

Geography – Background Information – 1991 Census Output Areas

Output areas have been created by National Records of Scotland (NRS) for 1991 census small area statistics in Scotland. This was in response to demands by census users to have areas which allow comparability with small area statistics output from 1981 and 1971. NRS were able to meet this demand because postcodes were used to plan 1981 Enumeration Districts (EDs), and postcode-based OAs generally fall within 1981 EDs. 1971 SAS was retabulated for 1981 EDs, thus providing a degree of continuity over 3 censuses.

The lowest area level for which small area statistics for the 1991 census are available is the output area (OA). For confidentiality purposes, each OA has at least 16 households and 50 usual residents. Output areas (OAs) were made up from aggregations of postcode units that comprised 1981 Enumeration Districts (EDs).

Since 1981, new postcodes have been created and existing ones deleted or amended. Because of this, some approximations to 1981 EDs were necessary. 1981 EDs which had more than 80 households in 1991 were, wherever possible, split into 2 or more smaller postcode-based areas, each containing at least 40 households. Conversely some 1981 EDs were too small to pass the 1991 threshold for OAs and so were absorbed into another 1981 ED being assigned to a 1991 OA. When a 1981 ED was split, every effort was made to design OAs which best followed other boundaries such as wards, while attempting to have output areas of equal size without splitting individual postcodes. In this process some OAs were created which cross true postcode sector boundaries. Where a 1981 ED was not split and it met the confidentiality requirements, the ED became an output area in its own right.

For special enumeration districts (usually large communal establishments) output areas were created only if the number of usual residents met the confidentiality threshold. In such cases, household data are not provided. These special output areas do not have mapped boundaries; their position is identified by a single grid reference.

Code Structure for 1991 Output Areas

In Scotland, each region is given a two digit code in the range 56 to 67. Each local government district or Islands area is assigned a two digit code in the range 01 to 56. In Scotland, the census equivalent of the ward is the postcode sector. These are not necessarily true postcode sectors as they may have been split to recognise local government district boundaries. Within each local government district, each pseudo postcode sector is assigned a two character code in the range AA to FG. For ease of reference, pseudo postcode sectors are called postcode sectors.

In Scotland the 1991 ED was used only as a unit of collection and has not been used for the output of SAS.

Instead NRS used subdivisions of 1981 EDs, or sometimes whole 1981 EDs, as the output units for the 1991 SAS. These 1991 OAs are aggregations of contiguous unit postcodes, or, rarely, single unit postcodes, to form areas which nest as closely as possible into 1981 EDs.

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The codes assigned to OAs consist of two digits and an alphabetic character, for example 01A. The first two digits are the 1981 ED code and the character suffix is used to identify each separate OA within a subdivided ED. For example, if a 1981 ES (01) has been subdivided into two OAs, the codes will be 01A and 01B respectively. Where 1981 EDs are not subdivided, the character code suffix is not used. This code, when used in conjunction with the region, district and postcode sector level identifiers provides a unique eight or nine character hierarchical identifier for each output area in Scotland, for example 5601AB03A. The first eight characters of the OA will correspond to the code used for the 1981 ED except in parts of the Aberdeen (AB) postal area where postcode sectors were reorganised between the censuses by the Royal Mail.

Example of OA structure

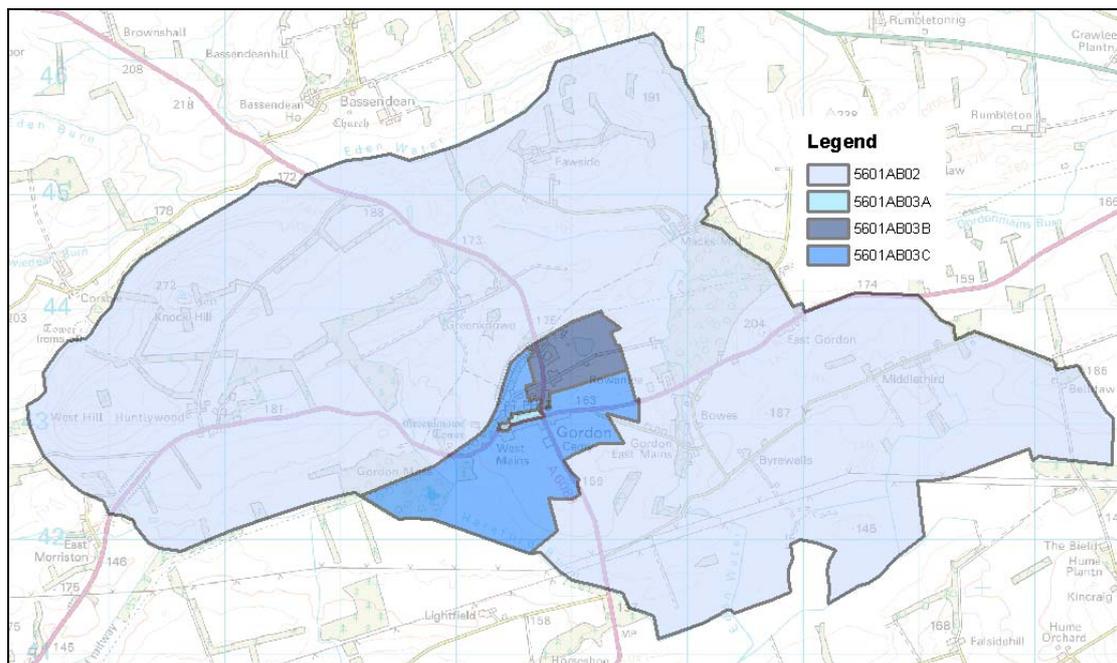
56 – Borders Region

5601 – Berwickshire District

5601AB – Postcode Sector “TD3 6(pt)”

5601AB03A – Output area

Sample of 1991 OA boundaries



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