



# Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General  
12 July 2022

Original: English

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## Economic Commission for Europe

### Conference of European Statisticians

#### Group of Experts on Population and Housing Censuses

##### Twenty-fourth Meeting

Geneva, 21–23 September 2022

Item 3 of the provisional agenda

#### **Delaying a census due to external crises: impacts and lessons for the future**

### **Ireland's Census: Covid-19 impacts and lessons learned**

#### **Note by Central Statistics Office, Ireland\***

##### *Summary*

Ireland's census was due to take place on 18 April 2021. When Covid-19 hit in March 2020, the Central Statistics Office (CSO) was about to start field recruitment. A decision was taken to delay the recruitment, and planning began to mitigate risks and still enable a census to be delivered in 2021. As the pandemic continued, risks escalated to the extent that a decision was taken in September 2020 to delay the census until 3 April 2022. This paper presents the impacts and lessons learned from this situation.

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\* Prepared by Eileen Murphy.

*Note:* The designations employed in this document do not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of the Secretariat of the United Nations concerning the legal status of any country, territory, city or area or of its authorities, or concerning the delimitation of its frontiers or boundaries.



## I. Introduction

1. Ireland usually undertakes a census every five years. The previous census took place on 24 April 2016. Planning for the 2021 census began in 2017. Traditionally the Irish census has involved hand delivery and collection of the census forms by a team of specially-recruited field enumerators. This has always produced a high response rate. The project was proceeding to plan with all milestones adhered to until March 2020.
2. The governance structure of the operation is a Census Management Group (CMG) consisting of the four census senior managers and the Director of Social Statistics. The group feeds into a Census Project Board (CPB) made up of expertise across the wider CSO support functions including Human Resources, Finance and Communications as well as external international census expertise. This board manages the risks of the project and escalates issues to the Management Board of the CSO when required.
3. On 12 March 2020, due to Covid-19, the government shut schools, offices etc. and everyone was asked to work from home where possible. The CSO had no history of blended working; people attended the office five days a week and there were limited supports in place to allow staff to work from home. It took a few weeks to set up the systems to enable staff to work from home. Initially, it was assumed that the pandemic would last for a short period and that after some time all would return to normal. So, in the first instance, decisions were taken to push back milestones and delay certain aspects of the work to see what the outcome of the pandemic would be. Planning also commenced to decide what might have to be put in place in order to continue with a traditional census field operation during a pandemic.

## II. Risks

4. An overall assessment was conducted of the ability to run the census while in the throes of a pandemic. This assessment considered four principal areas, as detailed in paragraph 5. This led to the identification of new risks to the project and escalations of already identified risks, and as time went on these risks increased. Government announcements about continued working from home and social distancing in work environments had a significant impact on the project. Processes had to be reviewed including recruitment, interviewing, training, warehouse work, map printing, field testing, system testing, premises etc. Everything became slower and put added pressure on already tight timelines.
5. Key risks identified were:
  - (a) *Field staff:*
    - (i) The ability to recruit staff who would be willing to undertake their roles and engage with the public during a pandemic;
    - (ii) The ability to carry out recruitment processes which took place in a face-to-face scenario interviewing 17,000 people, taking photos for identification cards, police vetting, signing contracts etc.;
    - (iii) The ability to carry out training for the 5,600+ field staff in a face-to-face environment;
    - (iv) The ability to acquire the level of personal protective equipment (PPE) required in a short timeframe, with global supply chain issues;
    - (v) Rolling out untried and untested processes in the field;
    - (vi) The ability to acquire additional regional office space all around the country to allow for social distancing;
    - (vii) Delays in the delivery of essential equipment as supply chains shut down;
  - (b) *Headquarters staff:*
    - (i) The requirement for essential staff to come onsite five days a week with all covid restrictions in place in the office;

- (ii) The ability to accommodate the required numbers of essential workers: firstly this was a capacity issue. It also brought additional risk if a significant number of key staff became ill;
- (iii) The ability to recruit the additional staff who would be willing to undertake their roles in the office five days a week;
- (c) *Public compliance/response:*
  - (i) The public acceptability of conducting a census during a pandemic was considered. The uncertainty of the public response to an enumerator calling at their door to deliver a census form and ask them to participate in the census was identified as a key risk as well as the overall response rate to the census itself;
- (d) *Governance/budget:*
  - (i) A freeze on recruitment and budget uncertainty due to diversion of government resources to pandemic funding;
  - (ii) The cost implications of external contractual obligations had to feed into the decision-making process, along with the additional staff costs arising from any postponement;
  - (iii) A review of risks to the overall project was undertaken and additional oversight meetings convened at both CMG and CPB level, with more frequent project updates.

### III. Impacts and mitigations

6. By the summer of 2020, the risk register of the project had risen to a level where the senior managers of the census deemed it necessary to hold an emergency meeting with the Census Project Board. The decision of this board was that a recommendation should be made to the Management Board of the CSO that due to the unprecedented number of serious risks to the project, a discussion should be had on the possibility of postponing the census.
7. The office also liaised directly with the public health authorities to seek advice on whether it would be prudent to continue or to postpone the census. Discussions around external contract implications and general budget implications of postponement were reviewed.
8. The Management Board reflected on the advice and further investigated the options of postponing the census either by six months or by one year. The European Union (EU) requirement to hold a census before the end of 2021 fed into this discussion. It was eventually decided that it would not be prudent to postpone the census by six months, as it was highly likely that there would be no substantial change in the prevailing conditions in that timeframe. Following a full review of all the circumstances, a recommendation was made to government to postpone the census by one year. A government memorandum was prepared and a CSO communications plan was developed to explain the risks around holding a census during a pandemic, while ensuring the safety of both the CSO staff and the public. The government made the decision to delay the census in September 2020 and set the new census date as 3 April 2022.
9. Additionally, a separate project was put in place to establish whether a population estimate could be made using administrative data sources. Some of the census team were tasked with analyzing the many administrative datasets that the CSO collates to see if it might be possible to create a population count from these data sources.
10. The following steps were taken to mitigate the risks identified in section II:
  - (a) *Field staff:*
    - (i) All the field recruitment processes were redesigned and moved online. Interviews were held virtually with required documentation uploaded to a specially-designed portal. The whole process became virtually paperless;

- (ii) Training of over 20,000 classroom hours for the 5,600+ field staff was redesigned to be provided online;
  - (iii) PPE was acquired in time for the revised census date;
  - (iv) Regional officers were moved to a mainly home working environment, rather than regional offices;
  - (v) There were some issues with recruiting the volume of staff required and with staff succumbing to covid during the live field operation;
  - (vi) The office also continued to liaise with the public health authorities to ensure any processes required for census would be compliant with all current public health advice;
- (b) *Headquarters staff:*
- (i) Revised requirements for onsite attendance were put in place with social distancing;
  - (ii) Only essential workers were brought onsite, to stay within capacity limits;
  - (iii) Strict protocols were put in place for covid incidences;
  - (iv) Additional staff were recruited for essential attendance onsite, but numbers were below those envisaged;
- (c) *Public compliance/response:*
- (i) The delay to the census meant that conditions had improved significantly when the live field operation took place;
  - (ii) Communication was identified as a key way to engage the public and to mitigate against any covid-related reluctance. The census team settled on a message of 'Be Counted' and emphasized the importance of the census in delivering key policy decisions around housing, health, transport, education etc. For the first time the form included a 'time capsule' where people could write a voluntary message to future generations, as our census forms are stored securely and released 100 years after census night. This also proved an excellent way to engage the public, and gave further opportunities to reach out across multi-media to encourage census responses;
- (d) *Governance/budget:*
- (i) A review began of the immediate census budget needs and the changes to the overall costs of the census project. Negotiations were undertaken both with the government finance authorities and with the individual census contractors to secure the delivery of the project in the new timeframe, while minimizing the additional costs and ensuring value for money;
  - (ii) Once the additional contractual and staffing resources were delivered, the census was able to proceed successfully within budget;
  - (iii) Revised project milestones were agreed in order to deliver the updated project systems and processes within the new timeframe;
- (e) *European Union requirements:*
- (i) Engagement took place with Eurostat to develop an agreed methodology to ensure that the relevant census information could be submitted from Ireland for the correct time period.

## IV. Lessons learned

11. The governance structures in a project of this size are of key importance. Having the relevant expertise in the Census Management Group and the Census Project Board meant that a thorough 360-degree review was given to the unique circumstances that developed, and this detailed oversight gave clarity to the CSO Management Board in making their decisions.
12. Although it was absolutely necessary for the recruitment and training of staff to take place in an online environment, we feel it was sub-optimal in some instances. Hence, although the use of online approaches will have a place in future, where circumstances allow some key elements of the processes should be held in person. From engaging with our international colleagues, we feel we should continue to deliver our recruitment in-house, since outsourcing can cause more problems than it solves.
13. From our interactions with other countries that proceeded with censuses in 2020/2021, we see that the provision of an online response channel meant that the limited field force required for Non-Response Follow Up (NRFU) gave them the confidence to proceed with their censuses, even in the teeth of a pandemic. Some countries even reported a pandemic ‘bounce’ in response rates as people were generally at home on census night.
14. As has been experienced more generally, it is becoming more difficult to engage with people and to continue to obtain the high response rates required to ensure a successful census. Providing a multi-mode option for people to engage with the census allows for wider accessibility and engagement.
15. Examining administrative data to deliver or improve the quality of a census has opened up new options to the office.

## V. Conclusion

16. The decision to delay the census by a year was the correct one for Ireland. The CSO would not have been able to deliver the high-quality census that was produced in 2022, if it had proceeded in 2021. Following on from a pandemic, it would be imprudent to plan to deliver the same traditional field methodology for the next census.

17. When the decision was taken to delay the census by a year, it meant that timelines for future censuses also had to be reassessed. The CSO Management Board decided to convene a team to carry out a feasibility report on delivery and timelines for future censuses. The recommendation of that group was that an online response option be provided for the next census and that it should take place in 2027. In early 2022, the government endorsed the recommendation, and funding for the online platform element of the project was acquired under the EU’s National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP).

18. The project to establish an administrative population estimate delivered a publication called ‘Irish Population Estimates from Administrative Data Sources’ (IPEADS) in November 2021. It gives details of the population by geography. However, it currently does not contain the attribute data required for a census. It is being examined as an option for future annual population estimates required by the EU. It will also be taken into consideration for decisions around the future of census-taking in Ireland for the 2027 census and beyond.

19. Preliminary results for the 2022 Census were successfully published on 23 June 2022 and the proof of concept for the online response option for the 2027 census is at an advanced stage.