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SECTOR: Unknown - Individual

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

1. Collection of information from households once a decade Presumably the proposal is to replace most of the post out/return questionnaires with on-line completion, and to focus physical questionnaires by post and in person delivery on those with least access to IT and hardest to reach respectively. The advantages are a reduction in printing, collection and processing cost, while more guidance could be provided while the questionnaire was being completed and the submission could be checked for consistency interactively. The disadvantage is the likelihood that the response rate will fall substantially, depending upon the percentage of respondents from whom on-line completion is sought. It would still be necessary to create a comprehensive address/population database to assess how complete the return is. Presumably unique passwords would be posted to each address or household to prevent multiple replies. Another problem is that the lower the response rate to the Census, presumably the less reliable adjustment using the census coverage survey becomes? The benefits of maintaining a census of some kind are primarily (i) the creation of a reliable benchmark of information about the population as a whole and (ii) the ability to create small area information. Such small area information can be updated from administrative sources using small area estimation techniques. It would be preferable to continue a traditional census on the 2011 model. Move to on-line would reduce the reliability of the Census in unknown ways. 2. A census using administrative data sources and surveys. This approach should be considerably cheaper than the traditional or on-line Census, but it is totally dependent on the data input to the estimation process. This does not include many of the attributes of the population which are of vital importance for social, economic and health planning and research. The population by age and sex is already estimated from birth and death registration and migration estimates so the Beyond 2011 approach should demonstrate it can go further and estimate attribute data from administrative data before it can be considered to be an alternative. The document mentions ethnicity and language as attributes to be measured using a survey, but economic activity, unemployment, occupation and industry of employment, educational qualifications and housing characteristics are all very important attribute variables which must be provided. Will the microdata from confidential government databases (e.g. the DWP and HMRC records of earnings, NI contributions and benefit payments) be used in the estimation process? If not, the estimation is hobbled by being based on limited cross-tabulations of the data. If so, the potential risk of loss of really sensitive individual data is substantial, at least in the public mind. How will an estimation approach based on data cross-tabulated by local authority cope with LAD boundary change? Surely use of administrative data will be compromised if the basis on which data is recorded changes? An example of this is the succession of revisions to the way unemployment is counted. The administrative count now only counts those claiming the relevant benefits or credits, not the number of people who are unemployed. The LFS/APS is the main source of many of these, but the sample size is extremely small. The proposed survey would be about 15 times larger. The response rate of the LFS/APS has been falling over time to around 40% and comparison with the Census (e.g. on occupation) suggests that the estimates yielded may be questionable. The proposed survey is probably not large enough to yield estimates which could be treated with confidence for small areas. The need to aggregate surveys over a long period to yield reliable results means that there is no real improvement over the Census in terms of timeliness while leaving major questions over accuracy. The likelihood is that the second approach will leave us with very limited small area data and much greater uncertainty over the characteristics of the population even at the national scale.

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

Census data has been used as the basis for making small area estimates from other surveys - for example literacy and numeracy estimates at MSOA scale based on the BIS Skills for Life Survey. Such estimates are extremely important for local economic development strategies.

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

The availability of such data enables new forms of information to be generated through combination with other spatially disaggregated data. An example is the creation of the ONOMAP classification which links names to ethnicity by university College London. This enables organisations with lists of names to make estimates of incidence by ethnic group. A particularly valuable use is the ability to classify health problems to ethnic group and relate to the underlying population by ethnic group, using health records.

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.

This would prevent the analysis of neighbourhood characteristics and undermine the creation of the Indices of Multiple Deprivation. There is considerable variation within a local authority area, and in Wales having only LAD level information would generalise over the characteristics of quite distinct settlements in a LAD. Data for rural settlements would mostly be lost, having a great impact on the planning of local services in rural areas.

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?

Medium

If medium or high please give further information.

These are already available to some extent from the Annual Population Survey and estimation exercises. The proposal would make the frequency of data availability slightly greater and extend data to somewhat smaller areas. There would be no improvement for rural areas.

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

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?

There is great potential given the wide range of information available in confidential administrative data bases, as a complete family and geographical life history not limited to 10 year time slices could be created if all the data was exploited.

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

1. Traditional Census Main risks are the escalating cost involved in maintaining a comprehensive address database and targeting the hard-to-reach. The former could be mitigated by making this a continuous activity. Public utilities, developers, retailers and postal companies could contribute to the cost and provide data as they would also benefit from an up-to-date database. 2. Administrative Census Loss of essential information, especially at the local scale. Significant levels of uncertainty over the estimates produced. Problems of accuracy would be mitigated by using much more detailed administrative data and increasing the size of the annual survey.

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

The main problems with the Census are that it takes so long for data to be published, too much of it is published in the form of pre-designed tables rather than more flexible multi-dimensional tables and microdata and that it is only collected once every ten years. An attractive approach would be to combine the two alternatives presented, with Census respondents invited to complete the annual survey on-line on a voluntary basis with the survey itself concentrated on hard-to-reach groups.