

Statement on the future of the Census and future provision of population statistics in England and Wales – RSA response to the public consultation by the Office for National Statistics

The Regional Studies Association (RSA) is a leading international learned society with global membership and a strong presence in the UK, representing a cross-disciplinary range of academics and policy makers engaged in questions of regional development in its many facets.

The following response to the Office for National Statistics (ONS)'s proposals on the future of the census reflects the views of experts and members of RSA.

ONS propose two possible and not necessarily mutually exclusive approaches. One is to carry on with a national Census, but to do more of it online. The other is to take a radically different approach to the Census and generate the information from administrative data held by the government and undertake a 4% annual survey of the population.

The Association recognises that there are potential advantages and disadvantages to both approaches. However, we are concerned to highlight potential risks and weaknesses of moving from the National Census to a proposed system that is as yet untested in a UK context. If implemented for 2021, it would not be subjected to a proper evaluation process in advance.

We agree with Professor Skinner's conclusions from his independent review of the proposed methodology behind the proposals for a system based on administrative data. He notes that whilst the analysis undertaken by ONS to date was well conducted and useful, it falls short of evidence and other preconditions to make such a radical transformation a reality. Professor Skinner also concludes that to carry on with a census every ten years but to do more of it online would work.

We would therefore like to highlight a number of concerns that arise from changing from a national Census to an alternative approach centred on administrative data:

- The present Census offers wide demographic coverage, down to very low levels of analysis (i.e. Output Areas). This enables a whole range of community-related analysis to be undertaken drawing on micro-spatial data, which is critically important across a whole range of policy areas, such as health, planning, housing, analysis of migration and commuting and welfare. Such a fine level of analysis down to small groups of postcodes would not be possible under the alternative administrative data proposals and limited annual 4% survey.
- The national Census has evolved over a long-history of some 200 years and is recognised as the most accurate, crucial piece of our national data infrastructure. It is essential that any proposals to replace the present Census should at least offer a comparable quality of data and analysis down to the lowest spatial levels (Output Areas). We are not at all convinced that the alternative proposals would meet that test.
- There are considerable risks in seeking to replace the Census with what is, in a UK context, a relatively untried and untested method. We note that the introduction of a system based around the collection of administrative data would require primary legislation at a relatively late stage in the national

political cycle. The implementation of proposals would demand cross-party support as well as appropriate time for proper scrutiny of draft legislation. Without these essential conditions, concern arises that any legislation might end up with watered down proposals, weakening the proposed replacement arrangements even further.

- In addition, even if such legislation were passed in a timely manner, the period remaining for successful implementation prior to 2021 is relatively short. Given the history of challenges in the implementation of national systems that are highly reliant on databases and the quality of IT systems (e.g. in welfare and health), there are considerable risks in implementing a new system without retaining the existing Census.

We therefore support the position advocated by the Royal Statistical Society that ONS should:

- Make a clear statement that it will not replace the 10-yearly census at least until real cases using an alternative approach have been tested and accepted by those who rely on them. To continue with just the 10-yearly census (with a strong on-line focus) might be un-ambitious but to abolish it without a well-tested alternative would be reckless.
- Ensure that a robust up-to-date address register is in place and accessible by ONS, the social science community and more widely in accordance with the government's Open Data policy. Such a register is a prerequisite for any move to a system of population statistics that relies on administrative data.
- Make the case for comprehensive sharing and linking of administrative data in accordance with data protection principles for the purpose of creating statistics for the public good. This should include a role for ONS in decisions about administrative data that are to be used for statistical purposes.
- Start using administrative data to produce experimental numbers now so that we can see how they will measure up in practice
- Act on all of Professor Skinner's recommendations and report publicly on those actions.

We recognise that it is likely over coming years that progress will be made towards the increased use of administrative data to generate census information. However, we believe that it is vital for such progress to be achieved in parallel to the maintaining of the present Census, until it is absolutely clear that the proposed alternative is at least as good and as reliable at all spatial levels as the current well-tested method. If a decision was taken that it was desirable over time to move to a system centred on administrative data, we advocate, that at the very least, there should be proper process of transition with the two systems being run in parallel testing of administrative data either nationally or at least in pilot areas such as cities.

Regional Studies Association
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