

Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Finance  
Leas Phrìomh Mhinistear agus Rùnaire a' Chaibineit  
airson Ionmhas

Shona Robison MSP  
Seòna Robastan BPA



F/T: 0300 244 4000  
E: scottish.ministers@gov.scot

Kenneth Gibson  
Convener  
Finance and Public Administration Committee  
The Scottish Parliament  
Edinburgh  
EH99 1SP

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## Inquiry into Effective Scottish Government Decision Making

Dear Kenneth,

Thank you for your letter of 19 September, which reflects the Committee's consideration of the responses from myself and the Permanent Secretary, at its meeting of 12 September.

In your letter, you request further information across a range of subject areas and ask that the Committee is updated on these matters by the end of March 2024, ahead of the next annual evidence session with the Permanent Secretary.

Separately, for earlier response, your letter requested further information on the following:

- Where, through the established processes, Cabinet decisions are published, and an indication of publication timescales;
- Further information on the Scottish Policy and Research Exchange (SPRE) and how the Scottish Government uses its services (and details as to the extent to which the research output from SPRE requested by the Scottish Government is then made public); and
- Clarification of how the new approach to ministerial induction will be evaluated and the extent to details of this approach will be published.

In this letter, I set out a response to each of these points in turn.

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## Cabinet decision publication

I welcome the opportunity to provide the Committee with further clarification of the processes for raising awareness of Cabinet decisions as alluded to in my previous letter.

To be clear, for the reasons outlined in my previous letter, a bespoke list of formal decisions taken by Cabinet is not published. I confirmed that whilst fully supportive of freedom of information principles, the Government has consistently recognised that there is a need to maintain the appropriate private space required for Ministers and officials to consider often sensitive and difficult advice in order to reach well founded collective decisions. That process, as referenced in paragraph 2.1 of the Scottish Ministerial Code, is generally recognised to be of vital public interest, with Cabinet papers not subject to disclosure until a significant amount of time has elapsed.

The established processes to which I referred were the recognised means by which the Scottish Ministers communicate Government positions, policies and activities to Parliament and the public. This would include, for example, ministerial statements to Parliament, responses to questions from parliamentarians, the routine publication of statistics and data, the introduction or laying of legislation or the lodging of written material in Parliament. Ministers recognise and welcome their duty to be held accountable by Parliament, its committees, and individual members, in consequence of any such engagement.

## Scottish Policy and Research Exchange

I note the Committee's request for more information on SPRE, in addition to more detail as to how the Scottish Government uses its services. SPRE is a Scottish charitable incorporated organisation (SC051809) grant funded in part by the Scottish Government. SPRE works with a number of organisations - including the Scottish Parliament Information Centre (SPICe), Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA), the Cabinet Office and committees such as the Scottish Affairs Committee.

SPRE function as a knowledge broker, helping to make connections between experts in academia and policymakers, with the purpose of improving policy outcomes and research impact. No part of the grant is used for any activity or materials which are party political in intention.

SPRE do not provide research outputs *per se* (i.e. research papers); instead they help the Scottish Government in making connections and to build networks of expertise, particularly where they don't already exist; these networks, in turn, help

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policy makers access the academic literature in an accessible format via academic experts.

For example, SPRE helped the Scottish Government and Holyrood build their joint list of experts on the non-medical aspects of Covid. SPRE used its existing relationships with knowledge brokers inside universities to quickly identify a range of experts who could advise government on this emerging topic and quickly get the most authoritative experts in front of officials, and ministers. The SPRE model (ie using networks and connections rather than databases) works particularly well when something new comes along because it's not constrained by having data in databases that has become outdated. No other organisation in Scotland does this.

Following covid, we are keen to rebuild public engagement between academics and policy makers to help establish more robust relationships where conversations in safe spaces can happen. For example, we are planning an in-person event for early 2024, led by SPRE, which will include a general presentation and then surgery slots to facilitate networking and relationship building. This event is an opportunity to summarise the academic evidence in a themed area, thereby providing accessible briefing in a forum relevant to policy makers.

Other services provided by SPRE from which we benefit include:

- advertising Scottish Government requests for experts to contribute to commissioned projects, consultations etc., to their network of academics across all Scottish universities;
- advertising opportunities such as secondment and internships within Scottish Government to their network of academics;
- training session for academics on how to engage with policy makers;
- training session for academics on how to enhance the impact of their research in key policy areas.

In the future we hope to benefit by:

- brokering mentoring opportunities between academics and policy makers to improve mutual understanding of pressures and incentives.

SPRE has also helped the Scottish Affairs Committee find experts on the impact of Brexit on fisheries, Society of Local Authority Chief Executives and Senior Managers (SoLACE) to find scholars working on the likely impact of the National Care Service, and has played a role in helping the Cabinet Office review the use of Areas of Research Interest publications.

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## Ministerial induction

The induction process for newly appointed Ministers, which was introduced in March 2023, has been discussed with Ministers in order to gather feedback. This feedback will contribute to adjustments and improvements for future appointments and we will consider how these learnings can be shared.

As a government we are committed to supporting the building blocks of more effective decision making and of means of learning lessons to support the delivery of improved outcomes for the people of Scotland. As Deputy First Minister, I remain grateful to the Committee for leading the Inquiry and for providing further opportunities to contribute to this important area of work.

The Scottish Government remains committed to addressing the report's recommendations and core themes.

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