

Beyond 2011: Consultation on the future of the Census.

Summary Response

December 2013

Introduction

This summary paper sets out the GLA's position with regard to the Office for National Statistics (ONS) consultation on the Census and Future Provision of Population Statistics in England and Wales. It has been compiled on behalf of the Mayor of London and the London Assembly and in consultation with London's local authorities and other parts of the GLA family. It reflects an extensive programme of engagement.

Set out below is our overall headline position, followed by:

- a series of recommendations;
- supporting summary appraisals of the options proposed by ONS; and
- a set of further points for consideration.

Given the importance of the issues, this paper is presented in addition to a full technical response submitted using the pro-forma provided by ONS. This is just the latest stage of the GLA's involvement in the broader *Beyond 2011* programme. We have already contributed a list of uses of census data and a statement of London's complex data needs. Copies of these will be submitted as part of the technical response to the consultation and the statement of London's data needs can be found on the ONS *Beyond 2011* website.

Headline Position

London is exceptionally and uniquely complex in the UK, with extremes of population churn, diversity, heterogeneity, deprivation and affluence. As a thriving economic centre, its travel, transport and commuting patterns are also unlike those of other areas. The significant growth the capital is already experiencing also adds emphasis to the need to count the population with accuracy.

The government structure in London is a regional body with overarching responsibilities and concerns, working collaboratively with the 33 local (unitary) authorities that make up the region. The London Boroughs were expressly designed to be heterogeneous, to include both rich and poor areas. They all include a variety of forms of housing and the characteristics of residents and workers are constantly evolving.

The central tenet of our position and supporting recommendations is that a balance needs to be struck between:

- a) the detailed information on the characteristics of the population provided through the decennial Census count which is so useful in effective service planning and delivery; and
- b) the relative advantage of administrative data, which falls short in terms of providing a detailed picture of the population's attributes but which can be used to generate a more up-to-date headcount with sufficient accuracy to be useful in funding allocation.

This balance is more important than delivering savings of marginal value¹ which we consider would diminish once the anticipated deficiencies in administrative data feed through into service delivery.

We believe therefore that at this time **a full Census is the only viable route currently available** to deliver the small area statistics that are required to meet the needs of the GLA and other agencies responsible for effective service delivery, policy formation and planning at the city level. The use of administrative data sources should be phased in ahead of the 2021 Census on a trial basis.

We acknowledge fully that technology makes possible a move to more efficient delivery of a census, and therefore **support the proposal of using an online methodology** as the primary mode of completion. This reflects the relative success of the online method in London in 2011 (a 21 per cent response rate was recorded in the capital, compared with 16 per cent nationally), as well as the advances in technology and projected take up of it between now and the next Census.

Nonetheless, we do have concerns regarding the existing and on-going coverage issues of those who are hard-to-count. There is a significant risk that the move to online collection could exacerbate these issues and this needs to be addressed through more traditional forms of enumeration.

As indicated above, we are also **supportive of on-going work to explore the potential for administrative data** to provide information on the population and its characteristics. Given the unproven ability of this data to provide the level of detail on population characteristics, we would recommend that this approach is phased in and allowed to develop before and alongside the 2021 decennial census, rather than as a direct replacement for it in which the risk relating to loss of data quality remains too high. We envisage significant potential benefits to being able to produce accurate and up-to-date population estimates, particularly in terms of funding and resource allocation. We do not consider the proposed sample survey to provide sufficient sample size to capture the characteristics of a population as complex and diverse as that of London's.

Recommendations

The GLA recommends that

1. **A full Census be carried out in London and the rest of England in 2021.** We support the proposals to encourage online responses as a first option. However, we are acutely aware of coverage issues, which certainly exist now and which may in the future affect:
 - particular population groups with limited access to internet services;
 - some areas where this has proved challenging in the past; and
 - some hard-to-reach groups within the population.

and therefore urge ONS to take whatever steps necessary to ensure that the Census captures the full population.

2. **ONS continue to explore the use of administrative data held by Government and other agencies** to produce statistics on the size and basic demographic characteristics of the population on a regular and on-going basis.

¹ £625m per decade for an online census once a decade compared to £460m per decade for administrative data and annual surveys; Beyond 2011, Figures taken from ONS' consultation document

3. **ONS pursues research into further possibilities for using administrative data** to obtain statistics on other detailed attributes and characteristics of the population, particularly, but not exclusively, those which may not be available through a Census.
4. **ONS work with the GLA, London Councils and other interested London partners, through a London Census Board** to ensure the specific data needs of London are addressed effectively, but in a broader sense to take forward research and piloting work in pursuit of all of 1), 2) and 3) above.

Summary Appraisals

1) A full decennial census – primarily taken online

A Census provides the flexibility and richness of data required to meet many of both the foreseen and unforeseen data needs of the capital. London does differ in many ways from its neighbours and from other parts of the country. Its population is not limited to its residents – around 800,000 commuters and more than a million day trip visitors swell numbers on a daily basis, impacting on services accordingly. The attributes of all of these people and how they vary across the capital and beyond is something that can only be captured adequately through a Census.

Case Study 1 - Transport for London:

Transport for London (TfL) is a key user of small area statistics in the capital. TfL has developed a number of transport models used for forecasting travel demand by mode and origin/destination. This requires the spatial distribution of population (by person type e.g. working, non-working, students) and jobs (by occupational classification) to calibrate the models and provide a reliable forecasting capability of future demand. Detailed small area data is the key planning input for this methodology.

As part of the above work, TfL is currently carrying out a detailed study of the drivers of travel demand over the last 40 years, which will ultimately lead to changes to the variables used in the major transport models. Small area census data has been crucial for this project, particularly data on changes in population density, car ownership, mode shares of travel to work, and age structures. This will feed into complex multiple regression models which will help to determine the key drivers of travel demand.

A key input to the transport model is the results of the London Travel Demands Survey (LTDS), an annual sample survey of 8,000 households in the capital. It is the single most valuable source of data on how Londoners travel, where they travel to, and the socio-demographic characteristics of these different groups. It is weighted up to the London population using census data, primarily households at the small area level.

Finally, TfL's accessibility measures require forecasting of changes in catchment areas as a result of transport improvements. The catchment areas are defined in terms of jobs/population within for example 45 minutes of transport nodes. This approach requires understanding planning data changes at small area level.

The results of both of these exercises underpin investment and resource allocation across London running into hundreds of millions of pounds.

A Census is the only way of deriving data for small areas, and in London, identifying the sometimes vast variation between small areas, even though they may be very close geographically. Whether some of these differences could be distinguished through the use of administrative data has yet to be determined.

However, using housing as an example, there is currently no alternative source of information on housing characteristics for small areas, and in particular a lack of information which links that with the characteristics of a population (e.g. the propensity for an individual to be highly qualified, in employment or have good health by whether they live in privately rented, owned or social rented housing).

These are all areas of particular concern to the GLA, as there are a wealth of uses of these data within London, from strategic city-wide planning (e.g. the London Plan, the Mayor's Housing Strategy), local planning, school roll and other planning outputs, down to active targeting of domestic violence services and wider community safety programmes, and promotion of recycling campaigns.

Additionally, small area housing data are used extensively in area profiling exercises which underpin crime prevention strategies, public health programme design, allocation of regional through to neighbourhood and community investment and budgets, as well as the identification of vulnerable groups within society.

Case Study 2 – GLA funding of affordable housing in London

In 2012 the GLA assumed responsibility for delivery of the functions devolved from the former Homes and Communities Agency. This includes allocation of public funding for the delivery of affordable homes in the capital.

The ability to profile populations at small area level is pivotal to the ongoing provision of affordable housing in the London. In 2010/11 alone more than £1 billion of public funding was distributed to affordable housing providers (by the HCA), who then levered in an estimated £1.4 billion more through private borrowing supported by this public funding. Statistics at small area are crucial to affordable housing providers in understanding potential demand for their developments, and as a source of data on the profile and housing needs of households in their existing housing stock.

Finally, housing data (not available elsewhere at small area level) are an important component of deprivation indices, which in turn feed into a host of uses from funding bids of all shapes and sizes to resource planning, to service delivery and campaign/service targeting.

Case Study 3 – Public Health England and the analysis of health inequality

Public Health England and previously, the regional public health observatories and more specifically the London Health Observatory have made extensive use of the 2010 English Indices of Deprivation, in which small area census data features heavily.

The *Health Inequalities Intervention Tool-kit* was created by the Public Health Observatories to help focus improvements in life expectancy and infant mortality, particularly in the most disadvantaged areas. The Toolkit, developed for all local authorities, allows users to compare mortality in their most deprived small areas with the rest of the local authority and importantly, to model the impact that implementing evidence-based interventions could have on inequality gaps within areas. The toolkit is therefore widely used to underpin commissioning decisions.

The Indices of Deprivation have also been an important data source in the development of disease prevalence estimates, designed to help commissioners assess the true needs of their community, calculate the level of services needed and invest the appropriate level of resources for prevention, early detection, treatment and care.

We acknowledge that the ability to achieve full coverage has been and will continue to be an issue in London. A move to a mixed but primarily online mode of completion, while overcoming issues for some groups (e.g. the young and mobile), may exacerbate them for others (e.g. the elderly and those without online access).

Establishing which groups are targeted with which mode of collection will be key to the success or otherwise of this option. We would seek to work with ONS and others through the establishment of a London Census Board to identify an approach which seeks to minimise the risk of poor response.

2) Using existing government data and compulsory annual sample surveys

A large proportion of funding allocation relies on statistics regarding the basic population count. It is important that the quality of these estimates reflects this and there is clear value in the contemporaneity administrative data sources have the potential to offer.

With this in mind, use of administrative data to produce annual population estimates is a course of action we would like to see ONS pursue alongside a decennial census. However, it is clear that at the present time the attendant risks on adopting this approach in full outweigh the benefits.

London's population has grown rapidly over the last decade and is projected to grow further still over the coming twenty years. Overall figures mask a range of trends within the population, including the fact that London is expected, for instance, to see rapid growth in both the younger and older populations and varying scales of growth in different parts of capital. Being able to accurately and regularly capture these changes is key to ensuring that London and Londoners receive appropriate levels of resource in future. Continuing to explore the potential of administrative data to provide basic population counts is important as we do not conclude that these data are adequate in this regard.

Under current arrangements the process of damping reduces volatility in funding allocations. Over the past decade London has grown faster than any other region in England, however, damping has meant that the relative increase in pressure on services which accompanies population growth has not been reflected in the overall allocation to the London region. For this reason, it is essential that the quality of future estimates, as key inputs to the funding calculations, should be enhanced by any means possible. Furthermore and with equal regard to the unique profile of London's population, assessing the capacity of administrative data to provide information on other characteristics of the population on a regular basis is equally worth pursuing.

It should be noted that the ability of administrative data to capture alternative population bases for example, the daytime or short term populations (which are also used for resource allocation and service planning) is yet to be determined and this lack of certainty supports our view that administrative data as a source of information on population statistics, requires significant further exploration before it can be considered adequate to replace a full census or even mid-year population estimates.

The key benefit of the proposal for a compulsory annual sample survey is the ability to produce statistics about the population more regularly. However, if these statistics do not have the required precision and confidence then their value is lost. GLA Intelligence Unit analysis of data from the Annual Population Survey suggests that the level of reliability from the proposed compulsory sample survey would not produce statistics that would be fit for purpose. To illustrate this point, the sample even for a local authority with the size and diversity of Southwark, would not have shown any statistically significant change in the unemployment rate for Black men over an eight year period which includes the recent recession (see accompanying full response for details). Additionally, the ability to compare local authorities with one another would be impaired since the proposed sample size would not provide sufficient coverage to fully

disaggregate many variables. For example, even in London, not all ethnic groups would be identifiable in all boroughs.

In summary, we believe the sample survey would not provide sufficiently accurate and robust estimates of change in the population at the levels of geography required for efficient and effective service planning and delivery. It is therefore not a feasible alternative to a full Census.

Additional points for consideration

The reasons put forward for investigating alternatives to a Census for the production of statistics include concerns about privacy, burden on the public and cost. As expressed by ONS at a London *Beyond 2011* roadshow event, as many people object to the use of administrative data held by Government to produce statistics as object to completing a Census form because it is too intrusive.

Under the proposals for a survey, the average burden would be reduced, but it is likely that for some people, the burden may be increased, as they would be required to complete the survey more than once in a decade. ONS figures suggest that the cost of a Census is more than the cost of the alternative option, but also suggest that the benefits accruing from the Census option also significantly outweigh the benefits from the alternative approach.

A further consideration is the sense of trust an individual or groups within the population have in a Census. It is a 200 year old institution, in which every member of the population has a stake and sense of ownership since every member of the population is required to complete the census form. There is a risk that a lack of participation in a sample survey coupled with a lack of understanding of how administrative data is used to compile population statistics, may lead to reduced trust and lower attributable value to the outputs.