

Statement on the future of the census in England and Wales

The most successful businesses are investing in data. The most innovative breakthroughs in science are coming through analysis of data. Data is the raw material of evidence and evidence brings understanding and better decisions. The same logic applies to good public services.

Inside government there is now an opportunity to invest in the most critical piece of our national data infrastructure, the census.

Businesses, local authorities, voluntary organisations and many others are arguing the case for why good quality, up to date census data matters to them. Data on the population is used to ensure that we build our schools where they are required by our children, that hospitals are equipped to deliver the services that we need, that transport links reflect the journeys we undertake. With good data we can get these things right (and can hold people to account should things go wrong). Without it children are left without school places, patients do not get the care they need and we sit frustrated on trains and motorways. It matters to all of us.

The Office for National Statistics (ONS) is [consulting on its proposals](#) on the future of the census. ONS has today [published an independent review](#) of the methodology behind its proposals undertaken by a team headed by Professor Chris Skinner. Professor Skinner was appointed for the role on the recommendation of the President of the Royal Statistical Society.

ONS proposes two possible, and not necessarily mutually exclusive, approaches. One is to take a radically new approach to the census and generate the information from administrative data held by government. This is an idea with considerable potential, but Professor Skinner concludes that the analysis done by ONS to date, despite being well conducted and useful, falls a long way short of what would be needed to make it a reality. That leaves the second approach, to carry on with a census once every ten years but do more of it online. Professor Skinner concludes that this would work.

But surely we can do better than this when so many organisations are using data in real time to improve performance.

continued



UK plc needs a much bolder approach from ONS to capitalise on data already held by government and to deliver the richness of information that comes from the census. The Royal Statistical Society believes that ONS should:

1. Make a clear statement that it will not replace the 10-yearly census at least until real numbers using an alternative approach have been produced and accepted by those who rely on them. To continue with just the 10-yearly census (with a strong online focus) might be unambitious but to abolish it without a well tested alternative would be reckless.
2. Ensure that a robust up to date address register is in place and accessible by ONS, the social science community and more widely in accordance with the government's Open Data policy. Such a register is a prerequisite for any move to a system of population statistics that relies on administrative data.
3. Make the case for the legislation and assurance necessary to enable full and comprehensive sharing and linking of administrative data for the purpose of creating statistics for the public good in accordance with data protection principles. This should include a role for the National Statistician in decisions about administrative data that are to be used for statistical purposes.
4. Start using administrative data to produce experimental numbers now so we can see how well they measure up in practice.
5. Act on all of Professor Skinner's recommendations and report publicly on those actions

John Pullinger, President of the Royal Statistical Society comments

"we take it for granted that someone knows how many people live in each locality and what services they rely on so that we get the schools, hospitals and roads we need in the right places at the right time. That someone is the Office for National Statistics. Many businesses are using data in new creative ways to improve their decisions. The debate on the future of the census provides an opportunity for ONS to do the same for the public. They should grasp it."

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