

Speaking with one voice - supporting diversity.

It is truism that we are becoming a much more diverse society and one of the many challenges faced by local authorities is the need to communicate with all sectors of their community, often in a range of different languages. Of course, to do this effectively, councils need to have a good idea of the languages that are commonly used in their area.

Tracking diversity is vital if national and local government is to plan and deliver the services that communities need. Compared with ten years ago, the 2011 Census explored the diversity of UK society in much more detail with new questions on national identity, passports held, immigrants' intended length of stay and main languages spoken. The information derived from these questions provides one of the most detailed pictures of the true nature of diversity across the whole of the UK.

A number of press reports on the recently released census statistics highlighted the fact that Polish is now the second most common language spoken in England and Wales with over half a million people citing it as their first language. While individual local authorities may be able to make reasonable estimates of the size of their Polish-speaking populations census statistics can provide additional evidence and help to improve the quality of data that councils hold and the allocation of resources to the provision of information in languages other than English.

However, while better knowledge of what might be called the 'language landscape' is useful, the census can paint a much more multi-dimensional picture of cultural diversity. In addition to information about main languages spoken, statistics on family structure, sex and age of children, housing and occupation contribute to a deeper understanding of the needs of local communities, particularly those of relatively recent arrivals.

Effective use of increasingly pressured resources depends on good quality intelligence. For all local authorities, but perhaps particularly for those in parts of the country with the most diverse communities, 2011 Census data offers a rich seam of information to help tackle some of the challenges that these new communities bring.

As the programme of publishing census statistics progresses, more and more detailed information will become available. While the early statistics are straightforward counts of the answers that people gave on their questionnaires, for example, revealing the number of people in a particular local authority of a specific age ('univariate' data in statistical jargon), later releases of data will be 'multivariate', enabling more complex information to be produced. This could include details of how many people in a local authority, of a given age range, speak a language other than English and provide unpaid care for family or friends.

The richness of this data can be explored at ONS.gov.uk/census where, in addition to interactive content there are statistical bulletins and short stories focusing on different aspects of the data, plus of course the raw data tables.

More information on census data is available from Census Customer Services (01329 444972) or by emailing to CensusCustomerServices@ons.gov.uk.