

What the Census means to you

It happens every ten years. It involves every man, woman and child in the country. And it often arouses strong feelings.

But whether you like it or not the first Census of the new Millennium will soon be upon us. In April 2001, a census-taker, or 'enumerator', carrying an eye-catching yellow bag emblazoned with the Census 'Count Me In' logo, will be calling on you.

The enumerator, usually somebody who knows the area, will personally hand over the Census form, ask you (or anybody else you agree is responsible for the household) to complete the 40 or so questions and post it back in a pre-paid envelope. Sounds simple enough – so why all the fuss?

Lively debate

Each census raises different questions – and this one will probably spark off a lively debate like others over the last 200 years that we have had a census. Quite reasonably, people ask why they should answer questions on how many people live at their address, who they work for, where they were born –and others. Headline writers have had a field day in the past, using such emotive phrases as privacy, snooping, and Big Brother.

So why do we need one? Who is it for? And what does it involve? With changes in society from working patterns to family life occurring at such a fast pace it's vital that the planners have the information of what your area will be like in the years ahead.

The form itself is important because the answers you give determine society's future needs down to the last detail - everything from schools, hospitals and jobs to homes, transport, the environment and business. Much of the information gathered by the Census will be used as the blueprint for community needs in the years to come.

Census factsheets:

1. The Census
2. Why We Need a Census
3. Census 2001 – What's new?
4. Counting Everyone In – the Big Challenge
5. The Census Organisation
6. Census Jobs
7. The Census and the Law
8. Census Taking Through the Ages

Decisions, decisions

From the facts and figures a business can decide whether an area has the people with the right skills and qualifications to start a new factory, what the transport links are like or whether the local facilities will attract staff.

So the Census is not just some survey which is collected, stored and quietly forgotten. The answers you give can help local and central Government to decide on what your area's needs are.

You'll be relieved to know that the form itself, known in official terms as Form H1 (in England and Wales) is relatively easy to complete. The questions are not difficult and it takes an average of 30 minutes to complete – some people will be quicker while others may take a little longer.

Organising the Census itself a massive operation involving up to 70,000 people across the country. In England and Wales the Census is organised by the Office for National Statistics.

Each enumerator will call on around 300 households and deliver the form in time for Census Day itself on Sunday April 29. If you are not at home at the time they will leave a leaflet saying they have called and will call again to deliver the form.

The enumerator isn't there to pry – he/she will be able to help with any queries you may have like who should complete the form and when it should be returned.

If you have fears that the forms will be passed onto the Social Security, Tax man or the police - don't worry - by law the Census form and the information it contains is kept secret and cannot be divulged to anybody – until a 100 years from now.

This doesn't mean you can put anything you like down on the form or not bother to return it. You can be fined for not completing or returning the form. But action like this is only taken as a last resort. The Census people realise that all sorts of problems crop up so for the most part they will be sensitive to any difficulties you may have.

When the Census arrives at your door – take a deep breath and remember that it's that time of the decade again, that you are not alone and that it's your contribution that counts.

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