

MRS Census and Geodemographics Group
Submission to HM Treasury Consultation: Independence for Statistics

Introduction

The Census and Geodemographics Group (CGG) is an advisory committee of The Market Research Society (MRS) containing around twenty individual members with experience in the creation and use of population statistics (in their widest sense), census data and geographic information. The Group was formed in 1989 and has actively promoted the use of census and other statistics for the past seventeen years, by means of publications, seminars and a Geodemographics Knowledge Base web site (www.geodemographics.org.uk). At the same time, the CGG has worked with the UK Census Offices, via the Office for National Statistics (ONS), representing the needs of the research industry in consultations on the 1991, 2001 and 2011 censuses.

This response represents the views of the Census & Geodemographics Group, gathered by consultation with CGG members. We have no objection to this response being made public on the HM Treasury website.

Importance of Official Statistics

Official statistics form the bedrock of information on which market research is based. Market research is a £1.3 billion industry (according to the British Market Research Association for 2005) and so is a major user of official statistics.

The population census arguably underpins all consumer research undertaken in this country, and is also a primary source driving a geodemographics and lifestyles industry which was last estimated at £200 million (for 2003).

Therefore, the availability of reliable, timely and useful official statistics is of critical importance to us.

Main Response

The CGG fully supports the responses made by the Statistics User Forum and MRS, the latter being concerned particularly with the funding, production, use and dissemination of all types of official statistics.

In this response, we focus on some particular points that we believe are important when considering independence for ONS.

1. We believe that independence for ONS should be taken as an opportunity to achieve better connection of all statistical activities, and that active steps should be taken to avoid the risk of further divisions between the agencies responsible for interdependent information, e.g. ONS and Ordnance Survey (OS). For example, the Output Area boundaries in the 2001 Census form part of the Census Access Project and so are freely available for end-users, however OS current policy is to charge royalties on any re-supply of these boundaries by value added resellers.
2. All unnecessary distinctions should be removed between national statistics and other official statistics – such distinctions are unsatisfactory and confusing to users. We understand that the current definition of ‘national statistics’ is ‘statistics generated by the Government Statistical Service (GSS)’. This definition seems circular and is meaningless to those outside government, who do not understand the distinction between GSS and non-GSS statistics.
3. Where appropriate, statistics should be consistent across the UK – for example, in the census alone, there are some output tables on a UK base, others

on Great Britain and others on England & Wales. Even the policy for disclosure control, used in the 2001 census output, was not consistent across the UK.

4. The opportunity should be taken to make a commitment that there will be uniform terms for access, use and further dissemination of all statistics for all users – irrespective of whether they come from the public, private or academic sectors.

5. We endorse the comments of the Statistics User Forum on user consultation. We would add that the many key users of official statistics in the private sector need to be recognised by ONS and fully represented in improved consultation processes.

6. We support the comments made by SUF and MRS on funding for official statistics and for the census. As the structure of society becomes more complex and individuals become more concerned about privacy issues, it seems almost inevitable that good information will become more difficult to collect in exercises such as the 2011 Census.

Further Consultation

Although the CGG participates in the Statistics User Forum, this should not be the sole point of contact for any future discussions. We would wish to have the opportunity to contribute directly to any further consultation on this topic.

We would be pleased to provide further input as an independent ONS evolves.

Dr Barry Leventhal

Chair, MRS Census & Geodemographics Group