



House of Commons
Public Administration Select
Committee

**Too soon to scrap the
Census: Government and
UK Statistics Authority
Responses to the
Committee's Fifteenth
Report of Session 2013–14**

Second Special Report of Session 2014–15

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The Public Administration Select Committee (PASC)

The Public Administration Select Committee is appointed by the House of Commons to examine the reports of the Parliamentary Commissioner for Administration and the Health Service Commissioner for England, which are laid before this House, and matters in connection therewith, and to consider matters relating to the quality and standards of administration provided by civil service departments, and other matters relating to the civil service.

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The current staff of the Committee are Catherine Tyack and Sian Woodward (Joint Clerks), Rebecca Short (Second Clerk), Sarah Taylor (Committee Specialist), Sarah Hawkswood (Senior Committee Assistant) and Jonathan Olivier-Wright (Web and Publications Assistant).

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Second Special Report

The Public Administration Select Committee reported to the House on *Too soon to scrap the Census* in its Fifteenth Report of Session 2013-14, published on 17 April 2014. The Government Response was received on 18 July 2014 and is published in this report as Appendix 1. The UK Statistics Authority's Response was received on 21 July 2014 and is published in this Report as Appendix 2.

Appendix 1: Government Response

Letter from The Rt Hon Francis Maude MP, Minister for the Cabinet Office, to Bernard Jenkin MP, Chair of PASC, dated 18 July 2014

I am responding on behalf of the Government to the Committee's fifteenth Report of Session 2013-14, *Too soon to scrap the Census* (HC1090), published on 17 April 2014. The Government welcomes the Committee's report.

A number of the recommendations relate to actions that would need to be carried out by the UKSA, to which the Chair of the UKSA will respond independently as is appropriate. I have set out our detailed responses to the recommendations addressed to the Government in relation to England and Wales.

Government has long said that the census in its current form is outdated and could be delivered more effectively and cheaply. A paper based census is extremely costly and time intensive and customarily only done every ten years – so we're often relying on data that's out of date almost as soon as it has been analysed and then published.

Much work has already been carried out on the future of the census, and Government lauds the efforts of the Office of National Statistics (ONS) and the UK Statistics Authority (UKSA) in this area. Government agrees with the recommendation of the National Statistician that the 2021 census should be conducted online (or partially online), which would help us compile the data more cheaply and, when supplemented by greater use of administrative data and surveys, allow us to access more up-to-date population statistics. The Government's response of 18 July 2014 to the National Statistician's recommendation sets out these issues in more detail, which is attached for reference.

Responses to Recommendations

Population estimates are of fundamental importance to the statistical system, policy makers and society more widely, but the days of the traditional, ten-yearly, paper based census are numbered. The Government has a wealth of detailed administrative data which is currently unexploited and which could provide a rich seam of information to improve the nation's knowledge of its population and boost the quality of public services. Data from administrative sources can be richer, broader, cheaper and timelier than the equivalent from a traditional census; it can be made available far more frequently than every ten years. The National Statistician has recently recommended that there should be a census in 2021, albeit conducted where possible online, and that there should be greater use of administrative data and surveys. It is too soon to decide whether to scrap the census. We believe that it is right to have a census in 2021; as insufficient effort has been made in recent years, the alternative options for the collection of population statistics have not been adequately tested and plans are not sufficiently advanced to provide a proper replacement, given the importance of the resulting data. (Paragraph 27)

The Government has long said that the census is outdated in its current form and holds the view that it could be delivered more effectively and more cheaply. As such, Government has accepted the National Statistician's recommendation to conduct a census in 2021, where possible online, and that alongside that there should be greater use of administrative data and surveys. The Government's ambition is that the dual running of the decennial census and use of administrative data should not extend beyond 2021. The future should be based entirely on administrative data. However, any final decision on moving to the use only of administrative data beyond 2021 will be dependent on the dual running sufficiently validating the perceived feasibility of that approach.

However, in order to get the most use out of the information already held by the Government, for the purposes of high quality and granular population statistics, and before we can be sure that there can be, eventually, a full and proper replacement for the traditional census, much more work must be done. We are concerned that the work on the future of the census has been done in isolation. (Paragraph 28)

Government does not accept that the work on the future of the census has been done in isolation. The ONS has conducted extensive consultation into the future of the census, and received evidence from Government, academics, and members of the public. Much work has already taken place, particularly to ensure that public authorities are able to share administrative data with ONS for statistical purposes.

As Government has now accepted the National Statistician's recommendation, work on the census in 2021 and beyond is ongoing, led by ONS. It is the Government's ambition that beyond 2021 the decennial census would not be undertaken, instead more regular and timely administrative data would be used to produce statistics.

Public concerns about data sharing must be addressed and must not be a barrier to making the most of the information already collected and held by the Government. The Minister's objective of "better, quicker information, more frequently and cheaper" depends upon this. (Paragraph 33)

Government is mindful of the need to maintain the trust and support of citizens, and so have launched an open policy making process. We are working in a collaborative and open manner with civil society organisations and the wider public sector as well as groups with a specific interest in privacy. This process will explore whether government data can be better used in order to improve our understanding of the economy and society, deliver more targeted and joined-up public services, and save public money lost through fraud, error and debt. We are not envisaging the creation of any large databases, or collecting more data on citizens, just using information in a way that the public already assumes we do. We plan to develop and publish policy proposals on data sharing towards the end of this year.

The Cabinet Office and the Office for National Statistics must make every effort to publicise the benefits of greater sharing of administrative data within Government and to the wider world, in order to realise the considerable benefits of using administrative data for policy-making, policy understanding and efficiency, and of course for the production of population statistics. The Government should use the lessons learnt from the problems with the "care.data" rollout to embark upon a public information campaign about the future of the census in order to raise understanding of the benefits of sharing administrative data, give information about the safeguards which will be in place to protect people's personal information and privacy, in order to smooth the way for its greater use. (Paragraph 34)

As we have already detailed, the Government is mindful of the need to maintain the trust and support of citizens, and so have launched an open policy making process in which we are working collaboratively with groups with a specific interest in individual privacy, local practitioners (through the LGA), academics, Government officials and some private sector organisations. This process has been informed by some of the issues that arose during the care.data rollout. Communications to support the publication of our proposals later this year will seek to learn appropriate lessons from the care.data rollout.

Finally, I wish to thank you and the other members of the Committee for this Report.

Attachment to Government Response: Letter from The Rt Hon Francis Maude MP, Minister to the Cabinet Office, to Sir Andrew Dilnot, Chair, UK Statistical Authority dated 18 July 2014

Thank you for your letter of 27 March regarding the census and future provision of population statistics in England and Wales. The Government welcomes the recommendation for a predominantly online census in 2021 supplemented by further use of administrative and survey data.

Government recognises the value of the census and its history as a bedrock of statistical infrastructure. The census provides information on the population that is of fundamental importance to society. At the same time, Government has long said that the census in its current form is outdated and – with modern technology – could be delivered more effectively and more cheaply. Modernising the approach could significantly improve the speed of analysis and outputs. In addition, we are not making the best use of the considerable data that government already collects.

We agree with the recommendation for an online census in 2021 as a modern successor to the traditional paper-based decennial census, with support for those who are unable to complete the census online. We welcome the increased use of administrative data in producing the census in 2021 and other population statistics, and to improve statistics between censuses, since this would make the best use of all available data and provide a sound basis for the greater use of administrative data and surveys in the future. We welcome ONS plans for further research to determine the most appropriate blend of methods and data sources for the 2021 census. However, our support for the dual running of an online (decennial) census with increased use of administrative data is only relevant to 2021 and not for future censuses. Our ambition is that censuses after 2021 will be conducted using other sources of data and providing more timely statistical information. However, any final decision on moving to the use only of administrative data beyond 2021 will be dependent on the dual running sufficiently validating the perceived feasibility of that approach. In the period up to 2021 UKSA's plans should include ensuring that adequate research into the use of administrative data and surveys is carried out to enable a decision about the future methodology for capturing population and census data.

The Government recognises that the public must be assured of privacy and confidentiality with the use of administrative data for statistical purposes, which is why we have launched an open policy making process. We are working in a collaborative and open manner with civil society organisations and the wider Public Sector as well as groups with a specific interest in individual privacy. This process will explore how government data can be better used to improve national statistics and our understanding of the economy and society. Colleagues from ONS are fully engaged in this work.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank you and the UKSA Board for the work on this important matter and look forward to receiving the detailed financial estimates which underpin these recommendations.

Appendix 2: UK Statistics Authority Response

Letter from Sir Andrew Dilnot, Chair, UK Statistics Authority, to Bernard Jenkin MP, Chair of PASC, dated 21 July 2014

Options for the future of the census

The Office for National Statistics has not provided detailed information about what data, other than a head count, could be harvested from the various administrative sources. We recommend that the Office for National Statistics lists all the public and quasi-public sources that could be tapped for data, the data that could be forthcoming from them and the administrative, technical and legal barriers to the use of, and ultimately linking of, that data. (Paragraph 21)

The Office for National Statistics (ONS) published a research paper in October 2013, setting out ONS's initial assessment of a broad range of public authority administrative data sources.¹ This paper indicated that several sources could potentially provide information for the purposes of producing official statistics on the characteristics of the population. ONS believes that this assessment has helped to identify priority sources that will be of future interest.

ONS also published four case studies in May 2014 which reviewed the potential for using administrative data for some key topics: ethnicity, household estimates, unemployment and income.² This work indicated the potential in combining administrative and survey data to provide some of this information. ONS's ongoing research programme will explore this potential further.

The use of an address register in 2011 was a very good example of using administrative records to enhance the accuracy of population statistics. Other administrative data was also apparently used. We recommend the Office for National Statistics sets out what data it used in 2011, the impact it had on the resulting estimates, the lessons learnt from this experience and how such additional sources can be used more widely and effectively. (Paragraph 26)

The 2011 Census population estimates have been subject to a rigorous quality assurance process. As a part of this process a series of checks have been carried out that involved comparing census data to a range of other data sources, including administrative data. Examples of the use of administrative data in the quality assurance process include:

- Council Tax data (aggregated to local area geographies, such as lower super output area, LSOA) which included totals of properties that were required to pay Council Tax and those that were exempt. This information was particularly helpful to quality assure

1 <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/about-ons/who-ons-are/programmes-and-projects/beyond-2011/reports-and-publications/beyond-2011-producing-socio-demographic-statistics-2.pdf>

2 <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/about-ons/who-ons-are/programmes-and-projects/beyond-2011/reports-and-publications/methods-and-policies-reports/beyond-2011--statistical-research-update.pdf>

household estimates of the resident population, which excludes most properties exempt from the payment of Council Tax, and to identify individual outlier cases.

- NHS patient register data were also used extensively in 2011 Census quality assurance processes, for example reviewing the number of patient records at particular addresses so as to resolve any discrepancies between the patient register and Census returns for individual households.

Further information about the administrative sources used for the 2011 Census quality assurance process have been published in various papers available on the ONS website.³

ONS's research programme is exploring additional topic areas where administrative data could supplement data from future population censuses, while enhancing the accuracy of population statistics. These include improving the efficiency of census-taking by targeting resources towards non-responders, imputing for missing data, improving address register information about communal establishments, and using other available data sources to estimate occupancy and vacant households.

Population estimates are of fundamental importance to the statistical system, policy makers and society more widely, but the days of the traditional, ten-yearly, paper-based census are numbered. The Government has a wealth of detailed administrative data which is currently unexploited and which could provide a rich seam of information to improve the nation's knowledge of its population and boost the quality of public services. Data from administrative sources can be richer, broader, cheaper and timelier than the equivalent from a traditional census; it can be made available far more frequently than every ten years. The National Statistician has recently recommended that there should be a census in 2021, albeit conducted where possible online, and that there should be greater use of administrative data and surveys. It is too soon to decide whether to scrap the census. We believe that it is right to have a census in 2021; as insufficient effort has been made in recent years, the alternative options for the collection of population statistics have not been adequately tested and plans are not sufficiently advanced to provide a proper replacement, given the importance of the resulting data. (Paragraph 27)

Considerable effort been made in recent years to explore alternative options for the collection of population statistics. ONS has undertaken extensive research to identify and evaluate the future options for taking a census, and these reports are available on the ONS website.⁴ This work was commended by the independent review of methodology led by Professor Chris Skinner, and the review report included positive observations about the innovative work undertaken by ONS in the evaluation and matching of administrative

3 <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/guide-method/census/2011/the-2011-census/processing-the-information/data-quality-assurance/overview-of-administrative-comparator-data-used-in-2011-census-quality-assurance.pdf>;

<http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/guide-method/census/2011/census-data/2011-census-data/2011-first-release/first-release--quality-assurance-and-methodology-papers/quality-assurance-of-census-population-estimates.pdf>;

<http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/guide-method/census/2011/the-2011-census/processing-the-information/statistical-methodology/predicting-patterns-of-household-non-response-in-the-2011-census.pdf>

4 <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/about-ons/who-ons-are/programmes-and-projects/beyond-2011/reports-and-publications/index.html>

sources. The review report also acknowledged that ONS has a strong understanding of the methodological challenges and risks in this area.⁵

The Statistics Authority believes that the decision to move to a different system for producing population statistics is not one to be taken lightly. The National Statistician's recommendation to the Authority on the future provision of population statistics in England and Wales, published on 27 March 2014, offers a springboard to the greater use of administrative data and annual surveys in future.⁶ The Authority welcomes the Government's recent endorsement of our recommendations set out in a letter from the Minister for the Cabinet Office.⁷

ONS will only be able to make greater use of data from administrative sources where it has the legal authority to do so. Although progress has been made using powers in the *Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007*, further legislation may help to maximise the benefits of future data sharing. ONS is actively engaged with the Cabinet Office and other government departments in an open policy making process to explore possibilities in this area, including the wider public acceptability of future data sharing legislation.

However, in order to get the most use out of the information already held by the Government, for the purposes of high quality and granular population statistics, and before we can be sure that there can be, eventually, a full and proper replacement for the traditional census, much more work must be done. We are concerned that the work on the future of the census has been done in isolation. (Paragraph 28)

Work on the future of the census has not been undertaken in isolation. ONS encouraged and used feedback from a wide range of stakeholders and users, including academics, international colleagues, and privacy groups, which culminated in a three-month public consultation. ONS engaged with stakeholders and the wider user community through numerous meetings and public events. In excess of 700 responses to the consultation were received. As the National Statistician's recommendations set out, we agree that there is more work to be done before a full and proper replacement for the traditional census can be made. ONS's future research programme will reflect this.

We recommend that the Office for National Statistics, under strong leadership from the board of the UK Statistics Authority, now scope and set out a more ambitious vision for the creative and full use of administrative data to provide rich and valuable population statistics. The Office for National Statistics should explain how the outputs will be different if administrative data were to be used in place of much of the census, explaining clearly the advantages and disadvantages. (Paragraph 29)

ONS is finalising a research work plan for the next three years, and this will be published later this year. This research plan will include an evaluation of how administrative sources can be used to supplement and enhance census data. The quality of such outputs will need

5 <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/about-ons/who-ons-are/programmes-and-projects/beyond-2011/reports-and-publications/methods-and-policies-reports/beyond-2011--independent-review-of-methodology.pdf>

6 <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/about-ons/who-ons-are/programmes-and-projects/beyond-2011/beyond-2011-report-on-autumn-2013-consultation--and-recommendations/national-statisticians-recommendation.pdf>

7 <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/reports---correspondence/correspondence/index.html>

to be evaluated before it is possible precisely to define what future statistical outputs might look like.

As noted above, ONS continues actively to engage with the Cabinet Office and other government departments in exploring the possibilities for improving access to the administrative data held by government for the purposes of producing official statistics, and the legislative requirements that might be necessary to enable this.

ONS has established an administrative data programme to increase the use and re-use of administrative data, building capacity and capability by pulling together and developing, relevant work strands on administrative data. This will enable progress towards the strategic aim of ONS being at the forefront of integrating and exploiting data from multiple sources, improving quality, reducing respondent burden and survey costs, delivering efficiency and enabling the development of new statistical products.

ONS's administrative data programme is also incorporating ONS's contribution to the Administrative Data Research Network. The Administrative Data Research Network (ADRN) has been established as a UK-wide partnership between universities, government departments and agencies, funders, and the wider research community to help accredited researchers carry out social and economic research on de-identified administrative data.

As recommended in the Administrative Data Task Force Report published in December 2012⁸, the UK Statistics Authority is the reporting body to the UK Parliament for the ADRN and seeks assurance for the robust performance and governance of the Network from the ADRN Board which has been established for this purpose, under the chairmanship of Professor David Hand, a non-executive member of the UK Statistics Authority Board. The objectives of the ADRN Board are to: (i) promote and safeguard the linkage of administrative data for research and statistical purposes that serves the public good; and (ii) provide assurance to Parliament and the public, through the Board of the UK Statistics Authority, about the achievements of the Network.⁹

In February 2014, the Authority launched a programme of work on the use of administrative data in the production of official statistics under the direction of the Authority's Head of Assessment. The programme is looking at how these data are currently being audited - by producers of statistics or by other experts - and ways in which the audit arrangements can be improved to enhance public confidence in the derived statistics. The programme is also looking at the issues that arise when official statistics become the basis of performance targets at an individual or organisational level. In addition, the Authority will develop guidance on the high-level principles that should apply to the audit of administrative data. Taken together, this programme will re-emphasise the importance the Authority attaches to appropriate quality assurance for maintaining and enhancing public trust in official statistics.¹⁰

8 <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/national-statistician/administrative-data-research-network/administrative-data-task-force-report---december-2012.pdf>

9 For further information about the ADRN Board, see <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/national-statistician/administrative-data-research-network/index.html>

10 <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/assessment/monitoring/administrative-data-and-official-statistics/index.html>

Public concerns about data sharing

The Cabinet Office and the Office for National Statistics must make every effort to publicise the benefits of greater sharing of administrative data within Government and to the wider world, in order to realise the considerable benefits of using administrative data for policy-making, policy understanding and efficiency, and of course for the production of population statistics. The Government should use the lessons learnt from the problems with the “care.data” rollout to embark upon a public information campaign about the future of the census in order to raise understanding of the benefits of sharing administrative data, give information about the safeguards which will be in place to protect people’s personal information and privacy, in order to smooth the way for its greater use. (Paragraph 34)

The Statistics Authority agrees that the benefits of greater sharing of administrative data within Government are substantial. The Authority and ONS will continue to make the case for improving current data sharing arrangements. As noted above, ONS is working with the Cabinet Office and other government departments to make the case for improving access to the administrative data held by Government for statistical purposes, including plans for wider public consultation and communication activities in this area, and to develop proposals to deliver the necessary changes while providing public reassurance on privacy and data security.

ONS published a paper in July 2013 setting out the privacy and security safeguards that ONS intends to put in place throughout the research phase of the Beyond 2011 Programme.¹¹ In its response to ONS’s public consultation on the future of population statistics in England and Wales, the Information Commissioner’s Office noted that they recognised that ONS has a strong track record of protecting the personal data from previous censuses, and that the Information Commissioner has confidence in ONS’s approach to data protection as demonstrated by previous census operations.

¹¹ <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/about-ons/who-ons-are/programmes-and-projects/beyond-2011/reports-and-publications/beyond-2011-safeguarding-data-for-research-our-policy--m10-.pdf>