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The future of censuses and their role for national statistical systems**Beyond 2011 – the future of population statistics?****Note by the Office for National Statistics, United Kingdom***Summary*

The Office for National Statistics is currently considering options for the future production of small-area population and small-area socio-demographic statistics in England and Wales. The 'Beyond 2011' programme has been set-up to take a fresh look at alternative approaches that will meet future user needs for 'Census-type' data.

While innovative ways of carrying out a traditional field-work based Census will be assessed most of the work is focusing on making better use of existing administrative and other data sources. These data sources are improving and maturing and Beyond 2011 aims to assess whether, properly combined, they will be able to provide a viable and cost effective means of producing the required statistics in future. A full understanding of user needs, quality, costs and the public acceptability of any alternative approaches will all play a part in informing the recommendation on the way forward which will be made in 2014.

Any recommendations from the Beyond 2011 work will have implications for all population based statistics in the United Kingdom and perhaps, in the longer term, for the statistical system as a whole. This paper describes progress to date and future plans. Parallel developments in Scotland and Northern Ireland are also described briefly.

I. Background

1. The Census is a cornerstone of the United Kingdom statistical system and provides a wealth of consistent, comparable data at small areas and for a range of topics from the local to the national level. It provides a key source upon which other statistics are built and a benchmark against which many are judged.

2. All the signs are that the most recent Census in England and Wales (in March 2011) has been highly successful. The Office for National Statistics (ONS) is confident that a response rate of 94 per cent has been achieved nationally with over 80 per cent in every local authority – an improvement on the results in 2001. Across London, the estimated response rate in most boroughs is between 5 and 15 percentage points better than in 2001, and across the capital a response rate of over 90 per cent has been reached. An option for online completion was introduced for the first time and around 16 per cent of the 23 million census returns were completed this way.

3. Nonetheless the Census is becoming increasingly costly, and changes in society are making it more challenging to carry out. A more mobile population and the increasingly complex ways in which people live make the process of taking a Census more difficult – and the concept of a snapshot every 10 years, arguably, less relevant. At the same time improvements in technology and the growth of computerised records about people and services (referred to here as ‘administrative sources’) would seem to suggest an alternative approach; we should pull together what we already know about the population from these records and only supplement this where there are gaps.

4. In May 2010 Sir Michael Scholar, Chair of the United Kingdom Statistics Authority (UKSA) – which oversees statistical matters in the United Kingdom - wrote to the Minister for the Cabinet Office to say that:

“As a Board we have been concerned about the increasing costs and difficulties of traditional Census-taking. We have therefore already instructed the ONS to work urgently on the alternatives, with the intention that the 2011 Census will be the last of its kind.”

5. As a direct response to these issues and challenges ONS has established the Beyond 2011 programme to assess user need and investigate options for producing the population data required in England and Wales. Good progress has been made on establishing the programme and the list of options which are to be tested and assessed has been agreed.

II. The statistical options

6. In summary, ONS is considering eight options, falling into three broad groups:

- (a) ‘Census type’ options:
 - (i) Option 1: Traditional Census (long form to everyone);
 - (ii) Option 2: Long Form (to a sample) Short Form (to everyone else);
 - (iii) Option 3: Short Form Census plus Continuous Survey (US model);
 - (iv) Option 4: Rolling Census (over 5/10 year period);
- (b) Survey option:
 - (i) Option 5: Address Register plus Survey;

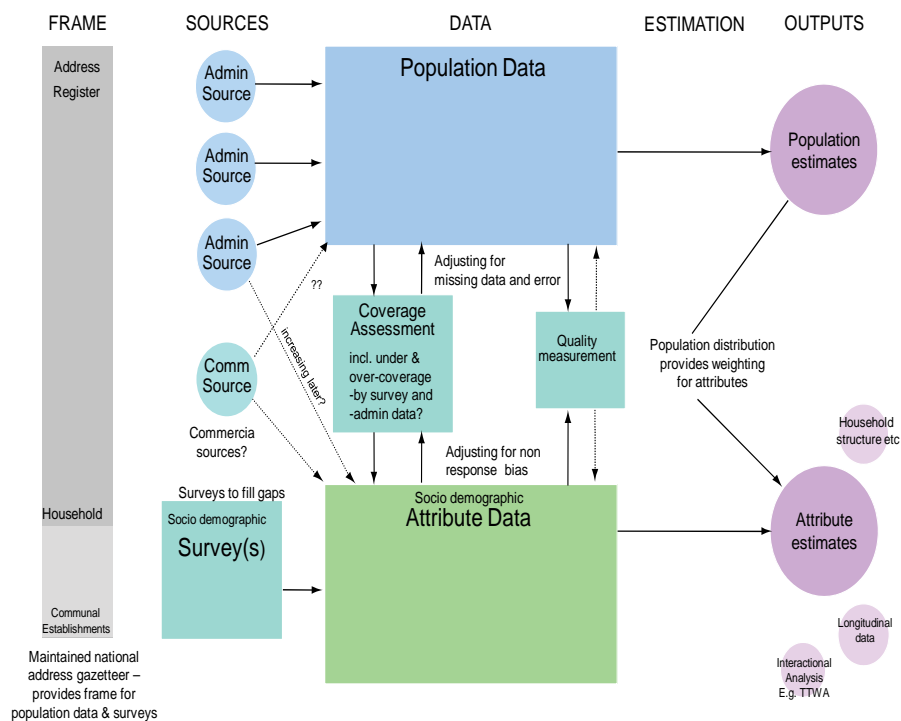
- (c) Administrative data + survey options:
 - (i) Option 6: Administrative Data - Aggregate;
 - (ii) Option 7: Administrative Data - Record level;
 - (iii) Option 8: Administrative Data – Intermediate.

7. Annex A includes a more detailed summary of the options being considered.

8. In practice, as the census and survey options are well understood already, research will focus primarily on the administrative data options. Figure 1 provides a summary view of how administrative sources and surveys might be used in combination to create population and attribute estimates.

9. A six-monthly cycle of research is proposed, with the options re-assessed and the business case updated at the culmination of each cycle. This will involve production of six-monthly research reports setting out what has been learned about the options, data sources and modelling methods. There will be five 'research cycles', with final recommendations being made in September 2014.

Figure 1 : Beyond 2011 – Administrative sources options - Overview



III. Criteria for assessing the statistical options

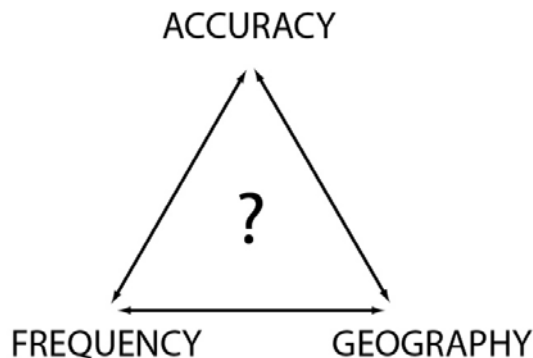
- 10. The options will be iteratively assessed against a set of criteria including:
 - (a) Fitness for purpose i.e. ability to meet user requirements including:
 - (i) Accuracy of the statistics produced;

- (ii) Frequency of the outputs e.g. updated annually, or every 5 or 10 years;
- (iii) Geographic level at which outputs can be produced;
- (iv) Consistency and comparability of the outputs across geographic areas;
- (b) Cost (both total cost and cost profile over time);
- (c) Technical and legal feasibility;
- (d) Risk;
- (e) Public burden and public acceptability.

11. Scoring the options against these criteria (which will be published, debated and agreed in advance will help to determine our final recommendation.

IV. The key trade-off: accuracy versus frequency versus geography

12. Our final recommendations will need to balance user needs against the other criteria above, but it is inevitable that there are going to be some compromises in the solution adopted. For any given topic and approach a more frequent supply of outputs may require us to compromise on a higher level of geography or lower quality – or vice versa. The requirement will vary by topic. Outputs for small areas every five years might be sufficient for some topics, while high level outputs every year might be a better solution for others.



13. The different statistical options that we are investigating have different strengths and weaknesses and we are consulting widely to help us understand users' priorities on this difficult three way trade-off.

V. Costs

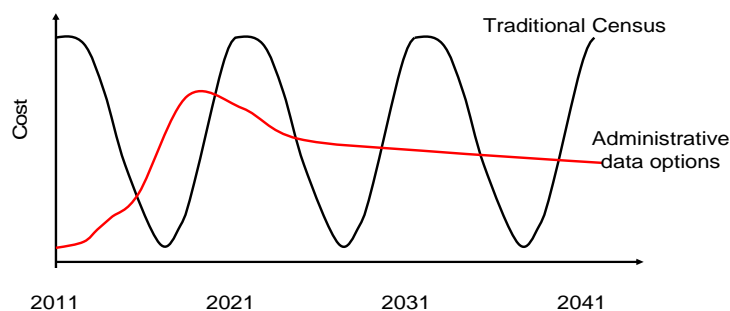
14. The cost of the research phase of the programme is £25m over four years. (2011/12 to 2014/15).

15. The cost of implementation of any solution recommended is currently unknown but there is clearly potential for the overall costs, and the cost profiles, of the different options to be substantially different. One possible relationship between the traditional census (Option 1) and the administrative data options (Options 6,7,8) is illustrated in Figure 2 below.

16. Key questions remain as to the height and shape of the peak in set-up costs of the administrative data options and the ongoing running costs. A key output of our research will be a better understanding of the total costs and cost profiles for the different options.

Figure 2

Potential (real terms) cost profiles of traditional census and admin data options



VI. Benefits - long term statistical benefit profiles

17. The Census¹ provides a benchmark for the current United Kingdom system of population and socio-demographic statistics and many statistical series are re-based every ten years to take account of census results.

18. However, the Census has a number of disadvantages - not least the fact that its detailed outputs are updated so infrequently (every ten years). This means that the accuracy and relevance of the data declines over the 'inter-censal' period. Moreover, due to the scale and complexity of census operations, there is a delay of approximately 18 months before detailed outputs are published. This can be a significant issue in areas experiencing rapid population change, or when the importance of a particular socio-demographic topic changes in response to new or emerging Government policies and priorities.

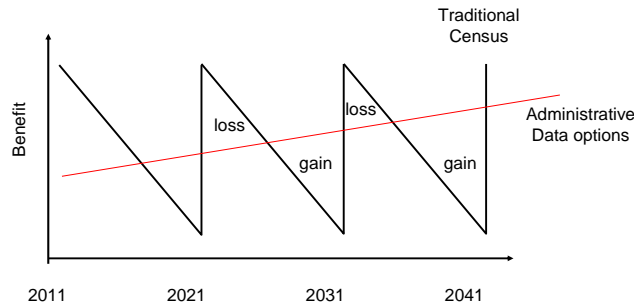
19. The benefits from a traditional census (Option 1) are realised in a cycle over a decade. At the point when the statistics are first published, they are a highly accurate but as the population changes through births, deaths and migration for example, they provide a less accurate picture of the population – and so less benefit.

20. Alternative methods, administrative data methods in particular, might never provide such an accurate or detailed snapshot of the population at a single point in time, but they do have the potential to provide more frequent updates, removing the decline in accuracy over the decade.

21. It may therefore be that the 'average' benefit derived over a decade is comparable to that of a traditional census, as shown in Figure 3. Clearly, as with Figure 2, this is only illustrative; the precise location of the profile is not known at this point. Understanding the benefit profile for each option over the full 10-year cycle will be a key part of the work undertaken over the next two years.

¹ Separate censuses are run in England and Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. Together these provide a complete picture of the United Kingdom.

Figure 3
Potential benefit profiles of census and administrative data options



VII. The role of stakeholder engagement

22. Effective and extensive engagement with stakeholders sits right at the core of Beyond 2011.

23. The programme has a wide and complex set of stakeholders across all sectors of government, and society – not least the established users of census statistics. A number of highly influential stakeholders and stakeholder groups have strong, potentially divergent, views on how the work of the programme should be taken forward. These views need to be fully understood, balanced against each other and fed into our approach to the assessment of options.

24. Ensuring that the needs and priorities of users are fully reflected in the solutions developed, and in the final recommendation, is also essential. A solution that is based on a poor understanding of what users need, both now and in coming years, is at risk of failing to deliver an effective approach – but also of missing a huge opportunity to re-think the way statistics are produced.

25. It is essential that key stakeholders understand that there are a range of views that need to be balanced and are assured that we are taking the right approach to this.

26. The opportunity to review the existing approach for the production of population and small area social statistics also brings with it risks relating to management of expectations. Whilst the programme will be fully open to new ideas, and will be looking for ways to extend outputs beyond those currently available, we again need to communicate clearly that any new approach will take time to implement, and will, at least initially, have limitations.

VIII. Stakeholder engagement strategy

27. Our approach to stakeholder engagement and user consultation will be based on three overarching principles, namely:

- (a) Listening to the views of users and other stakeholders;
- (b) Assessing the implication of options on different stakeholder groups; and
- (c) Communicating with stakeholders to inform, educate and manage expectations.

28. These three principles will vary in importance at different times through this first stage of the programme (up to and including 2014). Initially (until mid 2012) a strong emphasis will be on listening in order to develop a clear understanding of users' requirements and priorities. This will be achieved through consultation and individual engagement with users and key stakeholder groups. In subsequent stages (later in 2012 onwards) attention will focus more on considering the views of these groups and the wider public on the leading statistical options.

29. As the likely recommendations from the programme become clearer (from around mid 2013) more emphasis will be placed on informing and educating users – ensuring that they understand the implications of individual options in order that their expectations are managed. Through all stages of the process the methods and scoring being used to select and refine the options and recommendations will be communicated clearly and absolutely transparently.

IX. Public consultation

30. There will be two major public consultation exercises. The first was run from October 2011 to January 2012 giving users (both established and new) an opportunity to tell us about changes to their information requirements and priorities in order to inform our scoring and weighting of the evaluation criteria. This initial consultation exercise is being followed up by an ongoing series of more detailed and focused discussions with users, data suppliers, partners in the devolved administrations (Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland) and other key stakeholders.

31. A second public consultation will take place in 2013 to seek comments on the leading options and their relative merits in order to inform the final recommendations.

32. Public opinion and the public acceptability (or otherwise) of alternative solutions will play a key part in our criteria and we will be running surveys and focus groups to test public opinion as well as engaging with groups with a special interest in privacy and confidentiality.

X. Developments in the devolved administrations (Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland)

33. The Beyond 2011 work described above covers England and Wales, and the Government in Wales is working closely with ONS to review the options being considered in order to ensure that Welsh interests and requirements are properly reflected in any proposed way forward. The Welsh Government is also involved in a separate programme of data linking work seeking to make better use of administrative sources – including the SAIL (Secure Anonymised Information Linkage) project at Swansea University.

34. In Scotland, alternatives to the census are being considered as part of a much broader programme of work across the Scottish Government aimed at enhancing the whole national statistical system. Plans include combining several sources of data to trial a population spine and modelling for small area estimates. The quality of the data will be assessed against the 2011 Census. An investigation of potential improvements to a census based model is also planned.

35. A detailed review of the 2011 Census in Northern Ireland will begin after the initial census results are published. This review will include the examination of options for the future provision of socio-demographic statistics in Northern Ireland. Any proposals stemming from this work will be subject to consultation.

XI. Timetable

36. The first consultation, and supporting workshops aimed at capturing user needs and opinion ran from November 2011 to January 2012. A report on the outcomes of this consultation will be published during spring 2012 – and the results used to refine the options over the following months.

37. Work will continue testing and prototyping statistical options during 2012 and 2013 – and this will be supported by an ongoing dialogue with users. A second public consultation currently planned for summer 2013 will provide much more detail on the lead options and their relative benefits.

38. The Beyond 2011 programme will provide a final costed recommendation to the United Kingdom Statistics Authority in 2014.

39. We are very keen to share experience internationally and build on best practice developed elsewhere. To discuss further or for more details on any aspect of this work please contact us at: beyond2011@ons.gov.uk

ANNEX A

Statistical Options

1. This annex provides a high level summary of the main options that will be considered by the Beyond 2011 programme. Each of these options (and sometimes variations upon them) will be tested and assessed against an agreed set of criteria. All options including census based options will be assessed equally and transparently. Nonetheless ONS has considerable knowledge and experience of census and survey operations and so the research programme will initially focus more upon the administrative data-based options. In addition to research into the options outlined below we will be carrying out full assessments of the value that might be added to particular options by the use of key public datasets such as the electoral roll and the patient register.

2. The descriptions here are simplified in the interest of brevity. It is very possible that the solution adopted may use elements of more than one of these options – and we may recommend different solutions for different types of data.

I. Census type options

A. Option 1: traditional census

3. This option is a continuation of the current approach, that is by conducting a full census of the population at a single point in time (for example, most recently, in March 2011). Everyone completes a ‘long form’ questionnaire and the responses provide the basis for producing a count of the population and details on key characteristics. Historically a census has been taken every ten years in England and Wales, but some countries use a five-year cycle instead. Between censuses the results are supplemented by a series of mid-year population estimates which use the ‘cohort component method’ to take account of births, deaths and net migration. Social surveys on particular topics are used to fill in details, and update estimates as required in the inter-censal period.

B. Option 2: long form (to a sample) and short form (to everyone else) census

4. This option is similar to the current census approach in that information would be collected from the full population at a single point in time. A subset of the population would be asked to complete a traditional ‘long form’ census questionnaire. A ‘short form’ questionnaire collecting basic demographic, household and family information would be sent to the remainder of the population. Estimates would be created from a combination of the two sources. Population estimates would be updated using the existing cohort component method and socio-demographic statistics by social surveys. This approach was used in the USA up until 2000. Only in 1961 has a similar approach previously been used in England and Wales.

C. Option 3: short form census plus continuous survey

5. In this option, basic demographic, household and family information would be collected from the full population at a point in time through a short form census, that is a questionnaire covering the basic topics only. Population estimates would use the existing cohort component method in the inter-censal period. Socio-demographic statistics would be collected through a large scale continuous survey. A similar approach is now in use in the USA, with the 'American Community Survey' replacing the long form census element.

D. Option 4: rolling census

6. In this case, a census is conducted in different areas on a rolling basis. For example, 10 per cent of the country might be selected each year so that over a decade the whole population would be counted. Population estimates would be supplemented by the existing cohort component method, and socio-demographic statistics by social surveys. An approach of this kind has been implemented in France. Research has already been commissioned into the suitability of a rolling census approach in England and Wales.

II. Survey options

A. Option 5: address register plus survey

7. Data from an address register is combined with a survey to estimate the population and its characteristics. In its simplest form, the average number of people living at each address included in the survey is multiplied by the number of addresses in an area to give an estimate of the population in that area. Estimates could be updated on an annual basis, but a longer time period may be required to produce estimates for smaller geographic areas. Careful stratification can be used to increase the quality of estimates but this approach is very sensitive to the quality and consistency of the address register and local variations in household size. Administrative sources or a specific coverage survey would be used for quality assurance, or to supplement survey data to produce small area estimates.

III. Administrative data options

A. Option 6: administrative data – aggregate

8. In this option, aggregate data from a variety of administrative sources would be used to produce initial population counts. This would be achieved by a weighted average of the various sources, stratified by variables including age, gender and geography. Extra information, such as a Coverage Check Survey would be used to refine weights applied to the stratified initial counts. These weights would be regularly updated, producing annual population estimates. Data to produce socio-demographic statistics would be collected through survey(s), with potential for including information from public and private-sector administrative sources in the future.

B. Option 7: administrative data – record level

9. In this option record level administrative sources (including the address register) would be linked together to produce initial population counts. A regular coverage check

survey would be used to assess the accuracy of the initial count, measuring both under-coverage and over-coverage. An estimation process (such as dual system estimation, ratio estimation) would be used to derive weights to be applied to the initial population counts. Further statistical adjustment, for example through imputation, may also be possible. Data to produce socio-demographic statistics would be collected through survey(s), with potential for including information from administrative sources in the future.

C. Option 8: administrative data - intermediate

10. This option would make use of both aggregate and record level administrative data approaches. The aggregate administrative data approach would be used to produce initial population counts. Data from a Coverage Check Survey, measuring both under-coverage and over-coverage, would be linked to record level administrative data sources and the address register, in the coverage check areas only. An estimation process (dual system estimation, ratio estimation) would be used to derive weights to be applied to the initial population counts. Data to produce socio-demographic statistics would be collected through survey(s), with potential for including information from administrative sources in the future.

11. Almost all of these options will use an Address Register either as a source or as a frame for surveys. At the same time, all options are likely to be supported by independent quality checks such as coverage and quality surveys.
