



City of Westminster Committee Report

Meeting:	Westminster Scrutiny Commission
Date:	13 April 2011
Status:	For General Release
Title:	Beyond 2011: Counting the Population in Future Years
Wards Affected:	N/A
Policy Context:	The emerging discussion on what options exist beyond the 2011 Census on effectively and accurately counting the population.
Financial Summary:	There are no financial issues arising directly from this report.
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Summary

In January 2011 a technical policy seminar was held with support from the Westminster Scrutiny Commission. The aim of the seminar was to proactively take forward the debate relating to what should replace or supplement the Census after 2011. It also served to identify a number of overarching themes that could be considered by the Scrutiny Commission in terms of developing Westminster's stance and strategy following the 2011 Census.

This report outlines the key points arising from the discussion and sets out a number of recommendations which the Commission is invited to consider as part of actively developing Westminster's policy on counting the population in future years.

Recommendations

1. That the Commission make counting the population a regular item (such as on a yearly basis) on its agenda so that the profile of the issue is not lost after the 2011 Census.
2. That adequate support is provided to the Chief Executive of the Council in their role on the London Charter Board Counting Population working group.
3. That Westminster City Council be put forward as a pilot authority for the Beyond 2011 working group.
4. For the council to lead on creating a Population Statistics Users Group supported by the ONS and UK Statistics Authority that will be an integral part of the quality assurance of the new methodology.

Beyond 2011: Counting the Population in Future Years

April 2011

Westminster City Council

1. Introduction

In January 2011, Westminster's Scrutiny Commission organised a deliberative seminar to help proactively shape policy regarding what should replace or supplement the Census after 2011. It brought together a powerful mix of academics, local and central government specialists, commentators and statisticians to review current thinking, identify opportunities and recognise threats to the future of forming population estimates.

In the course of the discussion, a number of overarching themes emerged, and this report outlines key points in relation to these topics. A number of recommendations are also set out at the end of the report.

2. Consultation: process and parameters

The ONS Beyond 2011 Programme

At the seminar the Office for National Statistics (ONS) highlighted that there were no boundaries whatsoever in terms of what might replace the Census beyond 2011. There was a common assumption that the ONS was census-centric, but in reality it is very open-minded to suggestions on different approaches.

Most immediately, the ONS Beyond 2011 programme will be focusing on the potential of administrative data as it represented the biggest change to the existing system. The ONS is keen to have an open and frank conversation on all sides so that whatever replaces the Census is as transparent as possible. Plans for the new national address register, made in consultation with the Cabinet Office, Ordnance Survey, etc., are well-advanced and will be implemented early as the foundation of any new model.

The Beyond 2011 programme, which begins in earnest on April 2011, means finding an alternative statistics system to that which is currently based on the Census. It is not therefore just about a population count. There is a wide range of information collected by the Census, both in terms of the breadth of demographic insight and its detail, all of which is uniquely valuable to a variety of user groups, whether commercial bodies, individuals or local/specialist organisations. On top of this, there is the longitudinal continuity with prior Censuses to be considered: a priceless build-up of information which would be disastrous if lost. In other countries, changing the census has brought about some loss of information, and until there is a data repository which can produce census-like information for individuals and detailed geographical areas, it would be responsible to retain at least a short-form census

In essence, the key question is: what constitutes a minimum set of data to provide users with the range of information that the census now provides and more specifically, what would be the minimum number of questions you would ask in a short-form census to get this information?

Pointers to users (potentially combine with the above) Consultation considerations

The consultation process is important to the Beyond 2011 programme. In particular, ONS is asking users to identify their needs, as opposed to discussing potential means of delivery. Users must be prepared to think *outside* the traditional Census model, addressing issues like frequency, and whether constant, real-time counts are necessarily a good thing. Users must recognise public acceptability as an important part of the discussion, understanding that there could be a trade-off between cost and quality. There is also a considerable legal dimension – already under consideration – regarding what can be viewed and used. Given the possibility of building a national ‘spine’ of information based on administrative data, there is potential for controversy, and early thought must be given to feeding into the likely political discussion on privacy implications.

Timescale

A new approach needs to be agreed and in place by 2014 – when the financial climate is likely to be difficult – for execution in 2021. If progress is not made then the ONS may be left with little option other than conducting another traditional census in 2021.

The most critical short term landmark is the 2011 Census and after that, there will be a considerable amount of census quality assurance – including in relation to administrative sources. The timescale to which the local authorities (LAs) are working is defined by the next spending review, which will be influenced by having good population data. However the tight consultation timescale was a concern.

Several LAs have been involved in a pilot which, in June, will give them data from DWP, DVLA, HMRC, etc., to compare with local datasets to help clean electoral registers. As part of this, they are looking to pass legislation to overcome privacy issues on the use of local data in data-matching initiatives. A lot is likely to be learnt from this and pilot authorities, including nearby Southwark, are keen to share findings.

The need for change

For several years stakeholders have been telling the ONS that there is a need to look at making a significant step-change in how it produces socio-demographic data. The move was therefore user driven and there was general agreement amongst seminar attendees that prior counts had been inaccurate and need to be improved.

If official population figures (especially Mid Year Estimates) better reflected what is revealed in everyday practice and administrative data – and if this was not so closely linked to funding allocation for LAs and PCTs – then the ONS would be less concerned about making changes. Quite simply not local authority would use resources on the issue if there was confidence in the count. As it is, the impact on funding of an inaccurate census (and subsequent MYEs) is so profound that local authorities have no choice but to seek change.

The Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) is currently dividing up a fixed pot of money between different local areas. Its crucial requirement is therefore consistent and robust data that stands up to scrutiny and for which there is both local and central government buy-in. The guiding question is therefore: is the data good enough for resource allocation?

Flexibility or one size fits all?

The seminar identified a number of key questions in relation to how prescriptive the process needed to be:

- Given that the Census has worked well for a vast majority of the country for a long time, is a 'one size fits all' methodology right for the UK when a lot of the problems with population estimates are linked to internal and international migration?
- Should there be flexibility in a replacement which focuses on these issues?
- Should London and conurbations be addressed separately, given that the pace of change in somewhere like Westminster (especially over ten years) is much greater than elsewhere?

The ONS accepts that a pivotal issue is how much should be done centrally, and how much locally. However, there was no pre-disposition to a 'one size fits all approach' and in fact there was some flexibility in the current arrangements. Ultimately some things can be done from the centre but it was important to investigate what the best balance was. DCLG also agree that there is potential for obtaining the necessarily robust data in different ways in different areas. The starting point would be for users to say what they wanted from the outset in terms of what they want to measure. From this, options can be examined and a cost-benefit analysis carried out.

Moderating expectations

There had been some observations that local authorities often asked for too much and exaggerated what they could not do without. It is therefore important to find a balance, given that different users want different things. The problem of multiple users with differing expectations even occurs within local authorities, with some questioning the merit of counting hard-to-reach populations. A framework is required to ensure that within the debate, all partners are aware of the possibilities and limitations.

The difficulty for local authorities in moderating their expectations regarding 'hidden' populations, however, is the quandary of 'unknown unknowns': the fact that you do not know what you do not know until you find out, and that a particular detail might seem unimportant, but could become a key factor in how services are planned. Given this the key question facing local authorities is how to enumerate 'hard to count' populations? In a slightly strange paradox, it almost did not matter if a Census is wrong as long as it is wrong to the same extent across the whole country.

3. Political background

Drivers of Beyond 2011

An understanding of the political background to the Beyond 2011 programme is important in enabling stakeholders to understand what are realistic expectations during the consultation. Beyond 2011 did not start with the new government; it began with UK Statistics Authority/ONS believing it was time to take it forward, although the new government has supported the case, both financially (in terms of the spending review) and politically. In particular, the ONS hopes that government support will lead to significant improvements to administrative sources: for example, setting up systems like e-Borders with statistical purposes in mind.

Although expert discussion has led the politics up to this point, this is unlikely to persist. It is expected that reasonably soon, there will be a political mandate which will probably be shaped by the success of the coming Census. If there are serious problems, the treasury is less likely to go ahead with the same in 2021. Also if the political discussion is independent of the technical discussion (as is probable), it will be important for stakeholders and data users to consider who the key players are and how best to engage with the political debate.

Essentially it should not be assumed that experts will be given freedom to consult and then advance their solution for political endorsement.

Resourcing work after the 2011 Census

There is a significant risk that, after the Census work ends in May, some local authorities may leave work for Beyond 2011 un-resourced, especially given the current the pressure on council budgets. The ONS understands this but believes the Beyond 2011 programme should be a high priority for local authorities and particularly for those with large or hard to count populations.

4. Alternative data sources

Challenges in using alternative data sources

While administrative data can reveal many crucial details, it is not as effective at providing the kind of information gained by cross-referring different variables; its selectivity makes it good for counting people, but less good at asking the most pertinent questions for understanding change. The next census, for example, gives us an unprecedented chance to learn more about our migrant populations: where they live, how long they have been here; detail which might be lost in a straightforward transition to administrative data. Key questions include to what extent a precise count of every person on census day is needed, and to what extent we could get away with taking long-form information from fewer people?

Many individual administrative data sources are incomplete. The Annual School Census (ASC which replaced the Pupil Level Annual School Census) is a good example as although it is a useful source, it excludes those who attend private schools (approx. 40% of the school-age population in Westminster). Similarly, GP lists are compromised by 'Ghosts' – those who were added to datasets but then leave the area, while remaining on the register. The general rule is that 'if you're not collecting information for a purpose, you're not collecting it properly'. Similar lists can be compared, but there is often no triangulating source by which to establish which of two datasets is more accurate.

Common to all administrative datasets is the worry of what each one counts, and who it does not pick up. This has been acknowledged – and hence administrative data rejected – for many years, but the real question is to what extent it is not comprehensive? A lot of preliminary research is needed to better understand the weaknesses of administrative data and what auditing could improve it locally. This is essential in order to get people on board and create buy-in to potentially using administrative sources.

One of the strengths of the Census is that it is not dependent on datasets, and the changing policy landscape, for example, the shift from PCTs to GP commissioning consortia and the shifting relationship between local authorities and schools. The advent of a more decentralised environment encapsulates the key challenge of administrative datasets: that their boundaries keep changing over time in relation to external factors.

The ONS accepts that historically it has been too defensive about administrative sources, and that local authorities were right to challenge them regarding the reconciliation of such data. And while lessons have been learnt (eg. regarding short-term migrants) there is still much work to be done. The ONS has asked key collectors of administrative data sources to take copies of their databases at the time of the Census in order to provide a means of assessing their usefulness. This will also be done with commercial databases, and local authorities may also wish to take copies of locally-held databases as well.

A localised integrated solution

Broadly speaking, local authorities want an improved census involving a mix of administrative data and an improved, continuously updated address register. The ONS accepts these as the demands, and believes that an integrated solution is most likely which integrates across different sources and does so with in-built flexibility for regional variations (i.e. who completes what where, and which sources are most reliable for an area). The possibility of such local flexibility was regarded as very heartening by the local authorities represented at the policy seminar.

The potential for local authorities to simply 'get on' with uncovering the detail they each require is a valid question, not least because it would focus their minds on what they *really* need. Regarding DCLG and the Localism Bill, it is for individual councils to decide what is important for them and what they should be monitoring, and to feed this into the localism discussion accordingly.

Some centralisation remains important in providing consistent datasets to allow comparisons between local authorities. It would be wasteful to have 378 different local authorities all doing the same thing, and it is less easy for LAs to negotiate privacy issues by themselves. So some centralisation can help in terms of access points. There is therefore a potential role for the centre to provide local authorities with a broad base of information from which they can ensure they are looking at the right things.

The major databases that would provide the foundation of an integrated system are in an encouraging state. In particular, the ONS is exploring how to get better access to DWP data. Commercial databases, too, are an ever more valuable asset and work is being progressed to assess the databases held by utilities, TV and telephone companies (etc) and investigate where they can help. Though commercial sources do suffer from similar weaknesses to administrative sources, new commercial options (e.g. mobile phones) may provide better and more frequent estimates in tandem with other sources.

UK Border Agency and e-Borders

The UK Border Agency (UKBA) has a keen interest in population counts and especially flows, for which they currently rely on ONS data. It is especially interested in migrant data which is difficult to find out such as the cost of the migrant population. The UKBA has only limited information about this, and the data it possesses is not acquired or designed to measure population or what happens to the migrant population once it leaves the border.

E-Borders captures information electronically from people as they pass across the UK border (in December 2010 it captured 55% of entries and exits). Its key roles are enforcement, checking status, and identifying those suspected of wrongdoing. Following the change in government, a new contractor is now in charge, with an overall review still ongoing. The ultimate aim is to ensure that an effective system is ready for the 2012 Olympics, with a target of approx. 95% coverage of passenger flows by the end of the first quarter of 2012.

There are problems with e-Borders. The European Community is concerned about freedom of movement, and especially the proposal to capture data from airlines before people arrive. Also, while the system can collect data held on electronic passports, not everyone has these and passport data is limited in terms of UKBA's needs (it checks identity but says nothing about the nature of a person's visit). E-Borders is exploring how this information might be linked to other sources (e.g. visa information) to give more insight, but even visa information only covers a certain proportion of nationalities. Timescales should also be borne in mind as

if the system is ready in early 2012, full information will only be ready in 2013 – or 2014, where 12 month migrants are concerned.

5. Hidden populations

Fluidity of population and dwellings

The fluidity in population is increasingly being replicated by fluidity of dwellings, and this is not sufficiently recognised. For example, there are some households in Newham for which the Census forms will have space for six people, when in fact one such house actually contains 33 children. Houses in Newham routinely and regularly go in and out of being single or multiple occupancy. A recent check of duplicate names at duplicate postcodes on Newham's electoral register found 661 people, which raises questions if multiple census forms go out to these people.

Changing population

Westminster provides a useful case study of population transformation, and the weaknesses of established models in addressing it. In the past ten years, Westminster has transformed in response to gentrification, regeneration, and even Foreign Office policy. Historically, a key difficulty – resulting from weaknesses in the Census – has been not just capturing this changing population but predicting it, and so being better able to prepare for it. WCC is therefore often left unable to prepare which results in having to lay on new school places and new surgeries, and changing languages and resource allocation, reactively rather than pre-emptively.

The reasons for these failings of established models are manifold. First, WCC has not had a certain population base from which to start for a long time due to problems in the 2001 Census. Secondly, there has been no reliable basis for predicting migration flows and so nobody can foresee the influxes of migrants that put such pressure on resources. Thirdly, churn and migration flows, combined with the uncertainty about data accuracy, means that WCC really does not know who leaves the city and who returns or over what timescales. Research has been conducted into short-term migrants regarding their aspirations and service needs (given that different communities have different interactions with the public sector), but more is needed and administrative systems need to be linked up more efficiently. Finally, there needs to be greater emphasis on ensuring that research and analysis is effectively commissioned to ask the right questions and get the right answers.

Innovative approaches

More creativity could be used in small areas with hard-to-count populations. For example, how the South African government old approach to counting populations in shanty towns involved splitting maps into a number of squares, then taking aerial photographs and estimating numbers based on surveying only a proportion of those squares. There is nothing to prevent similar experiments in analysing small numbers of houses/tower blocks which are known to house hard to count populations. Other ideas include legislating to require all 'pay as you go' SIM cards to be registered with the government as is the case in South Africa at present); or measuring sewage output, as Slough Borough Council are seeking to do in conjunction with Thames Water.

For the first time in 2011 the Census will have an online completion option, and it is hoped that this innovation may pick up some of the harder to reach groups, such as young people or transient groups.

Incentives

Given the success of commercial bodies (e.g. Tesco and Sainsbury's) in collecting data through incentivisation, and given also their use of census data, there may be potential for getting commercial backing to help incentivise completion of whatever replaces the Census. A Tesco-sponsored Census with participation rewarded by vouchers is therefore not as far-fetched as it might sound. There is also good practice from abroad to consider, such as in the USA where engagement was enhanced by a clever campaign emphasising to respondents the direct relevance of the short-form Census.

6. Precedents and other practice

International

Generally, the issues surrounding the census – particularly privacy and intrusiveness – are the same everywhere. However, it is important to see these alternative models, and particularly the relative acceptability of data usage, in the context of cultural differences. Broadly speaking, western countries are slowly moving away from the traditional census model, while the rest of the world is not. Even the US (where a ten-yearly census is written into the constitution) has moved from a long-form model to a short-form census (last year advertised as 'Ten questions, ten minutes'), complemented by a continuous household survey.

Techniques vary in those western countries that have moved away from traditional fieldwork. Some use a mix of registers and administrative data; some combine a short-form census with a survey while some combine a short-form census with a long-form census. The most complex approach is France's rolling census, which presents real transparency complications.

Regarding how effectively different international methods deliver different things – for example, which is best at monitoring change in the structure of a population – assessment work has been done in the Netherlands. Here they found the impact on the population count to be positive but users were unhappy with the loss of census information, which was less accurate being estimated from a survey. Overall, however, cost-benefit analysis showed that it was working, and users had accepted it. In the USA, the switch from a long-form census to the Community Survey presented a similar challenge in explaining to users that the new method was sample-based and therefore less accurate. There is interest in finding out what, if any, compensatory data sources has been used internationally to account for loss of accuracy. In relation to this, it is paramount for users to consult with the ONS regarding which surveys are most effective, and which should therefore continue. This is something the ONS itself is currently looking into.

Contact Point

Regarding dataset integration, a potentially useful precedent is Contact Point. The issues encountered by this project neatly summarise some of the difficulties facing Beyond 2011, particularly the failure of initial legislation to provide guidance on privacy issues, leading to indecision and delay, and also the difficulties of sharing data and feeding back to sources on how their datasets could be improved.

Brecon Council

A useful precedent is also provided by Brecon Council, which 30 years ago created an enhanced electoral register, adding just four questions to the form, from which a significant amount of information has been collected that has aided the planning process. There is room

to explore how such an approach could fulfil the need for a (potentially more regular) short-form census and provide the additional data generated by a traditional census.

7. Next steps and Recommendations

Next steps

At the policy seminar on 19 January 2011 the following points were agreed as important in taking the Beyond 2011 programme forward:

- It is vital to make the 2011 Census as successful as possible. If it works well, it will aid the exploration of new models.
- The Counting London Project Board has been created as part of a project aiming to stimulate public participation in the Census in London. The purpose of this board is threefold: to look to execute projects which develop a better understanding of London's population; to use census outputs to answer pressing public policy questions; and to present London's position in a post-2011 environment.
- Given that there is a clear financial cost to inaccurate information, local authorities need to be working with ONS/UKSA on modelling alternatives as a crucial part of the process. It is also worth exploring the affordable local option of adding short questions to electoral registration forms to gain extra insight.
- The ONS wants to proactively liaise and engage with both users and experts. A wider stakeholder engagement strategy is crucial for the ONS and the policy seminar provided an important starting point in taking that forward.
- It will be important to manage public consultation, and ensure the right questions are asked to get the right answers. It will be useful to engage with local authorities both in terms of understanding user need and tapping into expertise.
- Local authorities should conduct more experiments in order to make their requests more evidence –based. More attention should be given to hard-to-count communities, but the search for such people must not itself determine the replacement for the Census.
- Continued resourcing is required in London Councils to focus on this beyond 2011, given that whatever follows will not be for some time.
- Work needed to continue in order to achieve clarity regarding: what we are trying to count; weaknesses of current methodologies and perceived strengths of what we want brought forward; and 'political' process (scope of consultation, how to feed into engagement rather than consultation, timescales).

Recommendations

1. That the Commission make counting the population a regular item (such as on a yearly basis) on its agenda so that the profile of the issue is not lost after the 2011 Census.
2. That adequate support is provided to the Chief Executive of the Council in their role on the London Charter Board Counting Population working group.
3. That Westminster City Council be put forward as a pilot authority for the Beyond 2011 working group.
4. For the council to lead on creating a Population Statistics Users Group supported by the ONS and UK Statistics Authority that will be an integral part of the quality assurance of the new methodology.