

## Treasury Sub-Committee Inquiry - Counting the Population

### Evidence from the Census and Geodemographics Group of The Market Research Society

#### Executive Summary

S1. This evidence comes from market researchers and geodemographers, professionals who collect and analyse statistical information.

S2. Good quality population figures are a key part of running many organisations and businesses in the UK, both in the private and public sectors, showing the number and nature of customers, and helping to serve them efficiently from national down to local level.

S3. The Census provides the bedrock which underpins much of the analysis, thus a successful 2011 Census is paramount. We have been generally well served by official statistics, but, with changes in society and users' rising expectations, traditional sources and approaches are now strained, and the inquiry is apt and welcome.

S4. We have addressed each of the Sub-Committee's areas of concern, and our **top priorities** are

- the creation of a national address register as a matter of great urgency as the basis for the 2011 Census and population estimates, open and accessible for consistent application in all data collection, analysis and output
- provision of a modest addition to the 2011 Census budget to provide space on the form for essential but well tried questions, to give the best return on the overall investment
- the continued production of official population estimates for

areas below the local authority level to help understanding of very varied local conditions and change, although clearly getting the figures right for local authorities is the highest priority

- a greater emphasis on plans for output throughout statistical operations, with the simple aim of maximizing value through accessibility in the public domain
- taking opportunities to push forward use of new sources such as administrative data
- action by the new ONS Board to ensure that the wider user community plays a full part in shaping the statistical programme.

S5. We have been considering our evidence in conjunction with that from other organisations and user groups through the Royal Statistical Society's Statistics Users Forum, and we share and support many of the views of the Association of Census Distributors and the Demographics User Group, as well as views expressed in the recently published Statistics Commission report on managing risks in the 2011 Census.

## **Detailed Submission**

### **The Market Research Society and its Census and Geodemographics Group**

1. The Market Research Society (MRS) is the world's largest association representing providers and users of market, social, and opinion research. The MRS 2007 annual survey of the UK market research industry showed that total industry revenue increased by 2.4 per cent during 2006 reaching a value of £1.353bn. The UK is the second largest market and social research market in the world.

Full details on MRS and its activities are available via:  
<http://www.mrs.org.uk>

2. Geodemographics can be defined broadly as 'the analysis of

people by where they live', and involves analysing demographic data within small geographical areas to serve a wide range of clients in the public and private sectors. The annual turnover of geodemographic activities in the UK has been estimated at £200 millions alone. The Census and Geodemographics Group (CGG) is an MRS committee and was founded in 1989 to represent the interests of this important activity, and to advise the MRS. The CGG has specialists in market research, retail site location, market and database analysis, as well as census distributors and academic researchers.

3. 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 contact in the market research industry

### **Official statistics and non Government use**

4. Good quality population figures are vital to geodemographic analysis now and in future. It is founded on the availability of robust small area statistics - especially from censuses - and, whilst much 'in house' information now complements the official statistics, there is no foreseeable alternative source for the counts and estimates of the whole population and its characteristics.

5. Geodemographers have been generally well served by the official statistics. However, with changes in society coupled with statistics users' rising expectations putting traditional methods of information collection under strain, a wide ranging inquiry is appropriate and welcome.

6. The CGG is firmly of the view that Government is in a uniquely advantageous position to collect and improve statistical information for all users. It is also in the position to benefit the whole information economy by making statistical output freely available at marginal cost and with minimal restrictions on its use. The general moves since 2000 to this approach should be

given every encouragement.

7. It is, however, very evident to those like the CGG involved in the plans for official statistics that the rate and extent of recent changes in UK society are challenging the traditional methods of collecting statistical information suited to a more stable society. Risks from use of dated or inaccurate information are growing. It is, for example, more than twenty years since the census organisations began to examine alternatives to decennial censuses, and it is arguable that progress has not matched changing circumstances. The Inquiry is therefore a timely opportunity to push forward improvement in traditional methods, new sources such as administrative data, and in delivery of output.

## **Topics raised by the Sub-Committee**

### **Uses and definitions**

#### ***Uses of population estimates***

8. The geodemographics community needs not only good quality periodic benchmarks of population numbers and characteristics at levels from the UK to the neighbourhood, but also regularly updated estimates for the same areas, as a basis for operating businesses and services effectively, particularly to help anticipate and meet the differing requirements of specific local populations.

9. Serious inadequacies in benchmarks or estimates, particularly if selective in terms of area or type of people, undermine the whole geodemographic approach. Indeed, in the absence of official estimates, the media research industry developed its own annual population estimates at postcode sector level (through the Joint Industry Council for Population Standards). The introduction of official sub-local authority estimates from 2001 onwards, albeit on an experimental basis, is therefore welcome.

## ***Definitions***

10. Counts of the usually resident population are generally the most appropriate base for geodemography. Changes to definitions, variation in and between sources, and revisions to figures over recent decades have not always been helpful. The objective of the 'One Number Census' set for 2001, but not in the end achieved, should be paramount.

## ***UK consistency***

11. The basic population counts are sufficiently consistent throughout the UK for geodemographic purposes, and compare reasonably well with the statistics available in similar countries. But unhelpful variation, going beyond the differing needs of the devolved UK administrations, persists in content and dissemination, for example there is no single official source for UK-wide local statistics on the Web or in other electronic form.

## **The role of the Census**

### ***Contribution of the Census***

12. The main value of the Census is as a benchmark, still uniquely so at small area level. It is best when well tried methods are used to deliver straightforward results giving a snapshot of the country and showing relationships between key characteristics of the population. A specific value of the Census to market and other survey based research is for organising fieldwork and weighting results to make samples representative of populations as a whole.

13. In current circumstances more frequent full Censuses might not be cost effective, and could deflect investment from development of alternative sources. Moreover, methods for intermediary sample or rolling censuses are undeveloped, although more frequent full counts would be welcome by users if there were no detrimental consequences to other sources.

14. The principal objective for 2011 must therefore be as complete as possible coverage of the population with avoidance of bias, with the means provided to detect and correct any under-coverage and bias.

### ***The 2007 test census***

15. In simple terms the test has shown that even well tried methods will be stretched to the limit by the nature of contemporary society.

16. The prospects of a good Census in 2011 remain in some doubt. Response rates in the 2007 test were at a historic low, quite possibly making it insufficiently representative of populations as a whole for a test of more contentious aspects. Moreover, major question marks remain over the availability of an adequate address framework for the proposed mail out of forms. Such concerns are set out in more detail a recent report by the Statistics Commission on managing the risks of the 2011 Census, and we are sure that this will be considered in the Inquiry.

17. In these circumstances use of the internet, with further unresolved issues of coverage and of security of personal data, and with no report of any large scale trial, would be a risk too far, despite the attractions of instant data capture.

### ***A fit for purpose address framework***

18. The first step towards ensuring a good Census in 2011, and an absolute priority, is a better address framework than the one-off compromise currently planned for the Census alone.

19. Such a framework must be accurate and properly updated as a record of physical places where people live, and must be openly available as a consistent base for all applications in the Census and elsewhere. None of this basic and essential information should be part of trading regimes.

20. For the greatest benefit there must be no restrictions on the use of output derived from the processing of address locations, likely for example to be a very large part of the output from the 2011 Census where coordinate (geographical) references which are the intellectual property of Ordnance Survey - a trading fund - will be used to allocate data to areas for the presentation of statistics. Charges should simply recover marginal additional costs.

21. The long running and persistent failure of Ordnance Survey, the Royal Mail, and the local authorities to work together for the creation of a national address framework is well known, and needs to be resolved at an appropriately high level where matters of funding and intellectual property can be decided for the benefit of the country as a whole.

### ***Response rates and question content***

22. The public and media must not perceive the Census as an unreasonable burden. Long term PR from ONS and Census users about the value of the Census can help, but primarily the Census must not be a vehicle for over elaborate or modish methods or questions. In particular the Census does not offer a prime solution to the challenge of measuring rapidly evolving patterns of migration and immigration.

23. There are well established guidelines which should be used to design successful self completed Census forms. Questions should be succinct and objective, with purpose clear to respondents, and contention minimized. The Census is not an 'omnibus' survey for single short term issues, questions must have value over the long term for all user sectors. Topics should relate to one another to show relationships between characteristics. Significant value is added if further key characteristics such as social groupings can be derived by combining data from existing topics without placing a direct burden on the public.

24. Our view is that, provided that the questions are clear and non-contentious, then increasing the length of the 2011 Census

form should not significantly impact on the response rate. ONS have already illustrated this through their testing of four page against three page questionnaires.

### ***Loss of valuable question topics***

25. The risk of losing valuable topics is well illustrated by the fact that the number of new question topics under consideration means that established labour market topics, including industry of occupation, hours worked and qualifications, are under serious threat of being excluded unless additional space is provided. These topics are the basis for widely used social classifications such as NS SEC and Social Grade, and add significantly to area classifications for geodemographic analysis. They also help in organising sample surveys.

26. We suggest that ONS should also consider including 'proxy questions' for topics that would otherwise take up disproportionate space on the Census form, for example 'age at end of full-time education' could be an acceptable surrogate topic for 'qualifications', being easy to answer and taking up much less space on the form.

27. The cost of increasing the form length from three to four pages per person, which we understand to be some £22 million, is relatively small in comparison with the gain in benefit from the additional topics and is an investment which we feel Government departments would find well worthwhile and be able to support. This would be a small addition to the 2011 Census budget to permit a combination of questions giving the best return on the overall investment.

### ***UK consistency***

28. Geodemographic analyses are generally undertaken on a UK-wide basis, and benefit substantially from the availability of a consistent core of census questions and local statistics. The Census Acts (Section 4.2) allow users to commission output, and in fact the vast majority of 2001 Census output was

produced under this arrangement. So consistency is in part a reflection of common needs among users, provided that there is sufficient consistency in questions and coded input, and provided that arrangements made by the three census organisations for commissioning and disseminating output cover UK wide needs.

### ***Output***

29. Our strongly held view as users is that there should be a greater emphasis on plans for accessible output throughout Census preparations, and indeed in all statistical operations, with the simple notion that the Census is only worthwhile if results are disseminated effectively, and with the clear aim of maximizing value through availability.

30. The statistical results from the 2001 Census are effectively in the public domain for all to use. This is in line with Treasury policy on boosting the UK knowledge economy by giving access to data where costs have already been met for Government purposes, and was implemented through the Treasury Invest to save programme.

31. Census output must continue to be freely available for use without restriction. In addition, boundaries in digital form, which are integral to the use and presentation of the output, must also be in the public domain.

### **Mid-year population estimates**

#### ***Methodology and accuracy***

32. The CGG does not have particular expertise or evidence in this area, but it does have a major interest in up-to-date population estimates and projections for small areas, and we strongly support the continued production of official estimates for a range of small areas below local authority level. Our understanding that this is to be part of the next four year ONS

programme of work, and this is welcome.

33. Although the prime concern is getting accurate estimates at local authority level, many need up to date information on the widely varying circumstances within the authorities. Any methodological improvements should therefore be for a coherent as possible package at all geographical levels. In addition, the sub local authority estimates made by ONS, which currently have the status of experimental statistics, should be established as permanent series of National Statistics without delay.

### ***Improvement***

34. We suggest that a better address framework, discussed in paragraphs 18-21 above, might offer a way of improving estimates of population numbers and change. As the effective tracking of the most mobile and elusive people may well remain problematic, it may be productive to see what improvements could be gained for surveys, administrative databases and estimates by the use of single source comprehensive and up to date 'hard' information on all places where people live. For example, changes in 'stock of dwellings' would indicate population changes and would also identify targets for additional surveys. An opportunity to do this arises from preparations for the 2011 Census.

35. There should be an urgent investigation of whether the address framework which the Census requires could also offer a basis for surveys and estimates of migration and population in the reasonably near future, within the timetable of the 2011 Census.

### ***Revisions***

36. Typically, revisions do not significantly change geodemographic analyses, but the impact of change on information systems can be unwelcome and an ideal position would be minimal revision.

## **The role of survey and administrative data**

37. The CGG has limited information on the suitability and availability of administrative data sets and suspects that coverage of the more mobile and elusive people, which is the most challenging aspect of estimating population, may be deficient in many such sources. Nevertheless, the bases are current and comprehensive, and we see considerable scope for increasing statistical output from records such as national insurance, benefits and health.

38. However, sample surveys have the advantage of being purpose built, and we feel that they should play an important part in the estimation of the number and characteristics of local populations through the application of analytics and modelling techniques. Cuts in funds for surveys should be reversed.

39. The potential offered by a better address framework is covered in paragraphs 18-21 above.

## **Cooperation with stakeholders**

40. The geodemographics community has reasonable relations through annual meetings with the National Statistician and through the Census advisory machinery, although we feel that engagement through the latter has been detrimentally diminished recently. The ONS workload has meant that different sectors, with differing requirements from the Census, have shared advisory group meetings. We also feel that the way in which relations with stakeholders is managed tends to be divisive, for example the needs of central government departments are perceived as being handled separately (and given higher priority). This may put at risk across-the-board user support for statistical operations such as the 2011 Census.

41. We therefore suggest that there should be action by the Statistics Board and Executive Office to ensure that the wider

user community plays a full part in shaping statistical programmes. It must recognise the economic benefit and importance of good official population statistics particularly for the private sector. Many information needs are in fact common between sectors, and the Board must ensure that relationships between producers and users are not divisive.