

RESPONDENT: 2857023553 – Gillian Parker
SECTOR: Unknown - Individual

Q1 - What are your views of the different census approaches described in the consultation document?

My main response is that if it isn't seriously broken, why are we trying to fix it? I understand the issue of a ten year wait being a long time to understand rapid change, but surely the best approach to this would be the tried and tested Census (with perhaps more completion on line) as a secure baseline, with periodic adjustments made by taking information from administrative data and large surveys. The issue of declining response rates to the decennial Census could be dealt with by returning to the more simple questions asked in earlier years; existing sample and longitudinal surveys could then deal with more detailed information on specific issues - which is where they are more properly dealt with anyway. I think that the combination of detailed questions AND on-line completion would just drive response rates down further. The Census is not just an administrative exercise but also an exercise of collective engagement in society; finding ways to improve that engagement rather than further erode it is also important but does not seem to be reflected in the consultation paper. The consultation paper does not adequately deal with the issues of individual consent in relation to the re-used of administrative and large survey data; it seems to me that such issues are likely to drive more, rather than less, suspicion of generating population statistics

Q2 - Please specify any significant uses of population and housing statistics that we have not already identified.

Not sure that you have captured the use that Public Health England makes of census data to inform policy and practice development in local areas.

Q3 - Please specify any significant additional benefits of population and housing statistics that we have not already identified.

This is not a benefit that can, perhaps, be quantified, but the use of individual Census records allows us to bring alive the individual lives of 'ordinary' people in an historical context; there are very few other sources of information about these lives before, for example, the Mass Observations of the war years, and even here, data are anonymised. There is an assumption that such knowledge about 'ordinary lives' may be replaced by data generated by, for example, on-line social networks. However, we have no current idea about the longevity of these types of data, nor have we properly addressed the ethical issues about using them to understand individual lives.

Q4 - What would the impact be if the most detailed statistics for very small geographic areas and small population groups were no longer available? High, medium, low or no impact?

High

If medium or high, please give further information.

Society is becoming more diverse and more divided. Understanding how this diversity and division is patterned geographically is vitally important for addressing its sequelae.

Q5 - What would the additional benefit be if more frequent (i.e. annual) statistics about population characteristics were available for areas like local authorities and electoral wards? High, medium, low or no additional benefit?

Low

If medium or high please give further information.

Q6 - Please specify any significant uses of census information for historical research that we have not already identified.

See my earlier answer about the possible unquantifiable benefits of being able to give 'ordinary' people a place in history.

Q7 - What advantages or disadvantages for genealogical or historical research can you see from a move to a solution based on archiving administrative data sources?

None - being able to track individuals and households across the decennial Censuses is the greatest benefit that the release of Census records after 100 years offers.

Q8 - What are your views of the risks of each census approach and how they might be managed?

The risks of moving to a greater reliance on online completion of a decennial Census is the sub-groups that would be missed, by definition, and public suspicion of electronic data collection. This route would need very careful campaigns to influence public opinion and very careful understanding of who would be missed because they do not have on-line access to anything. Simply assuming that 'everyone' will have access to computers in the future is not borne out by emerging evidence about the digital divide. The risks of the administrative approach are already clear. The reputational risks to the UK (in a decade when India has managed for the first time to run a successful Census) do not seem to have been considered. Have we really become the sort of country that would rather save a relatively small amount of money than continue to provide a resource that is both historically significant and contemporarily highly useful and trusted?

Q9 - Are there any other issues that you believe we should be taking into account?

No.

