



## **PLANS FOR LOCAL CLAIMANT COUNT DATA INCLUDING INTRODUCTION OF DATA FOR 2003 STATISTICAL WARDS ON NOMIS**

### **Introduction**

This paper gives details of ONS' current plans for changing the geographical basis for published claimant count statistics for local areas, including shorter-term plans for providing data according to '2003 statistical ward' boundaries by early next year.

### **Current arrangements for processing claimant count data**

The claimant count processing system run by ONS (based on data extracted monthly from the Jobseeker's Allowance Payments system run by Jobcentre Plus) uses postcodes of claimants' residential addresses as the base unit for all geographical outputs of claimant count data. The system currently maps postcodes to both 1991 frozen wards (compatible with analysis of the 1991 Census data) and to more recent ward boundaries (currently 2001 wards) using separate postcode directories provided by ONS Geography Branch. Postcodes and wards are imputed for around 4 per cent of claimants for whom recorded postcodes are missing or invalid.

The statistics for higher geographies are then mapped from the ward based data and at present the 1991 frozen wards are the basic building blocks for all of the main official published claimant count outputs (eg local authorities, parliamentary constituencies, travel-to-work areas, regions). All these data based on the frozen wards are readily available via Nomis® in considerable detail, eg by age and duration, and in a variety of forms. Some data by postcode sectors (which are different but similar in size to wards on average) are additionally available. Data using the more recent ward boundaries have, however, not hitherto been provided to Nomis® and analysis has been provided to some users on an ad hoc basis only and generally in a much more limited form than the data based on the frozen 1991 wards.

### **The need for change, the opportunities and constraints**

#### Needs

- There is clearly a strong user need for readily accessible claimant count data based on more up-to-date boundaries, and in particular data for areas compatible with the latest analysis from the population census. There is generally a need for flexible geographical analysis.
- In particular there is a need to establish as soon as possible a set of current ward data based on '2003 statistical wards' (as used for analysis of 2001 Population Census data, built up from Census output areas). These '2003' wards reflect boundary changes for which a Statutory Instrument was in place or anticipated by the end of

December 2002 (where the boundary change was expected to become effective in 2003 or possibly in early 2004).

- Production of claimant data for these 2003 statistical wards is required for the provision of claimant count proportions of the resident working-age population by early 2004.
- We also need to move away from the old 1991 frozen wards as the basic building block, and develop our system based on a new frozen geography. Census output areas seem to be an appropriate choice, for continued compatibility with census data. Using these will also allow for production of data for 'super output areas' as required for Neighbourhood Statistics. Output areas are also fine enough to provide a very good fit for most geographical areas for which claimant statistics are required. (NB We wouldn't envisage disseminating data for individual output areas, for reasons of data confidentiality, but these would be the new building blocks.)
- Wherever possible we will need to cater for comparisons based on consistent geographies over time.
- This development will also need to ensure that procedures are coherent for a range of other working-age benefit data, produced by Department for Work and Pensions, which in due course may also appear on Nomis.
- We also need to take account of the plans for Nomis/Neighbourhood Statistics integration as they emerge.

#### Opportunities

- The new All-fields postcode directory (AFPD), produced by ONS Geography Branch, which uses improved 'Gridlink' methodology introduced in 2001, now includes the 2003 statistical wards (for the whole UK, now including Scotland) and also the existing 1991 frozen wards. There is therefore now the opportunity to start using this for the claimant count processing and for Nomis, and produce data for the 2003 wards as well as for geographies aggregated from the 1991 frozen wards.

#### Constraints

- Until we have changed our system, we need to continue to use 1991 frozen wards for the time being as the basis for producing official figures for our monthly first releases and other publications. There is a lot of work involved in modifying the ONS claimant count system to compile all official data according to a new frozen geography based on output areas. ( We feel, though, that this should not delay our initiative to start publishing data for the 2003 statistical wards and for the 'super output areas' proposed for Neighbourhood Statistics.)
- It is important to safeguard confidentiality of information about individual claimants and ensure compliance with the National Statistics Code of Practice and the emerging Protocol on Data Access and Confidentiality. Our procedures for this need to be reviewed. We should not publish detailed claimant count data at ward level for

two sets of wards (ie 1991 and 2003) at the same time because of what might in principle be revealed by taking differences between the two.

- We also need to maintain consistency between all the published outputs, in particular between the outputs from Nomis and releases and other publications produced directly by ONS.

### **Modification of plans**

Since the previous paper, plans have been modified to allow for better protection of the confidentiality of information about individual claimants and to take account of the likely impact of switching to the use of the new AFPD for allocating claimants to areas based on their residential postcodes. While use of the AFPD is expected to lead to greater accuracy in allocating claimant data to areas, there will inevitably be some discontinuities in the local figures.

It is still intended that, by about January 2004, claimant count data by '2003 statistical wards' will be available on Nomis in similar detail as currently provided for the 1991 frozen wards. The exact timing of this depends mainly on checks being made on the quality of the data collated using the AFPD and assessment of the impact of this switch on the statistics. There are still a few issues to be further investigated before we are able to make the switch and start using the new directory in our live system.

While official aggregate data, for local authorities, constituencies and travel-to-work areas, etc, will continue to be based on data for the 1991 frozen wards for the time being, detailed data for individual 1991 wards will cease to be available as soon as the 2003 ward data begin to be provided. An important reason for this is to protect against disclosure of data on individual claimants which might be deduced by implication where there are small differences between old and new boundaries. This means that it will not generally be possible to make comparisons back in time for very small areas, at least not for detailed analysis at the time of the switch (Some further facility for historical comparisons may be available at a later stage, at least for total counts, although it should be noted that there would in any case be some discontinuities in the data for some areas at ward level, due to the improved geographical allocation using the new postcode directory.)

We recognise that this approach may cause inconvenience for some users, who will wish to maintain readily consistent data for geographical areas of special interest, and that this will persist until we have changed our ONS system to use a new frozen geography. From discussions with users, we believe that this inconvenience will be more than outweighed by the urgent need to have data for '2003' wards as soon as possible.

### **Planned developments**

The residential postcode will continue to provide the basis for local claimant count data. The system for producing claimant count data and Nomis will be adapted in three stages outlined below. Note that there are some technical and methodological issues, especially concerning disclosure control, that need to be considered, especially for the later stages involving development of the new frozen geography.

## **Summary of different stages of development.**

### Stage A (aimed for by Jan 2004)

New 2003 statistical ward data will be available on Nomis® in similar detail to the present data by 1991 frozen wards. These 2003 ward data will be geographically compatible with data from the 2001 census.

Detailed data for individual 1991 frozen wards will cease to be available (except possibly aggregate totals), though for the time being they will still be produced for the purposes of official aggregates for higher standard geographies such as LA districts. Historical data for 1991 frozen wards would remain available on Nomis.

Users of the 2003 ward data will need to recognise that official totals eg for districts, are still based on 1991 wards and may therefore disagree with figures built up from the 2003 wards.

There will be no back data for the 2003 wards.

### Stage B (aimed for by early 2004)

Claimant count data based on census output areas will additionally be available via Nomis® ( though not published at the individual output area level). This would allow data to be produced for the 'super output areas' ('data zones' for Scotland) as required for Neighbourhood Statistics. Initially this would involve data being processed via Nomis (using the AFPD, effectively for a second time, to allocate output area codes). The claimant count processing system will subsequently be adapted to look up output area codes directly.

### Stage C (2005)

It is proposed to switch the basis of frozen geographies for production of all official aggregates from 1991 frozen wards to census output areas (as used for the 2001 population census). (The official aggregate data would then be more accurate.)

Use of these output areas would allow easily for the updating of administrative boundaries, ie for current wards in future ( based on best fit of output areas) . But to do this we will need new procedures for confidentiality in order to provide flexible outputs for these alternative geographies with minimal risk of disclosure of individual details. (This might for example involve procedures to make the data fuzzy at the micro level, to make them non-disclosive but still reliable for statistical purposes.)

1991 frozen ward data would cease to be produced in their current form though it would in principle be possible – subject to confidentiality constraints – to aggregate figures via the best fit of output areas if there were a continuing demand for the data.

It is envisaged that this final stage would make it easier to make historical comparisons of local data and to maintain these in future. For this stage the possible production of geographical data organised by grid references will also be considered.

## **Comments**

Any comments are welcome. Please see the contact details below.

## **Contacts:**

**ONS, Claimant Count and Vacancies Branch, Labour Market Division**

**Andrew Machin**

Tel: 020 7533 6162

Email: [andrew.machin@ons.gov.uk](mailto:andrew.machin@ons.gov.uk)

**Michael McDonough**

Tel: 020 7533 5236

Email: [michael.mcdonough@ons.gov.uk](mailto:michael.mcdonough@ons.gov.uk)

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