

Beyond 2011

**Stakeholder Engagement workshop
Edinburgh, 15th January 2013**

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Beyond 2011 Stakeholder Engagement workshop – 15 January 2013

1. Introduction

National Records of Scotland (NRS) has been running a series of stakeholder engagement sessions with representatives from a range of users interested in small area population and socio demographic information. Local authorities, health boards and others have been invited to take part in this process. These discussions on the 15th January 2013 precede a formal consultation to gather user needs which is being launched in March 2013.

Each session began with a presentation detailing the reasons behind the initiation of the project and the different options that are currently being investigated. This presentation can be found within the [Beyond 2011 Events](#) section on the NRS website. Delegates were invited to discuss how they currently use census information and how any changes could affect their work. The outcome of these discussions is included in sections 2 – 6 of this document.

2. Current uses of census data

The following section details how the census is currently used by the delegates. It was clear that census data is hugely important to all aspects of many delegates work.

‘Almost everything I do relies on the census.’

2.1 Planning and resource allocation

The census is currently used by the delegates in the planning of a range of services across Scotland. The delegates use a range of aggregate statistics derived from the census to effectively plan services. Aggregate statistics are a collection of summary counts of the numbers of people, families or households resident in specific geographical areas possessing particular characteristics, or combinations of characteristics drawn from the themes of population, including ethnicity and religion, health, work, and housing. They are derived from analysis of the information provided in returned census forms. Adjustments are made in the outputs for people and households who may have been missed out and not been recorded on a form, or may have been counted more than once by being recorded on more than one form.

A number of the particular characteristics and combinations of characteristics drawn from the census, such as health and ethnicity, were mentioned by the delegates as being important to the planning of a range of services. Considerations of equalities characteristics are important for Local Authorities when producing and maintaining [Single Outcome Agreements](#) (SOAs). SOAs set out how Community Planning departments in councils will contribute to the [Scottish Government's National Outcomes](#) information for both of these is available on the Scottish Government website. The purpose of a SOA is to identify areas for improvement and deliver better outcomes for the people of Scotland as well as individual local authorities. A number of delegates emphasised the importance of cross tabulations to SOAs. Cross tabulations summarise data based on two or more of the characteristics and can show the inter-relationship between two or more characteristics. For example, gender and ethnicity can be cross tabulated with employment information to produce figures on how many unemployed Pakistani women there are within a specified geographical area. Delegates agreed that reliable information on these issues can only be found in the census.

The delegates discussed how census data is cross tabulated to profile areas in order to understand and predict housing needs for service provisions.

‘We use the census to understand housing needs. It is particularly useful to understand the age profile to plan for housing needs such as care homes and to break down particular needs, such as disability. It also helps to provide measures to meet needs.’

This information can be cross tabulated with housing information on tenure and number of rooms from the census to build housing strategies. The importance of the census to housing strategy was emphasised by the delegates working in this area:

‘We use the census on a day-to-day basis for housing strategy.’

Some delegates also use General Health questions which are ‘fundamental to providing healthy life predictions’ to plan services. General Health questions ask the population how their health is in general and if they have any disabilities which have lasted or are expected to last over 12 months¹. Health can be cross tabulated with characteristics on ethnicity, for example, to understand health inequalities in an area.

‘The General Health question is worth waiting 10 years for as it is a reliable source to base information from.’

While some delegates found the general health question useful, other delegates noted that the accuracy of personal assessments of health is questionable and there may be better ways of assessing public health.

The [public sector equalities duty](#) (PDF document available on the Press for Change website) arising from the Equalities Act 2010 ([legislation.gov.uk](#) website) also requires all public bodies to make assessments to ensure they are not discriminating against anyone with a protected characteristic (i.e. age, gender, disability, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion and belief, etc). As discussed above, the census provides local authorities and NHS Boards with baseline information on these characteristics to monitor discrimination. All delegates stressed the importance of the census as being the primary source of equality information, particularly relating to ethnicity, disability (self-diagnosed), and religion.

‘Census has data on ethnicity which would otherwise be hard to obtain.’

Geographical coverage

Aggregate statistics derived from the census are available from data zones to a national level. This flexibility to the statistics was considered very important to the effective planning and targeting of resources. The delegates emphasised the importance of small area data to their work. SOAs require data below Local Authority level to help identify areas for improvement within local authorities. Low geographical levels of data can be used to aggregate up to the level that is required to build data zones. Delegates stated that small geographies were very useful to Local Authorities when they receive information requests from the public and businesses for data, especially when

Footnote

1) These questions were asked in the [2001 Census](#) questionnaire and then again in the [2011 Census](#) one (both PDF documents available on the NRS website) along with an additional question about having a disability expected to last over 12 months with disability categories, including mental health, physical disability and learning disability. Both questionnaires are available on the NRS website.

the requested geographical areas might not match the official boundaries of Local Authorities. The detailed geographical coverage of the census allows for the data to be aggregated depending on the users' needs.

Some delegates also said that population estimates at the highest geographical levels (up to the national level), derived from the census and the subsequent Mid-Year Estimates (MYE)², are important in providing the denominators to calculate service provision.

'It is still tremendously important to have a [population] count.'

2.2 Benchmarking

The census is used by a number of delegates to check the accuracy of their own data and to make sure that they are not 'out of sync' in the long term.

'The census gets us back to a sound footing.'

A number of delegates emphasised that the census is widely considered a reliable, authoritative data source. The census was seen as being politically neutral and had no 'sponsorship' behind it.

'It is seen as a 'gold star standard' and is valued above all other surveys.'

'You take census information as gospel – it is trusted information.'

2.3 Issues with the current census model

Some delegates criticised the 10 year frequency of the census. They felt that the census cannot adequately capture changes in society and population figures at the current frequency.

'The problem is that it is [currently] 12 years out of date and does not capture population changes.'

It was discussed that the MYE need a regular census to keep them accurate. One delegate believed that 'the MYE become less accurate with every year that passes after the census' and felt that a more frequent census could limit inaccuracies. The ideal frequency for the collection of socio-demographic data for the delegates is discussed in [Section 3](#).

There was also some discussion about the lack of an income question in the 2011 Census. It was suggested that an income question would be very useful and that it would improve other indicators used by the delegates. For example, delegates felt that using information on household income in the [Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation](#) (SIMD) (available on the Scottish Government website), which identifies small area concentrations of multiple deprivation across Scotland, would 'make the income domain in SIMD that much better'.³

3. Alternative data sources used

Delegates were asked about other data sources used in their work. A wide range of administrative sources were used including Council Tax records, Citizen panels, Pupil Census, Higher Education Statistics Authority (HESA) data, Community Innovation Statistics (CIS) data, employment statistics from the Department for Work and Pensions, and information from The Register of

Footnotes

2) The mid-year population estimates provide an annual estimate for the population as of 30 June. They are based on census data and records of births, deaths and migration patterns.

3) For more information on the reasons behind question inclusion in 2011 go to the [2011 census recommendations paper](#) available in the Policy Section of the NRS website.

Sasines⁴. Some delegates also use social surveys, such as the Scottish Household Survey (SHS), Scottish Health Survey (SHeS) and smaller local surveys. A number of delegates also use Scottish Neighbourhood Statistics (SNS)⁵. SNS has developed the systems to enable statistics across most policy areas including information about benefits, education, health and the labour market to be brought together on a common small area geography.

4. Views on alternative data sources

Surveys

Delegates explained that they use social surveys in addition to the census, rather than necessarily as an alternative.

'The census is supplemented by other smaller surveys, allowing us to create a picture by putting them together.'

A delegate suggested that councils could conduct their own surveys asking the same 10 questions. This approach would be in line with the Scottish Governments harmonisation agenda, which has been running since 2005 to harmonise questions across Scottish Government surveys.

'The council have conducted annual household surveys which had 70% response rate. These could be developed. If 32 councils conduct household surveys and agree to ask the same 10 questions that might give you around 60% of the information required.'

However, some delegates expressed concern about the potential response biases of survey methods. As it is important for the sample to be as representative of the population as possible, it is important that there are not differences in the characteristics of those who respond to a survey and those who do not. As the census is compulsory this was felt by the delegates to be less of an issue for the reliability of census data.

'With other surveys there is more bias in the results because of the differences between those who respond instead of those who don't respond.'

'If we throw away enumeration from census we may end up with biased survey results'.

Some delegates were also concerned that many of the alternative and supplementary sources that they currently use have components that are actually derived from the census (for example, Scottish Neighbourhood Statistics and SIMD) and were keen to emphasise how useful these sources were.

Administrative data sources

By and large there was a positive attitude towards increased use of administrative sources.

'Administrative data should be used all the time. It should be a duty for those holding it to share it with the government. However, for this to happen there probably needs to be a cultural shift in media and public attitudes to data storage. I think data linkage is feasible.'

Footnotes

4) An instrument of SASINE is a legal document that records the transfer of ownership of a piece of land or of a building. The Register of SASINES is maintained by Registers of Scotland.

5) SNS is the Scottish Government's on-going programme to improve the availability, consistency and accessibility of small area statistics in Scotland.

‘From my experience people have been very happy to give us information. I think there is a willingness to provide information in the population at large.’

Delegates also discussed possible alternatives including HR personnel records, health records, and Her Majesty’s Revenue & Customs (HMRC) data so that Local Authorities could monitor equality and provide better indicators of poverty.

Data linkage

Some delegates also discussed possible uses of Data linkage⁶. Data linkage is the joining of two or more administrative or survey datasets to increase the power of analysis possible with the data.

‘Data that connects housing to life chances and health outcomes would be useful.’

One delegate also put forward the use of the National Insurance numbers as an index, with individual references that can be used for cross-referencing between sources.

‘If the census is not an option, National Insurance numbers are common and could be used as an alternative.’

5. Priorities for alternatives to the census

The groups were asked to discuss the following aspects of the information they use and their relative importance:

- Quality and accuracy
- Geographic coverage
- Frequency
- Aggregation

It was agreed that quality and accuracy were more important than the frequency of the survey by the majority of delegates. This was particularly important for measuring outcomes and understanding change over time. There was discussion on the expectations of Local Authorities and the pressure from users to have accurate data.

‘Quality is the priority – it is important that data is trustworthy and detailed.’

‘If it’s not at the appropriate geography and accuracy it’s unusable. The frequency is desirable but not essential.’

Delegates were keen to emphasise that quality and accuracy, and also geographic coverage of information are the most important aspects to their work. Geographical level of data was also still deemed to be very important for those involved in community planning and travel to work maps.

‘It is best to collect data at a low level. We are confident in census data because it has come from non-aggregated data.’

The optimum frequency of data was also discussed. The majority of delegates agreed that they would be happy with two year intervals between the collection of data. Some delegates thought that more frequent data would become burdensome as they could potentially end up in a continual cycle of

Footnote

6) More information on the [Data Linkage Framework](#) and the [Data Sharing Service](#) can be found on the Scottish Government website.

updating their information, which would also have resource implications. Some delegates agreed that more than once a year would be unnecessary as seasonal fluctuations could make the data difficult to interpret.

‘I would be happy with every two years but every year would be the best for strategic assessments. Economic questions would be better as often as possible.’

‘I think it’s unlikely you would be able to get census accuracy annually. Having the census every 10 years is acceptable because you can depend on it. The General Health question is worth waiting 10 years for as it is a reliable source to base information from.’

‘An increased refresh rate would be good. 10 years is too long.’

6. Implications of not having the census

Delegates agreed that it would be difficult to quantify the impact of not having the census. Most delegates see the census as an important benchmark for their work. Delegates expressed concern that if it was not available then people would start guessing how resources should be allocated, which could result in inefficiencies. Some delegates also expressed concern about the impact that not having the census could have on the ability of local authorities to plan effectively.

‘How many badly targeted operations will be put in place if future planning is flawed?’

In terms of legal implications, the delegates reiterated the legal requirement to monitor and assess equalities information. The importance of equalities indicators has been discussed in [section 2](#) outlining current uses of the census.

‘The only legal requirement of the Single Outcome Agreement is to keep reviewing data.’

A number of delegates said that ultimately, as Local Authorities need the data that the census produces, they would have to carry out their own surveys. Delegates believed that this would have financial implications and also ramifications for the quality of the data.

‘If you remove the census people might start commissioning their own surveys which would have low response rates and less reliable results. This would mean national savings are spent on sub-standard surveys throughout Scotland instead of one which can be relied on. I think local authorities would value and pay for having the census in their area.’

‘To see it as a cost saving nationally is a mistake. The census only costs about one pound per person per year. Is this a bad thing?’

7. Conclusion

The discussions generated were useful and allowed the Beyond 2011 team to see how the census is used by local authorities and health boards in the East of Scotland area. The information included in this report will be added to the bank of information currently being collected by the Beyond 2011 team and will be used in the evaluation of any census alternatives. Delegates will also be kept informed about any future events relating to census options and will be sent a link to the formal consultation in early 2013.

8. Our contact details

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