

Beyond 2011

**Stakeholder Engagement workshop
Perth, 24th January 2013**

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Contents

1. Introduction	3
2. Current uses of census data	3
3. Alternative data sources used	7
4. Views on alternative data sources.....	8
5. Priorities for alternatives to the census	10
6. Implications of not having the census	10
7. Conclusions.....	11
8. Our contact details	11

Beyond 2011 Stakeholder Engagement workshop – 24th 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 24th 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 – 5 of this document.

2. Current uses of census data

Delegates discussed how they currently use the census. The following section summarises their main uses of the census.

2.1 Planning and resource allocation

The census is currently used in the planning of a range of services. 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.

‘We rely on the census heavily for information on ethnic groups to understand service needs and initiatives.’

Delegates felt that the census provides a number of unique estimates, which are important to planning. Detailed information on tenure and room numbers is also used for housing planning.

‘The census is important for policy and planning and underpins housing strategy.’

‘It is essential to carrying out needs and demands strategy. We rely on the census for information on tenure and the number of rooms within households.’

These unique estimates also include information on travel to work which allows local councils to effectively plan transport.

‘The census is the only source of information on travel to work. It is vital to transport development.’

Census data on language and ethnicity is used in the provision of language classes and community groups.

‘The information on language helps us to understand the demand for language classes.’

The importance of the census in resource allocation was also stressed by the delegates. Speaking generally about the uses of the census, a delegate stated:

‘The census is mainly used for internal purposes such as fund allocation.’

Equalities Duties

The [public sector equalities duty](#) (available on the Press for Change website) arising from the Equalities Act 2010 (available on the [legislation.gov.uk](#) website) 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.). The census provides local authorities and NHS Boards with baseline information on these characteristics. 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.

‘Only the census captures equalities data.’

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 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. The groups emphasised the importance of the low level geographical outputs that the census can provide.

'The census underpins population estimates down to data zone level.'

The delegates also discussed the increased demand for detailed information at this level. The necessity for more information at lower level data zones was also seen as important for effective resource allocation.

'There is an increased demand for access at lower level data zones. It was a Scottish Government initiative to get lower level statistics.'

'Chief Executives want to know what is happening at low geography areas for resource allocation.'

2.2 Benchmarking

Additionally, some delegates claimed that although they use other data sources the census is still used as a point of reference and ultimately, they 'always go back to the census'.

'The census provides a benchmark against which other sources can be checked.'

'We also have our own local sources of data but they don't have the same clout.'

In support of this, the level of trust in the census was also emphasised. Delegates felt that the census is more reliable and authoritative than other data sources.

'Everyone trusts the census – you just have to say it's the census and people never question it. It's as good as you get.'

'The census is almost a brand, a seal of approval.'

'The census offers truly consistent data for comparative purposes. We have full confidence and trust in it.'

2.3 Information requests

The delegates also discussed their role in providing socio-demographic information to external bodies such as community groups and local charities. They stated that these bodies require this information to plan their own funding bids and services.

'Religious groups use the census for parish information – this cannot be found anywhere else.'

'Local charities need data for funding (often Lottery funding) so they can reach the hard to reach groups they are there to help.'

Delegates also discussed the importance of the census in providing information to businesses. Demographic and geographical information can be effectively used when targeting investment.

'Prospective businesses ask the council for ward information to see what areas are the best to start up in'.

2.4 Issues with the current census model

A reoccurring criticism of the census from the delegates was its frequency and the impact this has on its reliability, quality, and therefore, utility.

‘The shelf-life of the census is short.’

‘The census is out of date – 2001 data has run its course.’

‘It’s hard to remember how I used the census as 2001 data is losing its relevance given its age.’

Other delegates raised the issue of needing more frequent reliable snapshots due to migrant populations. There was concern in all groups about the census missing peaks and fluctuations in the migrant population.

‘Because of sudden influxes of migrant workers it is very difficult to keep track of the population. It is difficult to know our service needs. These are often urgent needs for families. We need help with local knowledge.’

‘We experienced one of the largest increases in migration in Scotland [...] but how big is this phenomenon really? Currently we are just relying on anecdotal evidence. If this perceived influx of migrant workers is correct then support mechanisms need to be put in place. This requires more frequent and up-to-date data.’

Further implications of the ten year frequency of the census were also discussed by delegates in relation to housing and other service provisions.

‘It has been a struggle in housing as the population grew too fast. We have a housing deficit and low numbers of affordable housing. Because it grew too fast we don’t know where they are moving to, it’s difficult to keep track. There are people who never come into contact with services. This not knowing is a huge problem. But the current census is not a solution, a more regular census would be better.’

‘A new housing development is not caught in the 2001 census – in 2001 it was a field and 2011 we have however many houses. We have missed a whole set of data in the middle which makes planning for new schools and closing or merging them difficult.’

Although the Mid-Year Estimates¹, which use the census as a baseline, are able to provide updated population figures by age and sex at a local level, the 10 year cycle of the Census was still perceived to be a problem, by delegates, for reliability due to the possible problem of inaccuracies and cumulative effects in the Mid-year Estimates; these are regularly rebased following a new Census.

Concerns were raised that across many sources there is currently too much reliance on estimation. Increased frequency of data would help to address this.

‘We are amalgamating household statistics and you wonder how representative they really are. We seem to be estimating everything and when we estimate the reliability is stretched.’

Footnote

- 1) 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.

The necessity for general local knowledge in addition to the census was also discussed. Local authorities use the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) to identify small area concentrations of multiple deprivation. It allows effective targeting of policies and funding. The SIMD ranks small areas (called data zones) from most deprived – ranked 1 – to least deprived – ranked 6,505. A delegate claimed that SIMD is not always entirely reliable, and local knowledge needs to be acknowledged.

‘Local knowledge feeds into the data, i.e. the statistics might say that an area is generally good, but you know that it is masking a particularly deprived area because the surrounding area is wealthy and skews the results. Pockets of deprivation don’t always fall into defined areas – they can span different data zones.’

3. Alternative data sources used

Delegates use a wide range of other data sources in their work, including social surveys, administrative data and management information systems.

Social surveys

Delegates use other social survey data, including the Scottish Household Survey (SHS), the Scottish Health Survey, and the Voluntary Population Survey. The group also mentioned the use of local or ad-hoc surveys.

Administrative data sources

Delegates also use administrative data sources in their work. Administrative data is derived from information collected and maintained as part of an administration system, such as health records, vehicle licensing and tax systems. The delegates mentioned using the School Census, Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) data, the Address Gazetteer, the Register of SASINES² (ROS) and Community Health Index (CHI).

Management Information Systems

The delegates also use a number of Management Information Systems (MIS) relating to their specific line of work including, Education management information software (SEEMiS), Social work information system (SWIFT and local authority Customer Relationship Management (CRM).

Scottish Neighbourhood Statistics

Many delegates also used Scottish Neighbourhood Statistics (SNS). SNS is the Scottish Government's on-going programme to improve the availability, consistency and accessibility of small area statistics in Scotland. 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. SNS also produce SIMD results.

Footnote

2) An instrument of SASINES 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.

4. Views on alternative data sources

4.1 Administrative Data Sources

The merits of a number of alternative data sources were discussed in more detail, particularly in providing information on hard to reach groups.

‘Some families never engage and if it wasn’t for schools and the school census we wouldn’t know about many of them.’

The delegates discussed potential uses of the Community Health Index (CHI). CHI is a database in wide use throughout the NHS in Scotland containing data on patient demographics and some clinical information on aspects of healthcare screening and surveillance. The CHI number is, effectively, an NHS number and its use as a patient identifier makes it increasingly important to the implementation of 'ehealth' Electronic Health Records (EHR) and other Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) being introduced to healthcare in Scotland. Alternative uses of the CHI in addition to the NHS were discussed.

‘CHI is better than the census at the moment, i.e. if planning for schools, we can see how many children have been born and are living in the area and who will be needing a school place in the coming years.’

However, issues of coverage and inaccuracies of the CHI were also discussed in other groups.

‘The problem with CHI is that not everyone is registered or it is incorrect.’

4.2 Administrative Sources and Data Linkage

The discussion turned to the more general merits and problems of the use of administrative data as an alternative to the census. Generally the groups were positive about the potential use of administrative data and data linkage³, the joining of two or more administrative or survey datasets to increase the power of analysis possible with the data. They believed that ‘the savings would be massive’.

‘There is so much red tape and bureaucracy. Someone needs to say stop- why can’t we join up? Trying to match up the data is where the money should go. It sounds like a really good idea. [...] if all our systems were linked it wouldn’t be such a hassle. If we make clear our intentions hassle would go away and it wouldn’t feel a burden. All this about ID numbers in the media – we all have lots of them anyway, it would be better if we could just have one.’

‘I think we need to make the effort to change perspectives on it and show it’s about providing a better service. Most people have multiple ID numbers anyway but they are not aware. Lots of people don’t know about CHI numbers.’

Following on from this discussion the delegates discussed what the next steps to using administrative data and data linkage might involve.

Footnote

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

‘We need to run a pilot study. We need to see if it works and get the counts. It might be a change for the better.’

‘We need to show the benefits. It might take a very long time. It might be generational as we move on and use different technology.’

4.3 Issues with Data Linkage

The groups also had some discussion about the potential problems of data linkage. Communication problems between data holders were highlighted as a barrier to data sharing.

‘The problem is data holders won’t talk to each other. It would be great to link across, but it’s very difficult.’

The group emphasised problems with software and infrastructure that inhibited data sharing and linkage.

‘We have strong partnerships for data linkage but we don’t have the infrastructure.’

‘There are so many queries and access issues. We need to change it to make the software better – we are fighting through these barriers. Better software would solve the problems first.’

Additionally, delegates across the groups discussed inadequate data management skills and knowledge. Delegates claimed that information about how to access and what information is available is not passed on between employees.

‘Sometimes the people who ‘own’ databases have inherited them and don’t actually know how to use them. The people who created them have left and nobody knows how they work.’

‘One of the problems is that a few people run the system. When they go we need to build resilience so that we don’t lose information and how to access it.’

The group also discussed the legal frameworks and issues that can prevent data linkage.

‘The ICO (Information Commissioner’s Office)⁴ is so strict on matching – privacy protection is so strict. Child protection issues are a nightmare.’

‘There are also so many problems with consent.’

Delegates discussed the problem of the scarcity of equalities information within administrative data sources. The group discussed the need for equalities information to be consistently captured across data sources and whether data owners should be obliged to gather this information.

‘Everyone is doing it in a different way [data collection] there are no single protocols.’

Footnote

- 4) The Information Commissioner’s Office (ICO) is the UK’s independent public authority set up to uphold information rights. The ICO enforces and oversees the Freedom of Information Act 2000, Data Protection Act 1998, and the Privacy and Electronic Communications Regulations 2003.

‘I think we need a central system that forces consistency – a unified system.’

To mitigate the inconsistencies a delegate advocated that improvements to local authority administrative data should be centrally funded. This was seen as a possible avenue by delegates to help with funding problems.

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

The groups agreed that quality and accuracy were the most important aspects from the list above.

‘I would prioritise quality and accuracy, as reliability is the most important.’

Delegates debated how often they would like to receive population and socio-demographic information and all agreed that it should be more frequent than every ten years.

‘We need to keep it up to date – every two years would allow capture of transitory population.’

‘It would be useful to have robust population figures more frequently than at present but perhaps supplemented or benchmarked against a ten-yearly (as present) full census.’

The majority of delegates agreed every five years would be ‘reasonable’ and ‘a good start’. There was also a general consensus that every year would be too often as ‘a year is actually too short to do the job’.

Geographical coverage was viewed as being ‘useful but not vital’. One of the groups discussed the importance of data zones and the changing expectations for information at this level.

‘We have worked hard to build awareness of the availability and it is now embedded. There are expectations and we are asked for information at data zone level more and more.’

6. Implications of not having the census

The group discussed what the main implications would be if the census was not available. Delegates felt that the main impact was that they would not be able to meet their Equality Duties. The group also noted it would be difficult to provide low level outputs without the census and that the importance of this is more likely to increase over time.

‘I don’t see pressure for information at data zone level going away.’

‘The potential reduction in the number of councils across Scotland needs to be taken into account here. The impact of any reduction on databases, internal data sources would likely make the census and its flexibility down to Output Areas even more valuable.’

For some delegates the repercussions of not having the census would be very wide-ranging for resource allocations.

‘If the census was not available there would be resource implications. It would have a domino effect as a lot of things are under-pinned by the census.’

Some delegates disagreed and claimed that they could rely on other data sources to meet [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 are 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.

‘If the census was not available it would not be that bad as tend to use other data sets in the council for SOA. It would be more upheaval if the census was the only source of information.’

‘SOA is high on the agenda [...] we could do without census as long as there was something on the population.’

7. Conclusions

The discussions generated were useful and allowed the Beyond 2011 team to see how the census is used by local authorities and health boards. The groups were very interested in discussing the issues surrounding data linkage and the potential solutions to these problems.

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 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

For further information or enquiries about the Beyond 2011 please contact:

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