

CENSUS ADVISORY GROUP

CAG (10)17 Census Objectives

2011 Census Objectives

This paper has been produced in order to inform Census Advisory Group members of the final agreed objectives for the 2011 Census and the approach for their measurement.

Action requested of Advisory Groups

The paper is for information only, but questions and comments will be welcome as contributed at the meeting or in writing to:

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Introduction

1. The overarching aim for the 2011 Census is:

“To provide high quality, value for money population statistics as required by key users, on a consistent and comparable basis, for small areas and small population groups”

2. In order to achieve this, the Census outputs must be accurate, accessible, timely, and comparable across geographies and between censuses, and users must have confidence in them. As a pre-requisite, the public must have confidence that their personal data will be protected, otherwise response rates (and hence data quality) will fall.

Objectives

3. Seven key objectives of the Census have been identified to enable this overarching aim to be met. In addition to these the National Statistician has responsibility for harmonisation of outputs across the UK,

4. For each of the seven objectives, ONS has identified more detailed, measurable aims which will describe what success will look like. Early discussions about these were held with users in 2005 and the clear feedback was that they would like data quality at least as good as in the 2001 Census, but with significant improvement in the worst five per cent of Local Authorities. This is reflected in the final quality aims described below.

5. These aims have been actively used during the preparations for the design of the 2011 Census and will drive decision making during the live operation.

6. The objectives and associated aims are as follows:

Objective 1: To provide the most accurate possible census population estimates for different geographic areas across England & Wales.

7. Quality Aim: The national population estimate has a 95% confidence interval of +/- 0.2%*

This was achieved in 2001 and we want to maintain this level of quality for 2011. Modelling work suggests that to meet this we need a national response rate of 94% or higher. In 2001 we achieved a 93.9% response rate (or 93.3% when allowance is made for post-census adjustments to population estimates). The Census has been designed to achieve this through:

- The development of a high quality address register and a large Census Coverage Survey
- Identification of the location of particular population groups to enable targeting of appropriate field staff and publicity.
- Advertising, community and LA liaison programmes developed to support enumeration within different population groups
- Collation of high quality, real time management information on response rates so that response targets can be monitored on a daily basis and used to drive decisions on where to deploy more resource, step up advertising community and local engagement campaigns and where to target follow-up letters.

8. Quality Aim: All local authority level population estimates have a 95% confidence interval of +/- 3% or better*

To help meet this, our aim for all local authorities is a response rate of 80% or higher. This is an improvement over 2001 where 96.8% of local authorities had at least 80% response (96.5% after allowance for post-census adjustments to population estimates). As described above, the 2011 Census has been designed to, and will be managed to, achieve this response aim.

The variability in response rates across areas within each local authority will also affect the size of the confidence intervals. The census questionnaire tracking system and management information system have been designed to enable us to minimise this variability.

* These aims relate to the coverage of people (not households) for the usually resident population (i.e. those in the UK for 12 months or more).

Objective 2: To provide the most accurate possible information about the structures and characteristics of the population in England & Wales.

9. Quality Aim: Maintain or exceed the question response rates achieved in 2001 and the accuracy of responses

In 2001 70% of questions had no more than 5% of responses missing and no questions had more than 19% of responses missing.

70% of questions asked in the Census Quality Survey (CQS) had at least 95% agreement with the census responses and all survey questions had at least 60% agreement. (The Census Quality Survey is a separate survey to the Census Coverage Survey, conducted several weeks after the main Census).

Extensive research and testing has been undertaken to improve a number of the 2001 questions, the instructions, and the layout of the questionnaire. Edit and imputation processes have also been designed to maximise response quality.

Evidence from the 2009 rehearsal and the questionnaire testing process suggests that we are on track to exceed these targets.

Objective 3: To provide accessible output systems with the right content and functionality.

Objective 4: To ensure the widest possible awareness of Census outputs & tools.

Objective 5: To ensure user confidence in the results.

10. Quality Aim: An independent assessment of outputs and users views measuring:

- timeliness
- quality of the results
- supporting information
- acceptability of the data after disclosure control
- users' ability to understand the limitations of the data
- accessibility
- awareness
- UK coherence

Measurement of these objectives is challenging and these areas were not systematically assessed in 2001. For 2011 this will be evaluated by the UK Statistics Authority as part of their phased, independent assessment of ONS' compliance with the Code of Practice for Official Statistics. The full review will cover consultation mechanisms, questionnaire content, methodologies, output (content and functionality) and explanations of decisions made. Phases 2 and 3 of the assessment, which will commence in winter 2010, will focus on ONS' plans for outputs as well as the post-census satisfaction survey of user views.

Objective 6: To protect, and be seen to protect, confidential personal census information.

11. Quality Aim: Security and confidentiality arrangements to protect personal census data are endorsed by independent review(s) before and after the Census.

It is a legal requirement for ONS to protect personal census information, and the public must be reassured that this is the case; otherwise they may be deterred from responding. Building on the successful reviews for 2001, all aspects of security have been embedded in the 2011 census design and decision making processes. As well as regular security audits, an Information Assurance Review will take place in winter 2010 as well as after the 2011 Census. The UK Statistics Authority assessment will also report on ONS' compliance with the Code of Practice principles and practices on integrity and confidentiality.

Objective 7: To provide value for money.

12. Quality Aim: Independent review confirms that the 2011 Census delivered the identified benefits within budget.

In 2001, the National Audit Office (NAO) reviewed ONS' processes for outsourcing, and made no adverse comments regarding value for money achieved. After the 2011 Census, we anticipate that value for money will be assessed by organisations such as the NAO, and the Public Administration Select Committees. In the meantime, the Office of Government Commerce holds regular Gateway reviews of the 2011 Census programme and the UK Statistics Authority will report on ONS' compliance with the Code of Practice principles and practices on resource use.

Census Design Authority, November 2010