

Foreword by the National Statistician



Jil Matheson, National Statistician (1 September 2009 - 30 June 2014)

As the National Statistician at the time of the 2011 Census, it was a great honour to have my signature on every one of the 25.4 million questionnaires delivered. The decennial Census of Population and Housing is a vast and complex undertaking, often described as the largest peacetime operation carried out in the country. It is certainly the largest statistical exercise we can contemplate, touching, as it does, every individual and household in the land.

It provides us with the opportunity to get an accurate, comprehensive and consistent picture of the country's population. The results are invaluable for both national and local policy formation, planning and the effective targeting of resources. It provides the only source of directly comparable statistics both for small areas and different population groups, and which are generally consistent across England and Wales and the rest of the United Kingdom. It is used as a reference base for many statistical series such as population estimates and projections and sample surveys.

This General Report reviews the entire census operation from the early consultation and planning stages through to the production and dissemination of outputs and evaluation, and beyond. It provides a wealth of detail about how the census was carried out and what we have learned to take forward in our plans for the next census. I hope that both the experienced and occasional user of census data, as well as the wider public, may find it useful.

Every census has its unique features – new developments and innovations to meet changing user needs, to reflect evolving socio-demographic and economic circumstances, and to embrace new methodologies and technologies. The 2011 Census was no exception and here I would like to pick out just a few of them – the report describes these and others in detail.

Questionnaires were posted out to households around the country. This was a fundamental change in the field operation, breaking the 200-year-old tradition of an enumerator calling on every household to ensure hand-delivery of the questionnaire.

As with 2001, most completed questionnaires were posted back, allowing field staff to focus on following up those households that did not initially return the questionnaire. There were areas of the country which were known to be difficult to enumerate – these areas were targeted with the aim of minimising the differential undercount experienced in the 1991 and 2001 Censuses.

A pre-requisite for this approach was having a reliable and widely acceptable national address register – something which did not exist beforehand. The Office for National Statistics created, for the first time, one that was fit for purpose by identifying individual addresses and not just postal delivery points. The list, together with a unique bar code on each questionnaire, meant the status of individual questionnaires could be tracked in the field and monitored centrally, making subsequent follow-ups efficiently targeted.

Also for the first time, a secure online facility was made available for people to send in their responses. This not only reduced the volume of paper questionnaires to be processed, but speeded up the whole operation by embedding automatic quality checks into responses before they were submitted.

ONS extended the range of services provided by outsourced contractors to include the recruitment, training and pay of the field force. The supplier attracted a high quality of staff better reflecting their local community.

New questions on national identity, passport held (as a proxy for citizenship), month and year of entry into the UK and intended length of stay, language, and second address were all introduced for the first time. These new questions reflected the changing requirements for information from users and the need to be able to better understand the concept of usual residence. The long-standing question on marital status was expanded in order to collect information on civil partnerships. New questions on type of central heating used and number of bedrooms were also introduced in order to provide more relevant measures of housing standards.

An innovative national publicity campaign, backed by an engaging brand, an intensive local and community liaison programme, and a web-based self-help facility, helped to get the key messages to a wide audience. Supporting and explanatory material, including the text of the questions, was translated into 56 foreign languages. The fact that we not only maintained the overall level of response compared with 2001, but increased it in those local authorities recognised as being harder to enumerate, is a testimony to the success of the campaign.

Quality assurance was more extensive than before, giving users more confidence in the quality of the results. Census outputs have been produced earlier than was the case for the 2001 Census and have been accompanied by innovative data visualisation and have received extensive press coverage. Web technology has enabled much wider dissemination of, and access to, the largest volume of census data produced than ever before. Moreover, for the first time, we have attempted to assess the benefits that have accrued from the use of such data.

The confidentiality and security of the information collected in the census was, as has always been the case, a matter of the highest priority. The public can be reassured that the arrangements to protect their personal information were the most rigorous ever carried out. Sound planning and risk management meant there were no significant security incidents in the course of the Census.

Detailed planning was vital to the success of the whole census operation, and I am grateful to everyone who put in so much time and effort to make it such a success. With a programme of this size there will always be lessons to learn for the future – these are discussed further in the report.

The overall population coverage of the 2011 Census was again well up to, if not better than, the standards for the 2011 round of international censuses and, as noted, represented an improvement overall compared with 2001. For this I have to thank, as my predecessors have done in the past: the general public for filling in their questionnaires; the army of 35,000 temporary field staff employed throughout the length and breadth of the country to take the census; and the very dedicated staff at ONS in collaboration with their opposite numbers and colleagues in the Welsh Government and at National Records of Scotland and the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency.



Jil Matheson

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