

The census and future provision of population statistics in England and Wales

ONS Public Consultation

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Executive Summary

- History shows that the decennial census is a fundamental democratic institution, valued as such by citizens in all their diversity, in their relations to each other and to the state; it is not simply an information gathering device for statisticians.
- The Consultation document's second option should explicitly take into account the risks of loss of goodwill towards compliance with government information-gathering that could flow from abandoning the census.
- In the absence of an accompanying proposal for a Population Register to replace the census, the Consultation document's second option of moving to exclusive reliance on administrative and social survey statistics has no precedent in the practice of any other country; while there are certainties about the loss of epidemiological detail that will result under this option, there are many uncertainties about whether this proposal can work at all and so this option would appear to offer many challenges for little reward.
- This means that the options to be considered should more correctly be posed as lying between a continuation of the decennial census and the innovation of a Population Register.
- A Population Register combines all the democratic and informational virtues of the census while meeting the Consultation Document's policy concern for more frequently updated population statistics; however, it may prove too politically unpopular to implement.
- In that case the Consultation document's first option of moving to an online decennial census in 2021 would be by far the preferable option; this is a manageable technological change, probably cost-saving in the longer run even if not initially, and it could be gradually complemented with supplemental information from other sources, such as surveys and administrative data. .

1. Introduction

H&P was founded 11 years ago to bring up-to-date historical research and its insights to the attention of policy-makers, advisors and civil servants. In this submission History & Policy is not seeking to speak for the History profession, nor for historians as users of the historical evidence produced by the census, since this is the role of the Royal Historical Society and other professional bodies and of individual historians. Rather, H&P wishes to emphasise the central importance to the policy options under consideration of properly taking into account the history of the census. This history highlights important and highly relevant considerations that have not yet been considered in the consultation document (CD).

We much appreciate this valuable exercise of open consultation and the efforts the staff of ONS have put into the content and design of the CD. Concerning the set of Questions posed in the CD, this submission relates principally to Q.3 and Q.9, with direct implications also for Q.4 and Q.8.

In an otherwise wide-ranging and open consultative document we find it surprising that, on a policy issue so steeped in history as the decennial census, the CD does not start with a systematic historical account –however brief- beyond the bare statement in the first sentence that ‘Every 10 years, for over 200 years, every household in England and Wales has been required to respond to the census,’

Since one of the two main options proposed for consultation is the abolition of the census (the other being to retain it in an online form) it seems important to ensure that consideration is given to the current meaning of the census in our national culture. This requires some historical understanding. The CD seems to offer only the rather mechanical and reductive view of the census as a set of questions on a piece of paper which the citizenry have ‘the burden’ of returning every 10 years and which government statisticians then turn into population statistics. But is that all the census means to today’s citizens? And is this all that would be lost by abandoning or significantly reformatting it?

2. The democratic significance of the census

In addition to its public policy functions, the census also holds a wider significance in our national culture today. Any decision to discontinue it should be not be taken without full and careful consideration of the consequent risks involved in abandoning the census. The chief risk here to the business of government is the silent withdrawal of co-operation on the part of the populace should they cease to feel a sense of any ownership over the national government’s efforts to elicit socio-demographic and economic information from them. It is history which explains how this invaluable sense of public ownership has arisen in relation to the national census and also how easily it could be lost, most particularly if policy-makers are so unaware of census history that they make the fatal mistake of assuming the co-operation of the public is a given, regardless of the methods

of enquiry they choose to use. In its third section the CD acknowledges that the individual household records of the census have become a source for historic and genealogical research. As is well-known, their use for family and community history is extraordinarily popular with the voting public. This is not simply a matter of contemporary leisure preferences, however. It relates, in fact, to the fundamental political significance and meaning of the census as the public have come to understand it in relation to themselves.

The reason that the historical records of the census are so popular with the voting public is due to the intrinsically democratic nature of the census. It began in 1801 as an effort to count every single subject in the country but since 1841 the census has also aimed to record the names and family relationships of every person in every residential household in the land. Long before the United Kingdom became a full suffrage democracy for both sexes in 1928, it had already become 'a democracy of public record': a nation of persons whose names and relationships were officially known to the state and recognised in law. This democratic principle was also enshrined in the simultaneously launched civil registration system for all births, deaths and marriages starting in 1837, which was administered by the same department of government, The General Register Office, as the 1841 and all subsequent censuses. These two information systems were integral elements of the wave of liberal reforms associated with the nation's first steps in the direction of a wider democracy with the emancipation of Catholics and removal of civil disabilities on nonconformists and the passing in 1832 of the 'Great Reform Act'

It has been this long-standing official and legal commitment to recognise the names and relationships of every individual member of the population which has created an unparalleled historical source which enables British citizens today and those settled overseas, no matter how humble their distant ancestors' origins, to recover a knowledge of who they are and from where they have come. There is no recognition in the CD of the powerful symbolic significance of the census in contributing to this fundamentally democratic relationship between state and citizen in modern Britain. Consequently there is a dangerous blindness in the CD to the continuing relevance of the consequent goodwill that has built up towards the national census, which it is vital to maintain among citizens for their willing participation and trust in all forms of official information gathering in a liberal democracy. There is already enough distrust of the state, most particularly in relation to its appetite for information collection, that, from an historical perspective, it would seem extremely unwise to take risks with the goodwill associated with the decennial census. In 1983 in West Germany its national census was abandoned in the context of broad fears of a burgeoning security state due to a sequence of political controversies which led to spontaneous protest movements. Statisticians and policy-makers should not take compliance on the part of the population they wish to study for granted in a liberal democracy - it has to be historically nurtured and carefully maintained.

3. The Census and its historical relationship with civil and vital registration

It is equally important to acknowledge the centrality of the historical relationship between the census and the nation's vital registration system. The second section of the CD starts by correctly pointing out that 'The census has been the bedrock of the UK statistical system for the past 200 years', then lists a large number of its current uses. However, there is no acknowledgment of the intimate, long-standing relationship between the 'bedrock' of the census and the equally important bedrock of the nation's civil registration system of births, deaths and marriages. These have been and continue to be two functionally inter-twined democratic information systems. .

The value to policy-making of the demographic and epidemiological intelligence achieved by combining the information derived from these two information systems has been enormous throughout its history and continues into the present. Any policy proposal to abandon the decennial census must take into account, as a matter of the highest priority, the implications of such a decision for the future of vital registration and the capacity of the nation to continue to monitor, to the highest standards of precision, its public health and emerging epidemiological patterns. The analysis and publication of detailed epidemiological information on deaths by different causes for local authority and often for sub-local authority areas, for occupational diseases, and most recently for ethnic groups, provides a basic intelligence function, which has been fundamental to 165 years of gradual, hard-won improvement to the nation's health since the first national Public Health Act was passed by the UK Parliament in 1848. Campaigns against cholera, typhoid and infant mortality in the past, more recently the eradication of polio and the ongoing battle against different cancers have all relied on high quality epidemiological intelligence. The policy goal of improving the nation's health in a liberal democracy has not changed, nor has the level of approval for this goal among the electorate.

4. The decennial census or a Population Register?

The CD puts forward two possible options for the future: a continuing decennial census to be enumerated online as much as possible; or an amalgam of administrative and social survey data sources to be patched together into a coherent whole, giving the hoped-for advantage of information updates more regularly than every 10 years, though suffering from the acknowledged disadvantage that they will not be accurate for the most local and specific sub-populations. However, the CD also clearly acknowledges in Section 1.1- but does not discuss at any length- the fact that the latter approach has only ever been promoted and has only ever been effective in a limited number of countries which also maintain a Population Register (PR).

A PR combines the information features of a civil registration system with that of a census (taken only once at the base date when the PR system is first launched) while also recording residential migration and occupational changes of individuals in the population, who are legally obliged to notify the PR of their permanent residential movements while occupational changes are often recorded in a separate job or activity register (with

individuals linked in the two register through a unique, confidential keycode identifier). These are essential features in a PR system to keep track of the geographical changes in population settlement and employment patterns- when these are no longer monitored every 10 years by a census exercise.

Such a well-designed PR fulfils all the needs emphasised in the CD for a future system capable of reporting changing socio-demographic patterns more rapidly than a census system (e.g. annually) while also retaining the same high level of precision as the census even for the smallest territorial units of analysis. In contrast, the CD's second option of using 'administrative and social survey data' cannot provide annual and small-unit precision, as is acknowledged, because these sources lack the basis of individual-level registration which is necessary for such precision.

It is difficult to see why the CD is not proposing a PR system as its second option. The current second option, of administrative and survey data, alone, has no precedent as a viable working system in any country's recent practice. A PR, by contrast, is thoroughly tried and tested in a number of other nation-states. It is not subject to the uncertainties and risks associated with the CD's proposed second option of attempting to patch together a variety of different data-sources with different institutional histories, provenances and legal bases for collection. Replacing a decennial census plus civil registration system, as has existed for the last 170 years in England and Wales (and nearly as long in Scotland and Northern Ireland) with a PR system creates no democratic deficit and, apart from the one-off conversion costs, could be quite low cost (in running terms) relative to the current system, since the national network of offices of registrars for births, deaths and marriage, already exists throughout the country. By contrast it is fully acknowledged in the CD that the second option is fraught with evident conversion difficulties and unpredictable costs - legal, IT, and institutional.

However, as the CD recognises- and as is supported by an historical perspective- perhaps the libertarian sensitivities of the British population, and in particular certain elements of the national press, would cavil at a national PR information system including the new requirement of official notification when moving address permanently or significantly changing occupation. Such sensitivities may be somewhat misplaced given the information that is already available on people's residential movements. It may be possible that such residential and occupational mobility information could be integrated into a new PR system by provision for automatic notification of information generated by GP or vehicle registration data, by the electoral roll or Council tax lists, (though none of these, alone, would be ideal), without imposing on citizens the need for a separate act of residential mobility registration when they move locations.

Nevertheless, if the political obstacles to creating a PR system are judged to be too great, then it needs to be acknowledged that the option of patching together administrative and social survey data is simply unworkable in the absence of a PR system. The option of moving the decennial census to an online system remains a sensible next step, however. The census authorities have always been pioneers of new information collection and management systems. In Britain the GRO was the first user (for the 1911 census) of a

Hollerith card-punch machine to analyse the data collected. Similarly in 1940, the US Census Bureau- not a private corporation, contrary to popular assumption- was the innovator behind IBM's first UNIVAC computer. Significant innovation with technology is no stranger to census-taking history. An historical perspective would strongly indicate that such technological innovation has been effective and successful when it is used not to subvert but to maintain and re-vitalise the fundamentally democratic meaning and purposes of census-taking in a liberal democracy, which is to create a universal record of all citizens in all their diversity.

5. Census History and the calculation of the costs of change

History shows that while it may not have been the original intention of the government when first funding a decennial census in 1801 to create a 'Who do you think you are?' record for posterity, it has inadvertently become a highly valued national resource. If the census has become a valued and popular feature in a democracy of voting citizens for this reason, then that is an additional justification (beyond its capacity to facilitate demographic, social and economic planning) for the expense of carrying it out. It is also arguable that the universal obligation to return the census form every decade is, rather like jury service, one of the civic acts which symbolically unifies while also re-affirming the diversity of the population as a nation. Crucially it also unifies the populace inter-generationally as a nation prepared to support the dependent young and the dependent elderly. The sense of connection between current and older generations is certainly facilitated by the ease with which family ancestors can be not merely identified but placed in their contexts with the ancillary information that is available on historic census forms.

Related to this, the second of the four 'weaknesses' of retaining a census – even an online census- listed in Section 3 of the CD, estimates that the cost of an online decennial census in the future would be £1.10 per person per year. Rather than assuming this is a 'weakness', it would be interesting to know whether the electorate would see this as value for money? Elsewhere the CD estimates that the costs of the main alternative being considered (administrative and social survey data) would be £0:80. Given the popularity of such TV shows as 'Who Do you Think you Are?' and the Find My Past website etc, it seems highly likely that there would be a strong positive response if the electorate were asked if they were prepared to pay 30 pence per person per year so that they would have the certainty that in the future their great-grandchildren and great-great grandchildren could more easily find out who they were descended from, if and when other family records had been lost. And of course that aspect of its value would be entirely in addition to its value as a high precision, national and local planning tool for government.

6. History and IT Policy in Government: key lessons

A final and extremely important lesson of History & Policy that should be borne in mind by civil servants and ministers contemplating the apparent promises of cost savings that it is hoped will result from driving through an IT revolution in this particular sphere of

government data collection and analysis is to be found in Chapter 13 ‘IT- technology and pathway’ of Anthony King and Ivor Crewe’s new book, *The Blunders of our Governments* (Oneworld 2013). In particular, one of the two options that is being proposed in the CD of knitting together into a unified national information system a number of distinct social survey and administrative data systems with diverse departmental provenances, in order to provide a supposedly cost-saving and more rapidly-produced substitute for the current census exercise, looks remarkably like a perfect recipe for the repetition of all the well-identified problems that have already led *repeatedly* to a number of IT fiascos in various departments of government under both Conservative, Labour and Coalition administrations, documented by King and Crewe.

This important historical stock-taking review by King and Crewe, widely-acclaimed and non-partisan, shows that major government IT projects involving multiple ministerial and departmental jurisdictions in interaction with multiple external experts and private providers, which are ambitiously innovating simultaneously in a number of ways, are almost impossible to pull-off. They have typically involved large unforeseen costs to the taxpayer and resulted in eventual IT systems that are often significantly less functional than had been originally intended or even have to be abandoned after several years. This is not a counsel of despair or pure conservatism but it is a counsel for avoiding technological and political hubris and for adopting an approach of judicious gradualism and incrementalism where change in large government IT systems is concerned. If a lesson from very recent history is to be drawn from King and Crewe’s book to apply to the particular policy being consulted on here by ONS, it would be to commence with modest and manageable changes to the established successful system. Moving towards an online decennial census by 2021, dealing effectively with obvious associated problems such as the proportions unable to return online, while experimenting with one or two ways in which additional social survey and administrative data may be brought in alongside this reliable backbone system, would be plenty of large-scale innovation for ONS to deal with and to manage over the next 6-7 years.

7. Conclusions

Given recognition of the democratic importance of the census and its role in epidemiological intelligence, the long-term policy goal should be clearly recognised and formulated as either maintaining a decennial census or emulating other liberal democracies in moving to a Population Register system. With either of these democratic and high-quality systems there is a case for also intelligently supplementing them with the development of complementary social survey and administrative data to bring on board policy knowledge of a growing diversity of supplemental information needs in our more complex societies. However, the proposal being entertained in the current CD as one of its two main options, that such diverse social survey and administrative data systems can somehow be developed to provide a complete and satisfactory alternative to the universal registration and enumeration of individual citizens, without a Population Register, flies in the face not only of hard-won and expensive recent lessons of what is practically possible with change to IT systems in government, but also in the face of all comparative experience in other countries. It is also an historically uninformed proposal that would inadvertently remove a democratic underpinning of British society and risks needlessly sacrifice popular goodwill towards democratic information-gathering by the state.

History & Policy views the most technically propitious longer-term policy option as a move to a well-designed Population Register, which would have the capacity to produce more frequent information bulletins about social change but without losing any accuracy or local epidemiological precision. It would also maintain the system's democratic basis. However, it has to be recognised, as the CD does indeed acknowledge, that a population register may face insuperable popular resistance in the Anglo-Saxon politico-cultural context. Without a population register the second option in the CD of reliance on administrative and survey data, alone, has no successful precedent. If the political calculation is that a population register will be unacceptable to the population then this really leaves no option but to continue with the tried and tested decennial census. It can be technologically upgraded, as it always has been throughout its history, through going online in 2021. This may not be a cost-saver initially because of the need to cater for many non-IT-literate citizens among the elderly, but in due course it probably will provide substantial savings. The goodwill the census promotes can also be built on by supplementing its authoritative decennial findings with various partial surveys to give more regular updates on issues of local or strategic importance and by adapting some administrative information systems to complement more intelligently the knowledge gained from the census.

The chief historical lesson is that the democratic popularity of the census, the goodwill it generates, and its national symbolic importance must be taken into explicit consideration when considering the options and their risks. Built-up over two centuries, these valuable resources of trust and mutual acknowledgement between citizens of different identities and different generations and between citizens and their state, could all be inadvertently discarded by careless, historically-uninformed policy changes.