

Statistics user name and organisation:

MRS Census & Geodemographics Group and Association of Census Distributors

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We would like this assessment to be considered for all three of the Census Offices' as a whole, i.e. ONS, NRS, and NISRA. We think that consistent UK outputs and co-operation are key to a successful Census.

Q1 Tell us a bit about your organisation

This response comes from two organisations, the Market Research Society (MRS) and the Association of Census Distributors (ACD), in order to give views from the supplier and user sides of the industry.

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 those sectors providing world leading training, qualifications, content and skills.

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 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 contact in the market and social research sector.

The Association of Census Distributors (ACD) was formed in 1993 as the Association of Census Agencies. The name was changed after the 2001 Census, when the term Census Agency was dropped by ONS.

The original purpose of setting up the ACD was to provide a forum for its members to meet for the purpose of negotiating with OPCS, the forerunner of ONS as the collector of the national Census of Population. Subsequently the ACD also represented its members in discussions with other data providers, such as Ordnance Survey and Royal Mail.

Current members of the ACD are:

- Acxiom
- Beacon Dodsworth
- CACI Information Solutions
- CallCredit Information Group
- Experian
- Pitney Bowes Software

Q2 What statistics from the Census do you use?

The Census provides essential statistics on residents and workplaces for small areas, a unique range of topics, and consistent and often UK-wide coverage (but it can be up to 13 years out of date).

Statistics at Output Area level are absolutely essential for:

- Creating ad hoc catchments
- Geodemographic classifications
- Applying models to customer databases
- Understanding the customers of a business

Q3 What are these statistics used for?

Census statistics are used to provide information to answer business questions:

- Which areas are best for our new stores?
- What products should we offer in each particular outlet?
- Who are our best customers and prospects and where are they?
- Which areas & people should we survey?
- How do I find more of my types of customers?

They inform decisions about the targeting of investments of certainly hundreds of millions, and probably billions, of pounds every year.

Q4 Where do you access the statistics from?

CGG members access 2011 Census statistics for the UK from:

- ONS Census website
- ONS's Neighbourhood Statistics website
- NOMIS website
- NRS Census website
- NISRA Census website

Access has been very good and predominately downloaded for each office's website

Q5 In what format do you use the statistics?

We use Bulk CSV flat file format which is essential to using these data.

Q6 How easy is it to find the statistics you need?

Pretty easy. We could get put on ONS/NRS/NISRA e-mailing lists which meant that we got notified when any update was available with relevant links to download these data. The NOMIS and NRS websites are particularly good and well structured for accessing data.

The only output which wasn't always obvious was the Commissioned tables which tended to be stored in an ad-hoc location and not in similar areas to the standard output tables.

Q7 How helpful is the format of presentation by ONS, NRS, and NISRA for the statistics you use?

Overall it has been good. The key elements to us have been;

- Bulk CSV flat file format for the release of data and Meta data.
- Excel for the table specifications and notifications of updates to data.
- Downloadable from the web.
- E-mail alerts from the Census offices about new releases of Census data

Q8 Do you consult any accompanying explanatory material? Is it helpful?

The user documentation and Meta data on the whole have been very good. The table specifications have been very good once released. The Meta data has been good, but not always consistent across the three Census offices in terms of what is provided or the format that it is provided in.

Q9 Are there any other statistics from the Census that you might need in the future that are not supplied?

Statistics at Output Area level on Income have long been our top priority; we hope that, in the future, these will be created using administrative files from HMRC.

More generally we hope that the Census offices will continue its excellent work to develop the administrative data options swiftly. Whilst aware of potential difficulties (some topics being unavailable, coverage, quality, UK-wide, and change / instability), the prospect of annual statistics at OA-level, new topics (especially income) and proxy topics, is very attractive. This would be increased if data sharing could enable multivariate tables. We hope that advances in this area would reduce the need for the expensive sample surveys.

Q10 In terms of having your say to ONS, NRS and NISRA about the Census, what worked well?

We regard the 2011 Census as being very successful, despite increasingly difficult circumstances in terms of Census office budgets and staffing levels, and of better quality than 2001. There are, however some lessons that can be learned for 2021 (see below).

The Bulk CSV flat file format release of data has been a major improvement on 2001. It has made the processing of these data much easier.

Having consistent UK table specifications for Key and Quick Statistics at output area level has been a major success.

ONS and NRS have been very helpful and proactive in getting issues with table specifications sorted out to the best of their ability.

Q11 In terms of having your say, what did not work so well?

Whilst the chosen pre-tabular method of Statistical Disclosure Control (SDC), with its consistent tables, has been a real improvement on the inconsistencies between table totals created in 2001, there have been issues with this new approach. The change in SDC approach has had the unfortunate side effect that some tables (containing small cell counts) became disclosive in 2011 when they were previously non-disclosive. Every output has had to be individually checked for disclosure, which created bottlenecks at times. Therefore we strongly request that the method of SDC be reconsidered and redesigned for 2021.

The speed of delivery has been no better than in previous Censuses, despite the staggering advances in computing power. As much resource and planning needs to be put into output production as on data collection. The value of Census data decays with age and so a 3 year delivery implies a huge loss to the UK economy. In future, the core outputs need to be delivered within 1 year of a Census.

The order in which types of data were released was not ideal. Having Detailed Characteristics released before Local Characteristics was a pain. We really want output area level data as a priority over larger area data.

The order in which themes of data were released, i.e. health, ethnicity, Demography and Families, housing or labour market, was not ideal for the Local Characteristics tables. We really want population and households characteristics released first as these are essential to any organisation or business. These data only started to appear in the 4th release, not the first for England and Wales.

The Local Characteristics table specifications at output area level are not consistent across the UK which is such a shame after the success of the Key and Quick Statistics.

Late changes to the multi-dimensional table specifications by ONS topic leads meant that previously agreed tables could no longer be produced, due to SDC restrictions. And when the tables were then reduced in detail, they became worthless to users.

We would still like a greater emphasis placed on getting consistent UK data table specifications.

A lack of a "transparent priority setting" for any changes made by the Census offices. Changes were made without warning or reasoning given to the users meaning delays in getting the data that we really need and want to use.

Changes to bulk delivery file formats for Local Characteristics tables made by NRS and NISRA meant delays in using these data.

Lack of control in amount/detail of output that was agreed. A primary example would be last minute changes to table specifications or the level of geography that a table would be released at. This caused delays and late changes in outputs.

The 'no data revisions' rule seems to be considered sacrosanct at the moment. However users may be better off if an early, provisional, basic set of figures could be released, even if this requires revisions in later releases.

Is the rule for having several weeks' notice for release dates counter-productive? It may delay publication of data if, for example, ONS wait until data is ready or nearly ready before announcing a definite publication date.

Q13 Is there anything you would like to ask us?

What are your next steps in producing the Assessment report, and when do you expect to publish this?

How can you help to ensure that the Census offices retain the lessons learnt from the Assessment, for the 2021 Census, given that (due to usual staff turnover) the next Census will be managed by different people? – who are likely to be new to the UK Census.