the need to consult with users about changes to our releases¹ – but I would welcome your feedback on our plans nonetheless.

¹ Code of Practice for Statistics requirements (V1.5) – ‘to provide users with feedback about how their needs can and cannot be met, being transparent about reasons for the decisions made and any constraints’ – and (V1.6) ‘to consult users and other stakeholders when deciding whether to continue, discontinue, adapt or to provide statistics through other means’ are both relevant in the current situation.

Broader risks

I also wanted to raise some broader risks which the emerging financial position may expose.

Firstly, it will be apparent that changes in resourcing of this kind pose challenges to statistical quality. Although we have made the decision to maintain our existing underlying data collections and we are intending to scale back our outputs and resources proportionately – avoiding overburdening existing staff – it is possible that necessary changes in staffing will have an impact on the quality of our outputs. We will monitor this situation closely to manage this risk as carefully as possible: continuing to work within the advice of the Code and proactively engaging you as the regulator should issues arise.

Secondly, budget reductions will make it harder for NISRA to improve the quality and depth of information which is available for Northern Ireland and to engage fully with wider initiatives to improve our evidence base. As our consultation will set out, the financial situation will make it difficult to maintain our existing service to users this year. While it is not unusual to have pressure on baseline budgets and activities, this is an inauspicious platform from which to deliver ambitious new statistical collections and activities. Improved, new and more detailed statistics that we might have provided for Northern Ireland will consequently take longer or remain aspirations.

Finally, our funding position also poses a broader challenge to the way that the devolved statistical system operates: a challenge you recently identified in OSR's 'State of the Statistical System 2022/23' report. In the UK statistical system and in the Republic of Ireland there is a growing emphasis on the importance and potential of new administrative data sets; on developing new methods and practices which enable policy makers to call on a richer array of information to support their decisions.

However, NISRA's existing funding mechanisms make no specific provision for us to take on these same methods and data and to keep pace. As we step up our work on population statistics ahead of a recommendation about how to conduct a Census in Northern Ireland in 2031, and as we continue to monitor the impact of UK trading arrangements with the EU and Ireland, we risk creating a two-speed statistical system. I would welcome an opportunity for us to discuss how we can better align funding with our desired outcomes in the context of the devolved statistical system.

Yours sincerely,



Philip Wales

Registrar General for Northern Ireland & Chief Executive NISRA