
Chair of the UK Statistics Authority, Sir Andrew Dilnot CBE

Rt. Hon. Francis Maude MP
Minister for the Cabinet Office
70 Whitehall
LONDON
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27 March 2014

Dear Francis

THE CENSUS AND FUTURE PROVISION OF POPULATION STATISTICS IN ENGLAND AND WALES

In May 2010 and ahead of the 2011 Census, my predecessor, Sir Michael Scholar, asked the National Statistician and the Office for National Statistics (ONS) to review the future provision of population statistics in order to inform the decision about the next census, which would customarily take place in 2021.

Over the past three years, ONS has undertaken an extensive programme of research into new ways of counting the population as well as reviewing practices in other countries (the Beyond 2011 Programme). ONS has engaged with a diverse group of users, commentators and public bodies across England and Wales, and has worked closely with counterparts in Scotland and Northern Ireland who are carrying out their own, similar reviews. ONS has undertaken research into public opinion about different approaches to producing population statistics¹ and has recently completed a major three-month public consultation.² Finally, ONS commissioned a significant independent review of methodology chaired by Chris Skinner, Professor of Statistics at the London School of Economics, which was published in November 2013.³

The Board of the UK Statistics Authority is satisfied that ONS has carried out a thorough public review of the future provision of population statistics in England and Wales and the options for the next census.

The ONS consultation confirmed continuing demand from government, local authorities, public bodies, business, the voluntary sector, academia and individual citizens for the detailed information about small areas and small populations that is produced from the decennial census. But it also confirmed increasing demand for more frequent and timely statistics between censuses, which could be produced from greater and more efficient use of the administrative data which is already provided to government and the wider public sector by individuals, as well as by regular surveys.

¹<http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/about-ons/who-ons-are/programmes-and-projects/beyond-2011/beyond-2011-report-on-autumn-2013-consultation--and-recommendations/public-attitudes-report.pdf>

²<http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/about-ons/who-ons-are/programmes-and-projects/beyond-2011/beyond-2011-report-on-autumn-2013-consultation--and-recommendations/report-on-public-consultation.pdf>

³<http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/about-ons/who-ons-are/programmes-and-projects/beyond-2011/reports-and-publications/methods-and-policies-reports/beyond-2011--independent-review-of-methodology.pdf>

The Board of the Authority sees substantial potential benefits from using administrative data and surveys to supplement the traditional census approach and to provide population statistics in the future. The Board of the Authority fully recognises that the public must be assured of privacy and confidentiality with the use of administrative data for statistical purposes. Parliament might therefore wish to consider appropriate legal safeguards in any future legislation to enable such data sharing for the purposes of producing official statistics, such as those in the *Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007* covering current uses of data for statistical purposes.

The National Statistician has concluded that the demand for a decennial census remains strong and that there is general support for the next census being conducted predominantly online (with help and support being provided to individuals who may not be willing or able to respond in this way). The National Statistician also concluded that there is support for the increasing use of administrative data for the purposes of producing census and other population statistics, and to improve annual statistics between censuses. The National Statistician has recommended making the best use of all sources, combining data from an online census in 2021 *and* administrative data and surveys. The Board of the Authority accepts and endorses her recommendation⁴ and I commend it to you.

Under the *Census Act 1920* it remains for the Government and Parliament to determine whether and when the 2021 Census for England and Wales should proceed. Later this year, the Authority will present detailed financial estimates underpinning our recommendation, and I will write to you again at this point.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Andrew Dilnot', written in a cursive style.

Sir Andrew Dilnot CBE

⁴<http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/about-ons/who-ons-are/programmes-and-projects/beyond-2011/beyond-2011-report-on-autumn-2013-consultation--and-recommendations/national-statisticians-recommendation.pdf>