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Submitted to Consultation on the future of population and migration statistics in England and Wales
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About you

Full name

Full name:

Nick Moon

Email address

Email address:

nickmoon500@gmail.com

Are you answering this questionnaire on behalf of an organisation?

Yes

About you

What is the name of the organisation?

What is the name of the organisation?:

British Polling Council

What sector does the organisation belong to?

Business, industry or commercial

If you selected 'Other', please provide your organisation's sector below.

If you selected 'Other', please provide your organisation's sector below.:

About you

In the last 12 months, approximately how often have you used or referred to statistics from the ONS?

Daily

What do you currently use the ONS's population and migration statistics for?

Service provision or business planning

What do you currently use the ONS's population statistics for?:

Your population and migration statistical needs

Please explain how you currently use the ONS's population and migration statistics?

Please explain how you currently use ONS population and migration statistics? :

Census data is used extensively by the polling industry, and its use is essential to conduct good-quality polls. Three main uses of census data are the following. Firstly, quotas – where the census tells pollsters how many people with various characteristics (such as by gender, age, social grade, and so on) are needed for a sample to be representative. Such samples can be national in scale (which require national-level census data), or in smaller areas (which require lower-level census data). If census data is not available to set the quotas, then polling will be much less accurate. Secondly, census data is used by pollsters to weight samples which are not completely representative, in order for them to be representative. This requires census data for the relevant variates (such as social grade, ethnicity, religion, and so on) so that samples can be reweighted to

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match national or area-level census figures. Again, an absence of census data would make polls less accurate.

Thirdly, census data is used by modern polling techniques such as MRP (multi-level regression and

post-stratification). MRP is a way of analysing polls which uses more advanced statistical techniques. It is often more accurate than classic polling, and also allows estimates of opinion at small areas to be made. MRP relies on small-area census data across a wide range of census topics, such as age, gender, social grade, occupation status, education, ethnicity, religion, marital status, language skills, and so on. MRP polls are used by political parties, charities, campaign groups, businesses and others. Additionally, our research partners and clients, as well as society at large, benefit from the transparency of the data, in particular the granular information that pertains to wealth and life outcomes.

Representative sampling requires national and sub-national definitive information about the fraction of the population who have various characteristics. It is important to have both national level statistics, but also lower geographical level statistics for polling of sub-national geographies. Statistics for demographic sub-groups, such as surveys of those aged over 75, of LGBT people, or of ethnic minorities, are also dependent upon the fine details of the census. This includes fields such as approximate social grade and religion. It is important that these fields be measured from official sources, such as the census, rather than from surveys. Surveys themselves need to be calibrated to official data, rather than to other surveys.

In particular, the polling industry makes extensive use of the following census variables, whose continued production is not guaranteed: approximate social grade, religion, national identity, and language skills.

The polling industry also uses the following census variables at low-level geographies, whose continued production is uncertain: education, housing tenure, vehicle ownership, marital status, occupation status and ethnicity.

Your population and migration statistical needs

To what extent do these proposals meet your needs?

The proposals do not meet any of my needs

Your population and migration statistical needs

Are your current information needs better met by these proposals?

No

Your population and migration statistical needs

Would these proposals allow you to do anything new that you have not previously been able to do?

No

Please explain the reasons for your answer.

Please explain the reasons for your answer.:

Our members have not identified anything new in particular that they would be able to do under the proposal. More frequent updates of data, if they could be applied to the entire existing set of fields, would be welcome. But the loss of data, and the loss of data at small areas mean that firms can do less instead of more.

Your population and migration statistical needs

Which of your current needs would not be met by these proposals? Please include reasons for your answer. For example, information around levels of detail, accuracy, timeliness or geography.

Which of your current needs would not be met by these proposals? Please include reasons for your answer. For example, information around levels of detail, accuracy, timeliness or geography.:

Our members are concerned about the potential loss of approximate social grade. This is an important field for quota purposes in polling, and it would be a significant loss for it to be discontinued. The loss of other fields such as religion, national identity, and language skills are also unhelpful.

Understanding the religion, national identity and language skills of the population is very important in today's society, and impacts political debate. Pollsters, and those in the wider research ecosystem, need to know what the true figures are.

One example of the risks comes from polling for the 1992 election, where the industry relied on survey samples, such as the NRS (national readership survey). Inaccuracies in these surveys, such as too many C2Des and too many council house tenants, were part of the material error in polling at that time. There is a genuine risk, as this example shows, that a lack of solid demographic data will

result in polling error.

The replacement of official data, such as the census, with survey data may also be insufficient. Survey quality is ensured, in part, by using weighting schemes to match official quotas. If the quotas themselves come from surveys, the whole operation would become circular and sampling errors could be magnified in a positive-feedback loop. Any survey is reliant, to a large degree, upon reliable demographic data in the first place.

Further, those members who conduct MRP polling express deep concerns that the proposal would not meet their needs. They need official data at small area level. The proposal contains aspirations to give LSOA data for some fields, but many other fields have no definite proposals for small-area statistics. These include education, housing tenure, vehicle ownership, marital status, occupation status and ethnicity. The same concerns also apply to the fields which may be discontinued (as mentioned above): approximate social grade, religion, national identity and language skills. These losses would make it hard for our member firms to conduct good-quality MRP polling. The census data is an essential input to MRP surveys, and cannot be replaced by survey estimates.

Impact on your information needs

Do the proposed levels of geographic breakdown meet your information needs?

No

What additional geographic breakdowns would you need? Please explain the reasons for your answer.

What additional geographic breakdowns would you need? Please explain the reasons for your answer.:

As mentioned in our reply to the previous question, our members have a keen need for small area statistics.

The proposal document is less than definite on this question. On pages 24-25, it says some topics "could have... more geographic detail..., with outputs at LSOA level". Others would have LA-level outputs, but "ONS aims to build towards outputs at ... LSOA level". A third set of topics needs "further research" to determine what could be available.

This wording suggests that research into this question is still ongoing and subject to change. But, on the basis of the likely outcomes, the lack of small area data for many fields does not meet the needs of our members. Particularly important fields include: approximate social grade, occupation (labour market) status, housing tenure. Other important fields are: vehicle ownership, marital status, religion, ethnicity, and language skills.

We note a recent MRS survey of MRS and BPC members, which found that 60% of respondents used census data at small areas. It also found that 44% of respondents used approximate social grade at small areas, 44% used ethnicity, 40% used housing tenure, and 35% used occupation status. These figures suggest that relatively large numbers of firms are making use of such data.

Impact on your information needs

Would this change in available detail still meet your needs?

I don't know

What impact would this change in available detail have on your use of our population and migration statistics? Please explain your answer.

What impact would this change in available detail have on your use of our population and migration statistics? Please explain your answer.:

Section 3.3.3 of the consultation document only appears to have two sentences on this subject. One says that "there are limits to the detail that can be achieved", and the other gives a

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single example of ethnicity where the granularity of possible responses is decreased from 287 buckets to 19 buckets.

Absent an actual detailed proposal for each field, it is hard to make a definite statement about whether or not an unknown level of granularity is sufficient. In the case of ethnicity, 19 buckets seems adequate for most purposes.

Population definitions and estimates

Do you need definitions for population and migration estimates other than 'usual resident'?

No

Delivering future population estimates

For the usual resident population how frequently would you like population estimates? Please select the most important frequency for you.

Other

If you ticked 'Other', please specify

If you ticked 'Other', please specify :

BPC Members have a variety of needs, but, in general, annual updates are sufficient.

Please explain the reasons for your selected frequency and how it would meet your needs.

Please explain the reasons for your selected frequency and how it would meet your needs.:

As above

Delivering future population estimates

How timely would you like population estimates to be?

I don't know

Please explain the reason for your answer.

Please explain the reason for your answer.:

BPC Members have a variety of needs.

Data needs for genealogy and social history

What details from population and social characteristics data do you see as being important to be preserved for future generations, if any?
Please explain why this data is important to be preserved.

What details from population and social characteristics data do you see as being important to be preserved for future generations, if any? Please explain why this data is important to be preserved.:

BPC Members are not heavily involved in this area

Other comments

Is there anything else about the population and migration statistics proposal that you wish to add to your response?

Is there anything else about the population and migration statistics proposal that you wish to add to your response?:

The British Polling Council is an association of UK polling organisations that publish polls and are committed to promoting transparency in polling. It was established in 2014, and currently has 34 member organisations.

The BPC welcomes the chance to express the views of its member firms to the ONS. This is a very important topic for us and our members, and we would like to help achieve the best possible outcome.

The UK census has a strong institutional track record dating back over two centuries. Its advantages to market research and polling come from the comprehensiveness of its sample, its accuracy, and its geographic detail.

Any plan to replace this successful exercise needs to be carefully thought through and shown to be likely to deliver an equivalent or superior product.

Unfortunately, the proposal document does not meet those requirements. The proposal is clearly still in the research stages for many topics, and there are many important questions unanswered. These relate to which topics will be included, the geographic reach of each topic, and the frequency of updates. The proposal has few concrete statements, but many "objectives", "aims", "baselines", and "could haves".

For a project as important as the national census it seems ill-advised to take a "leap in the dark" and to try to move a new system which has not been fully researched, specified, tested or demonstrated. The risks of project failure are high. As far as we know, no other country (without a population register) has successfully migrated from a questionnaire census to an administrative approach in a single cycle.

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The potential loss of fields, such as approximate social grade, will be negative for the polling industry overall. The loss of small area data will be negative for a substantial number of polling firms.

We would recommend that the ONS consider moving at a slower pace on this project to reduce the project risk, and to keep more continuity in the data supplied to users.

One option would be to run the 2031 census with an online questionnaire. ONS could use the additional time to complete its research into administrative sources and make definite and specific proposals for each field which would be evidence-based. Comparison could also be made between the two approaches for quality assurance reasons.

Another option is to run a smaller-scale questionnaire in 2031 to 'fill in the gaps' where administrative sources either cannot produce the field at all, or cannot produce the field at small area level.

Otherwise, ONS runs the risks of a failed project. Even on the best scenario, the proposal look set to damage UK statistics in terms of their breadth and geographic depth. This would make it harder for UK companies to conduct good-quality polling and market research.

Other comments

Which of these geographies do you mainly use ONS population statistics for? If you use more than one, please select all that apply.

UK-wide

Other comments

Thank you for taking the time to complete this consultation. Can the ONS contact you for further information on your answers?

Yes