



The Census and future provision of population statistics in England and Wales Public consultation

Response by the Market Research Society (MRS) and the MRS Census and Geodemographics Group (CGG)

December 2013

Background

The Market Research Society (MRS) is the world's leading authority on research and business intelligence. MRS is for all those involved in generating creative and intellectual capital from marketing sciences, insight, research and analytics. With members in more than 60 countries, MRS represents, regulates and promotes these sectors providing world leading training, qualifications, content and skills. The UK is the second largest market in the world for these research services. Full details about MRS and its activities are available at: <http://www.mrs.org.uk>

The Census and Geodemographics Group (CGG) is an MRS advisory board, founded in 1989 to represent the interests of this important activity. The CGG has specialists in market and social research, retail site location, market and database analysis, as well as Census distributors and academic researchers. The CGG is involved with Census developments through representation on the ONS Business and Professional Interests Advisory Group, and with wider matters through membership of the Statistics User Forum as well as through an extensive network of contacts in the market and social research sector.

Preamble questions

Are you responding on behalf of an organisation, or as an individual?

An organisation

Organisation name Market Research Society
Contact name Debrah Harding
Email address Debrah.harding@mrs.org.uk
Telephone number +44 (0) 207 490 4911

Which sector do you primarily work or study in?

Private and public sectors: service industry

What are your main uses of population and housing statistics? (Tick all that apply)

Policy development	No
Policy monitoring and evaluation	Yes
Research – academic	No

Research - family history	No
Research – marketing	Yes
Research – policy	Yes
Research – social	Yes
Research - social history	No
Resource allocation	Yes
Service planning and delivery	Yes
Bidding for funds	No
Other planning purposes	No
Other research and analysis	Yes

Other: please specify

Marketing services, social marketing, direct marketing, property planning, retail location planning

Main Questions

1. General comments

Q1: What are your views of the different Census approaches described in this document?

The Market Research Society (MRS) and the MRS Census & Geodemographics Group (CGG) strongly prefer option A, a traditional Census conducted mainly online.

Our main reasons are:

- We regard data for small areas – Census Output Areas - as essential to most private sector applications of Census data, since these largely rely on the ability to distinguish local areas and their populations from each other at as fine a level as possible. Option A can provide small area data of the same high quality and fine geographical accuracy as the current Census. Small area data in option B is however severely curtailed, with very little or no data available at a geographical level equivalent to current Census Output Areas.
- Provisional estimates of the economic benefits of the two options, developed by ONS in consultation with MRS and other experts, suggest that Option A has a value of around £367m per annum to the private sector (£3.67bn over the ten-year lifetime of the Census), while Option B would have a corresponding value of around £210m (£2.1bn over a ten-year period). These estimates indicate that the private sector value alone of Option A is more than sufficient to justify its projected £625m cost over ten years, and the difference between the values is sufficient to justify the choice of Option A over Option B.
- The risks associated with option A are likely to be much lower than would be involved in a rapid transition to option B, which is a radically new and untested approach to Census taking in the UK.

MRS and the CGG would encourage and welcome continued research and development of the use of administrative data in addition to the Option A Census. This has the potential to significantly improve population estimates, and possibly other demographic estimates, in

intercensal periods. We also hope that ONS become able to publish a wide range of raw, aggregated, non-disclosive administrative statistics as open data at small area (Output Area) level.

2. Uses and benefits of population and housing statistics

Q2: Please specify any significant uses of population and housing statistics that we have not already identified.

The range of uses of Census data in the commercial sector is rather wider than described in the ONS document *Summary of the uses of census information* (2013: Section 2.4), which describes the use of Census data for store location, direct marketing, market research and geo-demographic classifications.

In addition to these applications, Census data and enriched Census information is widely added to commercial customer databases for use in a diverse range of behavioural and attitudinal modelling and analysis applications. It is also used in the targeting of digital and social marketing, as well as in more traditional forms of direct marketing. It is widely used to support commercial property investment assessments and decisions.

In addition to the variables highlighted in the ONS document, wide use is made of housing variables such as house type, number of rooms, and number of bedrooms. Workplace statistics are also used to give estimates of worker and workday population, and origin-destination statistics to provide information on worker commuting flows.

The Census is widely used as the underpinning denominator to measure the incidence a whole host of sub-groups and characteristics. This works well, even though users know that the data ages with time, because the denominator is based on the whole population – so has very low sampling error – at a single point in time across the whole country.

If option B were to be chosen, the denominator either would no longer be available or would be survey-based and so would have large sampling errors (except possibly for age and gender), which could result in money and resources being wasted due to unreliable research being produced. Also, the characteristics would be based on aggregated data over varying numbers of years and locations.

Q3: Please specify any significant additional benefits of population and housing statistics that we have not already identified.

Benefits arise from the commercial and public-interest value of the applications described in our answer to Q2. Accurate assessment of commercial property investment decisions, such as getting the right size and kind of shopping centre in the right place with the right kind of transport links to the surrounding population, for example, has considerable benefit both to the private sector and to the general public interest.

5.3 Impact of different Census approaches on statistical uses

Q4: What would the impact be if the most detailed statistics for very small geographic areas and small population groups were no longer available? High, medium, low, or no impact?

There would be a very high impact on many private and public sector applications.

Q4.1 If medium or high, please give further information.

Commercial use of Census data depends on small area statistics being available. Output Area statistics are valuable, but areas such as Lower Super Output Areas (LSOAs) fail to reflect much of the demographic variation at the level of small areas, and are of much less value.

If Census data were no longer available for Output Areas, a certain amount of substitution may be possible from other sources, but this may lead commercial operations to become dependent upon a few big private sector data owners or data integrators, and much of the economic benefit of Census data being available as open data would be lost.

Provisional estimates of the economic benefits of the two options, developed by ONS in consultation with MRS and other geodemographics experts, indicate the following levels of benefit of the Census to the private sector:

Industry Sector	Option A value £m per annum	Option B value £m per annum
Geo-demographers	32	17.6
Housing Planning Consultancy	15	8.2
Market Research	70	57.7
Direct Marketing	38	13.0
Retail	50	27.5
Leisure	10	5.5
Utilities	27.5	15.1
Financial Sector	125	68.7
Total	367.5	213.3

These figures indicate that Option A has a value of around £3.67bn over the ten-year lifetime of the Census, while Option B would have a corresponding value of around £2.1bn over a ten-year period. These estimates indicate that the private sector value alone of Option A is sufficient to justify the cost of a Census, and the difference between the values is sufficient to justify the choice of Option A over Option B.

Q5: What would the additional benefit be if more frequent (i.e. annual) statistics about population characteristics were available for areas like Local Authorities and Electoral Wards? High, medium, low, or no impact?

Improved annual estimates of population and household counts would have a medium / high value.

Annual updates to other geodemographic characteristics at this level of geography would have a low value, since it is not generally possible to model these changes back down to small areas with any degree of accuracy.

Q5.1 If medium or high, please give further information.

Annual estimates of population and households: the Mid-Year estimates up to 2010 were not accurate for all local authorities, and had substantial errors in some London authorities in 2010. Improved accuracy in annual population estimates at any geographical level would allow more accurate analysis, particularly for location-based applications such as store location and property investment.

5.4 Impact of different Census approaches on historical research

Q6: Please specify any significant uses of Census information for historical research that we have not already identified.

Not applicable

Q7: What advantages or disadvantages for genealogical or historical research can you see from a move to a solution based on archiving administrative data sources?

Not applicable

5.5 Managing risks

Q8: What are your views of the risks of each Census method and how they might be managed?

The summary given by ONS of the risks involved seems reasonable. We believe however that whatever approach is taken to managing risks inherent in option B, it will remain a higher risk option than Option A. Option B is a radical and untested change of methodology, while option A stays close to methods that have been used in the past. There is no real experience in the UK of the risks, or benefits, of conducting compulsory surveys, which are samples of a few households in every hundred, even if geographically clustered for publicity purposes. A compulsory 10% sample Census was undertaken in 1966, but our understanding is that this was not considered an unqualified success.

Q9: Are there any other issues that you believe we should be taking into account?

If option A is chosen, as is our strong preference, MRS and the MRS CGG believe that ONS should in addition continue to research and develop the use of administrative data. This work has the potential to improve updates to Census data between Censuses, and it may also give ONS a wider range of options that can be considered post-2021.

MRS and MRS CGG believe the first priority in this area is to improve the accuracy and reliability of annual population and household estimates, preferably at as small a geographical level as possible. The second priority is to provide improved small-area estimates of basic demographic characteristics, although it is recognised that the range of variables that can be updated by this kind of method is likely to be rather narrow.

MRS and MRS CGG would also encourage and welcome the publication of raw small-area aggregations of administrative datasets whenever this is possible within constraints on disclosure of personal information. These do not need to be modelled back to Census variables, or adjusted to represent the whole population, to be useful as indicators of the demographic nature or change in an area. The Output Area aggregations of counts of benefit claimants already published by DWP, for example, are a valuable indicator of characteristics and change in small areas, even though they do not directly reflect standard definitions of unemployment.