



Advisory Group Paper AG (04) 08

### **Consultation on a 2011 Census**

This is a discussion paper prepared as part of a wider project on National Statistics consultation. It does not represent any decisions on direction of developments either on a 2011 Census or within National Statistics as a whole at this stage.

**Advisory Group members are invited to:-**

**-note that the way National Statistics is organised and the way that user consultation as a whole is carried out in future may necessitate change in the approach to consultation established for recent Censuses; and**

**-give views on the form of consultation which would most effectively combine the various user community and topic interests in a future Census whilst aligning with the directions being taken for National Statistics**

The objective is to make 'high level' recommendations to the National Statistician before the end of 2004, so there is relatively little time for the consideration of the initial findings and options for improvements, and **comments should be made to the Secretariats within two weeks of the date of Advisory Group meetings**, or sooner if possible.

Chris Denham

October 2004

## Consultation on a 2011 Census

### 1 Introduction

ONS has initiated a short project to produce recommendations for improved user consultation as part of a wider review of National Statistics processes. It has a special remit to make sure that emerging consultation arrangements for the Census are effective and are aligned with the directions being taken for National Statistics.

The assumption underlying the project is that the core purpose of consultation - *realising the benefits of investment in statistical information by meeting user needs and providing value* - can be carried out more effectively. A discussion paper on consultation as a whole which summarises the current position, suggests principles for effective consultation, and puts forward first ideas of options for achieving improvement supplements this paper, but the main purpose is to seek views on how the distinctive nature of a Census should be covered by future consultation.

#### Advisory Group members are invited to:-

**-note that the way National Statistics is organised and the way that user consultation as a whole is carried out in future may necessitate change in the approach to consultation established for recent Censuses; and**

**-give views on the form of consultation which would most effectively combine the various user community and topic interests in a future Census whilst aligning with the directions being taken for National Statistics**

The objective is to make 'high level' recommendations to the National Statistician before the end of 2004, so there is relatively little time for the consideration of the initial findings and options for improvements, and **comments should be made to the Secretariats within two weeks of the date of Advisory Group meetings**, or sooner if possible.

### 2 Background

Meeting user needs has been key to Census policies, and effective consultation has been a prime objective in the three decades up to and including 2001. It has focussed strongly on the content and output of each census as a *source*, and on co-ordination at a UK level. The means used, although not necessarily in entirety throughout the period, have been

- internal Government committees which set broad strategy and provided UK co-ordination
- standing Advisory Groups representing the main user communities and/or the interests of the parts of the UK
- ad hoc working groups, often linked to specific projects within the census programmes
- rounds of direct consultation with end users, particularly on output and geography, including debriefing
- opportunities provided by learned societies, user groups and other externally organised activities

together with information gathered through day to day contacts with users.

These mechanisms were in use from early in the 2001 Census programme, and were relatively unaffected by the launch of National Statistics - indeed they met the guidance on consultation given in draft National Statistics protocols - or by the more recent change to a Sources/Analysis structure in ONS.

### **3 The current Census machinery**

The **advantages** of the current machinery may be summarised as

- providing comprehensive coverage of user communities and topics, particularly as alternative mechanisms in the GSS have only emerged recently
- being geared very largely to the lengthy Census programme, and providing continuity throughout
- being close to the source and helping users gain the necessary understanding of the balance between user requirements, respondent burden, and operational costs which is necessary for a successful Census
- the closeness to the source has also contributed to achieving 'buy in' from users, which is essential in such a public and high profile operation, as well as giving prominence to the statistical results.

The **disadvantages** can be summarised as

- a risk of 'self fulfilment' in that radical options and alternative sources may not be adequately assessed
- a risk that emerging issues are not adequately addressed in an extended consultation process, although this is also inherent in a Census timetable itself
- a risk that output is not sufficiently 'harmonised' with other sources, although the substantial resources of a Census have acted as a successful driver of major developments in statistics
- in all, a risk that perception of the opportunities available to meet user needs from the whole range of official statistics may be restricted by remaining within a single source 'silo'.

### **4 Changes in National Statistics**

There has been a significant shift in National Statistics and ONS from a focus on specific sources, such as a census, to a focus on statistical themes and topics, and there is a new emphasis in ensuring that information needs arising from emerging and cross cutting issues are met effectively.

The work programme of National Statistics has since 2001 been planned by Theme Working Groups which have the remit to take account of the views of users. There is a two year cycle for formal consultation, to be carried out by appropriate means, not necessarily the same for all, but the Groups should be open to user views at other times. There has, however, been relatively little interaction with the 2001 Census programme (more information on and consultation by theme can be found at-

[http://www.statistics.gov.uk/about/Consultation\\_by\\_theme/default.asp](http://www.statistics.gov.uk/about/Consultation_by_theme/default.asp)

Much of the work of ONS is currently organised around Sources and Analysis Directorates.  
[http://www.statistics.gov.uk/about\\_ns/foi/ons\\_org\\_chart.asp](http://www.statistics.gov.uk/about_ns/foi/ons_org_chart.asp)

In particular, this means that work on, for example, statistical policy and data requirements is lead by Analysis Directorate, while census and survey operations is lead by Sources Directorate. Methodological and geographic work is carried out in separate Divisions, whilst output from the 2001 Census is now covered by within Sources Division. Steering groups co-ordinate major programmes such as a 2011 Census.

Work in the Analysis Directorate is being arranged around a number of topics. Assessment of user need in a topic will be carried out by interface between topic groups and user groups which will feed into a planning group within ONS, and in turn to source specific steering groups.

## **5 Future consultation**

A *discussion paper* on user consultation as a whole is attached as an **Annex A**. This summarises the current position, suggests principles for effective consultation, and puts forward first ideas of options for achieving improvement. These are first ideas, and do not represent any decisions on direction of developments within National Statistics at this stage.

The issue for a 2011 Census is whether or not any of the models for consultation suggested in Annex A would be effective in ensuring that benefit from the investment in a 2011 Census is realised by meeting user needs. It is suggested that, in addition to the general principles set out in the Annex, the main criteria are that arrangements for consultation should have

- a means to achieve support for an overall strategy for the Census which will in turn provide the framework for more detailed consultations
- a means to provide continuity in liaison with users throughout the Census programme, and between users in the parts of the UK as appropriate
- a strong connection between all aspects of content (data needs) and output
- a process which helps users gain the necessary understanding of the balance between user requirements, respondent burden, and operational costs
- a consistent and reasonably direct interface with any part of the organisation(s) involved in taking the Census, together with any other activities, particularly those organised on a centralised basis, which have a bearing on the Census.

It is vital in a lengthy Census programme for the process to be able to do as much as possible to foresee needs in the decade beyond 2011, to be flexible and well informed enough to be able to respond to changes in policies and priorities, and to keep pace with innovations in methodology and information technology.

It is also essential that the process provides for user needs to be assessed in relation to all possible sources, and for the output from sources to be harmonised in relation to user needs, to give an optimum return on the investment in statistical information.

*National Statistics user consultation: discussion paper*

ONS has initiated a short project to produce recommendations for improved user consultation as part of a wider review of National Statistics processes.

The National Statistics Code of Practice sets out how responsibilities for user consultation should be met. At present there is a mix of activities both on themes and on sources, with liaison at strategic, developmental and usability levels, and there is a need to incorporate regional and other cross cutting interests more effectively into the process.

The assumption underlying the project is that the core purpose of user consultation - *realising the benefits of investment in statistical information by meeting user's needs* - can be carried out more effectively. This note summarises the current position, suggests principles for effective consultation, and puts forward first ideas of options for achieving improvement. The aim is get some consensus of views before making final recommendations nearer the end of the year.

**Comments on any aspect of the paper are welcome and will contribute to decisions to be made by the National Statistician.**

---

**Introduction**

The National Statistics Code of Practice sets out six principles for user consultation, with more detailed guidance in the Protocol for User Consultation. It gives the National Statistics Theme Working Groups (TWGs) the remit to take account of the views of users and producers in the preparation of work programmes. There is a two year cycle for formal consultation, to be carried out by appropriate means, not necessarily the same for all, but the Groups should be open to user views at other times.

The remit for the project is wider than the consultative activity of the TWGs. Taking the broad definition of users of National Statistics in the Code of Practice, the purpose of the project is to propose mechanisms for effective consultation for UK National Statistics by the end of 2004 to feed into decisions to be made by the National Statistician. A description of current arrangements is being prepared, and other models in the UK and elsewhere are being assessed. There is liaison over the new RSS Statistics Users Forum and with user groups. The project also has a special remit to make sure that emerging consultation arrangements for population statistics and the Census are effective and have aligned with the direction being taken for National Statistics.

The project is being carried out under the direction of Mike Hughes of the ONS National Statistics and International Division by Chris Denham with assistance from Gez Kirby (contact details are given at the end of the paper).

## **Input from Users**

The main purpose of discussion with users is to seek views on how well the process for consultation set out in the Code of Practice is working and to identify any needs for change which might be incorporated into the recommendations made by the project. Points for particular comment include interfaces with the relatively new Sources/Analysis structure of ONS, and dealing effectively with emerging issues and major cross cutting programmes. Relationships with user groups are also at a turning point with the transfer of the 'umbrella' function from the Statistics Users Council ( SUC) to the Royal Statistical Society (RSS) Statistics Users Forum at the end of September 2004.

### **Initial findings: the current position**

Four main messages about the current position can be drawn from views and information obtained from 'key players' in the first phase of research:-

- the principles for user consultation set out in the Code of Practice are supported and might be distilled into a simple message on the lines of *investment in collecting statistical information is only worthwhile if the output meets use requirements and provides value* with an additional purpose of gaining 'buy in' from data suppliers and statistics users, but the principles need to be developed into actionable proposals covering all levels of National Statistics
- the means of consultation listed in the Code of Practice are in use to varying extents at strategic, developmental and usability levels, but there is no central base of information about users, or an adequate support service, for consultation purposes
- the need for consultation on emerging and cross cutting issues, such as the development of regional statistics following the Allsopp report, or a 2011 Census, is not adequately met by a topic/theme approach alone
- communication to and from users and with policy makers, and direction of feedback to relevant areas with the GSS, is neither consistent nor sufficient - user groups may not see what happens to their input, feedback on the rationale for decisions may be lacking, and there are no 'councils' for agreement of the direction of consultation or for ultimate arbitration.

In addition, aside from the points on communication, three *key issues* have emerged, each reflecting the complexity of current arrangements and underline the challenge of finding solutions:-

- scope - consultation is carried out for National Statistics, and also separately for business in ONS and other parts of the GSS and in the devolved administrations, but user groups may not align easily with this approach and may simply have an interest in UK 'official statistics' : a solution would be to design machinery for a core of National Statistics activities, to be followed elsewhere as appropriate

- perceptions - market research shows that many users see requirements mainly in terms of sources and usability rather than in terms of National Statistics themes or the ONS Analysis topics; changing perceptions is not a short term task, and risks loss of contact: a solution would be to accept this user focus and conduct consultation around output themes
- simplicity - perhaps the greatest challenge is to make proposals for machinery which manages the potential number of interfaces between topics/themes and the various user communities, with the added dimensions of regional and devolved interests, usability and other cross cutting aspects: a solution must be "clear and simple" in the words of the Code of Practice, and would have a user focus aiming for 'wins' for both sides, with machinery to set and agree priorities, and with a recognition that there are parts of the 'matrix' where consultation might be relatively less productive and necessary.

### **Improved user consultation: principles**

There are principles for effective consultation which should apply to any model, already clear from the Code of Practice. In summary, the mechanisms should have

- a user focus, and therefore a focus on output
- a well defined role for user groups
- priorities agreed between providers and users
- buy in from users
- commitment and ownership at a high level in National Statistics
- manageable structure and agendas, including agreement on what *not* to cover
- means of covering and linking strategy, development, and usability
- dialogue with policy makers in government
- a mapping onto, but not dominance by, the themes and topics of the providers
- a means of identifying and dealing with emerging and cross cutting issues
- achievable common standards/protocols
- allowance for different patterns of consultation - not 'one size for all'
- clear channels into the GSS, avoiding attenuated links
- full and timely feedback to users
- information open to all through a single Website
- support from dedicated resources
- means of measuring efficacy.

Where appropriate, consultation should be part of the policy and decision making process, for example by setting priorities or by providing cases to support needs, but the setting of realistic user expectations is vital from the start.

## Improved user consultation: options

This section puts forward first ideas of options for achieving change. It proposes that there should be a co-ordinating body - a 'national users council' - with three options for machinery for consultation - limited change, topic based, output themes - with a little more detail on the latter, together with outline suggestions for machinery to cover regional interests and for new supporting services. It does not address more detailed aspects organisation or resourcing at this stage.

A *co-ordinating body* (a 'national users council') at UK National Statistics level would

- be chaired at ONS Executive level
- have representation from the RSS Forum as a whole
- report to the National Statistician and through the chair of the Forum
- endorse standards/protocols and monitor implementation
- set the broad agenda and priorities
- liaise over non National Statistics matters and devolved activity
- resolve issues referred to it
- give direction on feedback
- review the consultation process at intervals.

A forum on these lines is very much the norm in other national models. Nevertheless there would be a need to define and agree the functions and limitations of such a body in the UK.

Three general *options for consultative machinery* are:-

**1. *limited change*** - existing machinery would remain in place overseen by a new co-ordinating body and with new machinery at regional level and support services: the main *advantage* of a pragmatic approach would be use of proven and familiar machinery; the main *disadvantage* would be the varied nature of links with National Statistics, with consequent risks to achieving a more consistent approach.

**2. *a topic based model*** - National Statistics themes would be aligned to ONS Analysis topics with consultation as a whole directed through 'topic groups', each interfacing with users and with the management of relevant sources: the main *advantages* would be the fit to the National Statistics/ONS organisational structure and the encouragement to users to think of requirements out of source 'silos' or in a 'source free' way; the main disadvantages would be the potential duplication of producer and user effort in the very complex set of interfaces, particularly for cross cutting programmes, and a lack of alignment with user perceptions.

**3 *an output themed model*** - clearly the distinction between topics and output is only a matter of degree, but the key consideration in this option is to reflect the focus of users rather than the organisation of the producers.

The emphasis would be on broad and enduring areas of output. It would not be on 'silos', but would be overlapping and flexible enough in approach to deal with cross cutting and rapidly emerging issues, and would be redefined by participants as necessary. It would be based on a

limited number of output themes - perhaps half a dozen - to be discussed further if the option gains support.

Each theme would be owned by some form of advisory group, with provider/user representation, chaired by GSS but with a user side chair to help coherence and with opportunity for user sides to convene independently. User sides would be drawn from relevant users groups inside and outside the RSS Forum umbrella, with co-option of further representatives if there were gaps. The brief would be to

- agree the priorities and agenda for consultation in the theme
- identify and act on emerging issues
- act as the forum for consultation on major statistical development
- ensure full engagement with policy makers
- review existing machinery and fill gaps as necessary
- remit matters as appropriate to working levels
- ensure full and timely feedback
- review the efficacy of consultation in the theme

but to avoid becoming enmeshed in detail and to draw resources from supporting services.

Below such national activity, an initial review of the need for *consultative machinery at regional level* to carry out the recommendations of the Allsopp review indicated that

- user consultation in future *must* have a regional dimension
- the need applies not only to the economic statistics which were the principal focus of the report but also to other statistics which are inadequate at regional and sub regional level
- ONS would have a regional presence by 2007, and this would be a conduit for consultation
- a place for a theme based approach at regional is seen, but there are doubts over the feasibility of conducting separate consultation for every theme in every region, although there would be some region specific issues which would not extend across the whole country.

The model of SCOTSTAT (Scottish statistics user/provider network) may contribute to a solution.

Whatever the model for consultative machinery, there must be improved *supporting services*. This would include information, logistic help, communications, and monitoring effectiveness,

Improved *information* about users and their needs would include:

- a comprehensive guide to user groups (inside and outside the RSS Forum 'umbrella'), on the ONS/ National Statistics Website with links to information about their activities
- a system of registration/approval for user groups
- a database of end users held in the GSS for the purpose of targeted consultation and communication
- A rolling programme of market research for the GSS, particularly on usability.

Assistance from ONS/National Statistics with the *process* of consultation would, where required, include:

- secretariats, and help with facilitation of workshop and focus groups
- logistic help with road shows, conferences and seminars
- Gathering and analysis of information by methods which met National Statistics standards.

Good *communication*, principally through a single ONS/National Statistics Website, would include:

- navigation based on the main themes
- content authored by experts
- support to ensure that coverage was full, consistent, and up to date
- information for the newcomer on: policy; machinery; user groups; how to submit views; and on what is planned, active, and at feedback stage
- a system of alerts to known users about planned and active consultation
- Facilities for submissions, and discussion databases.

*Monitoring and reporting on the effectiveness* of consultation would include researching into, and recommending improved practice, including the termination of unproductive activity.

---

The **contact point** for the project is

Chris Denham  
Office for National Statistics  
Segensworth Road  
Titchfield  
Fareham  
Hants PO15 5RR

Tel.01329 813720  
Email [chris.denham@ons.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:chris.denham@ons.gsi.gov.uk)

who is working with the National Statistics and International Division of ONS, and from whom further information may be obtained and to whom comments may be directed.