Beyond 2011: Administrative Data Sources Report: Electoral Register

February 2013

Background

The Office for National Statistics is currently taking a fresh look at options for the production of population and small area socio-demographic statistics for England and Wales. The Beyond 2011 Programme has been established to carry out research on the options and to recommend the best way forward to meet future user needs.

Improvements in technology and administrative data sources offer opportunities to either modernise the census process, or to develop an alternative by re-using existing data already held within government. Since methods for taking the traditional census are already relatively well understood most of the research is focussing on how surveys can be supplemented by better re-use of ‘administrative’ data already collected from the public.

The final recommendation, which will be made in 2014, will balance user needs, cost, benefit, statistical quality, and the public acceptability of all of the options. The results will have implications for all population-based statistics in England and Wales and, potentially, for the statistical system as a whole.

About this paper

This paper is one of the Source Reports series looking at the use of existing administrative data sets and Beyond 2011’s assessment of the quality & potential use as an administrative data source. This report focuses on Household Electoral Registration data. Another paper in the Sources series, Beyond 2011 Administrative Data Sources Report: The English School Census and the Welsh School Census (S3) is being published alongside this report.

This document is one of a series of papers to be published over coming months. These will report our progress on researching and assessing the options, discuss our policies and methods and summarise what we find out about individual data sources.

For more information

Search Beyond 2011 @ www.ons.gov.uk or contact: beyond2011@ons.gov.uk
1 Executive Summary

This report presents research reviewing the scope and quality of the electoral register as a potential source of data for use, within the Beyond 2011 Programme, by the Office for National Statistics (ONS).

The electoral register is a list of British, Irish, EU and Commonwealth citizens who are eligible to vote in England and Wales. To be eligible to vote an individual must meet certain age, nationality and residence criteria, and not have a legal incapacity to register.

The electoral register has a high level of population coverage for persons 18 years and over. However, there are underlying conceptual differences between the Local Government Electorate and the usually resident population (the key population for Beyond 2011 purposes). The main differences include the absence of children under 18 and citizens from outside Britain, the EU and the Commonwealth.

The electoral register does not contain any data on gender and contains very limited information on age. Furthermore there is no consistent format of the electoral register at the record level across the local authorities and therefore there is no national electoral register available.

The main findings from comparing the Local Government Electorate count (reference date of 1st December 2010) with 2011 Census data (reference date of 27 March 2011) are:

- at the national level, the 2011 Census population estimate is greater than the 2010 Local Government Electorate count by 6.3 per cent
- at the local authority level the Local Government Electorate count is within three per cent of the 2011 Census estimates in 34 per cent of local authorities. 57 per cent of local authorities were within five per cent of the census estimates and 87 per cent were within ten per cent of the census estimates
- there are only nine local authorities where the Local Government Electorate shows a higher count than their 2011 Census population estimates.

Any method of estimating population size based solely or mainly on the electoral register is unlikely to be suitable for Beyond 2011 purposes due to the lack of information regarding age and gender. However, the electoral register should still prove to be an important source for the Beyond 2011 Programme as it can be used in combination with other sources.

2 Introduction

The principle of Beyond 2011 is relatively simple – the Programme is investigating the best way of producing the population and small area socio-demographic statistics needed to support the effective administration of the country. We are carrying out a programme of research looking at all of the possible approaches to producing this data, then assessing each of these against an agreed set of criteria in order to help us decide on the best way forward.

This document, S2: Administrative Data Sources Report (Electoral Register) is one in a series of detailed assessments setting out the results of reviews of individual sources.
The following Administrative Data Sources Reports have already been published;

S1: Administrative Data Sources Report (NHS Patient Register);
S3: Administrative Data Sources Report (The English School Census and the Welsh School Census).

We anticipate that further reports will be published including:-

S4: Administrative Data Sources Report (Higher Education Student Data).
S5: Administrative Data Sources Report (Data from DWP/HMRC systems);

In making use of data from administrative sources, we need to understand the processes and procedures associated with the collection, collation, processing and validation of the information and the implications these processes may have for the underlying quality of the data. In particular, it is important to take account of the differences between data collected for administrative and statistical purposes and, where necessary, to make allowances for differences in data definitions and classifications as well as variations in timeliness and reference points.

This report brings together this information with a quantitative comparison of the electoral register and the 2011 Census results to inform the use of this dataset within the Beyond 2011 Programme.

3 Background

All of the indications are that the census held in 2011 has been highly successful – but there are clear signs that taking the census is becoming increasingly challenging and costly.

The dynamic nature of populations, advances in information technology and demand for more frequent and more detailed statistics are driving changes in methods. This trend can be seen across many developed countries.

ONS set up the ‘Beyond 2011’ Programme in April 2011 to take a fresh look at options for meeting future user needs for population and small area socio-demographic statistics.

The ‘Beyond 2011’ Programme is studying a range of statistical options including:

- census-type solutions
- administrative data solutions
- survey solutions

Since ‘census type’ solutions are already relatively well understood the majority of the Programme’s research work is focussed on investigating ways of making more use of existing administrative datasets combined with targeted surveys. Recommendations on the way forward, to be made in 2014, will be informed not only by the statistical viability of the potential solutions, but also by a full understanding of user requirements, public burden, costs and public acceptability.

Evaluating the quality of administrative data sources that may be used within the Beyond 2011 Programme is a key element of the research. The outcomes will inform the benefits and challenges associated with using these data sources. The electoral register is one such administrative source. ONS has access to each local authority’s electoral register which includes an entry for every person who is registered on the electoral register for local government, European parliamentary elections and/or parliamentary elections. Due to its broad coverage of persons over 18 in England
and Wales, the electoral register is an obvious and potentially important source of data for the Beyond 2011 Programme.

4 Potential data source - an overview

4.1 The electoral register

The electoral register is a list of British, Irish, EU and Commonwealth citizens who are eligible to vote in England and Wales. To be eligible to vote an individual must meet certain age, nationality and residence criteria, and not have a legal incapacity to register.

Each local authority produces their own electoral register which is updated and published annually through postal canvasses, and continuously updated through a rolling registration of monthly revisions where electors are added and removed (Electoral Commission 2008).

The local authorities take ownership of their own electoral registers and are thus responsible for collecting and producing their data. An Electoral Registration Officer (ERO) is employed in each local authority and it is their responsibility to ensure full completeness of their register (Electoral Commission 2008). The EROs are supported by an independent body, the Electoral Commission, set up by Parliament to work with them and provide them with a central point of guidance (Electoral Commission 2011b). The Electoral Commission also set the standard for electoral registrations and ensures that people understand the importance of registering, how to register and how to vote (Electoral Commission 2012b).

From the electoral register two separate lists are derived:

- the parliamentary register;
- the local government/European parliamentary register.

Registrations for the parliamentary, local government and European elections are collected using the same registration form and are collated by the ERO to form one electoral register for their local authority. The ERO will then identify which elections an elector is registered for (depending upon the electors’ eligibility) and will create the two separate lists from the electoral register (the parliamentary register and the local government/European parliamentary register).

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1 A legal incapacity includes prisoners (except those on remand who can vote), people with learning difficulties or mental health conditions (Electoral Commission 2008).
4.2 The parliamentary register

The parliamentary register contains a list of all people who are entitled to vote in England and Wales parliamentary elections. An individual is entitled to register if they are living in England or Wales and are a British citizen, a qualifying Commonwealth citizen, a Republic of Ireland citizen or a British citizen living overseas and are not subject to the following;

- any legal incapacity to vote;
- under 18 years of age\(^2\)
- a member of the House of Lords.

An individual may register to vote in two different areas if they have two different addresses. For example, students living away from home during term time can register at both their home and term time address. However, despite some individuals being eligible to register at two different addresses they may only vote once in each Parliamentary election.

The 1\(^{st}\) December 2010 Parliamentary register count for England and Wales was 40,297,109 – of these there were 38,036,176 registered voters in England, and 2,260,933 registered voters in Wales (ONS 2012c).

4.3 The local government register

The local government register contains a list of all people who are entitled to vote in England and Wales for both local government and European parliamentary elections. An individual is entitled to vote in both of these elections if they are a British, Commonwealth or Republic of Ireland citizen or a citizen of a member state of the European Union (Electoral Commission 2008). An individual is not entitled to vote if they are under 18\(^2\) or have any legal incapacity to vote, as in parliamentary elections.

The local government register contains similar information to the parliamentary register, but does not include British citizens living overseas. Although eligible to vote in parliamentary elections, British citizens living overseas are ineligible to vote in local government elections as they are not registered in a local government area in which to vote. Citizens of member states of the European Union and members of the House of Lords are also eligible to register on the local government register but not on the parliamentary register. However, British, Cypriot and Maltese citizens are eligible to vote in both elections as they are part of the Commonwealth.

As with the parliamentary register, a person may register in two areas if they have two different addresses, but unlike the parliamentary elections, if they are registered in two different local government areas they may vote in each of their registered areas. For example, a student registered at both their term-time address and their parents’ address in a different local government area, may vote twice in the local government election – once at their term-time address and once at their parents’ address.

The local government register is also used for the National Assembly for Wales elections, the Scottish Parliament elections and the Greater London Authority elections. For example, anyone who is registered on the local government register as living in Scotland may vote in the Scottish Parliamentary election, if they are registered in Wales they may vote in the National Assembly for

\(^2\) An individual can register to vote if their 18\(^{th}\) birthday will occur during the canvass period – these are known as attainers.
Wales elections and if they are registered in London they may vote in the Greater London Authority elections (Electoral Commission 2008).

The 1st December 2010 local government register count for England and Wales was 41,345,546 – of these there were 39,064,016 registered voters in England, and 2,281,530 registered voters for Wales (ONS 2012c).

The relationship between the population covered in the parliamentary register and the local government register is illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Comparing the populations of the parliamentary register with the local government register

Source: ONS 2012

4.4 Selection of data source

The focus of this report will be on the local government register as the eligibility criteria indicate that it should be more closely aligned to the *usually resident* population\(^3\), the key population for Beyond 2011 purposes, than the parliamentary register. This is because the local government register:

- does not include overseas voters;
- covers a larger proportion of the population as it includes citizens of member states of the European Union (who are not already eligible to vote in parliamentary elections).

However, the parliamentary register could still be beneficial to Beyond 2011 in identifying those individuals who have left the country and reside overseas.

\(^3\) See section 5.1.2 for the definition of the *usually resident* population.
4.5 Data collection: annual canvass and rolling registration

An annual canvass is currently the main method used to collect the data required for the electoral register. Each individual local authority delivers registration forms to all addresses within the local authority (a copy of the form is shown in Appendix A). Currently the form may be completed by one member of the household on behalf of the whole household (which includes information such as name, address and nationality). Failure to supply this information when requested by an ERO is an offence. The annual canvass takes place between July and October each year, with the deadline for inclusion on the published December register being 15th October.

Time and effort is focussed on ensuring that the electoral register is as accurate and complete as possible. The Electoral Commission circulate very detailed instructions on ways of how to improve the data collection process. For example, one regularly occurring issue is that of non returned canvass forms. The Electoral Commission (2008) suggest the following advice to deal with this issue:

“the minimum contact the Electoral Registration Officer should make would be to send two canvass forms and have the property visited by a door-to-door canvasser on at least one occasion, or such of these actions as are required until a satisfactory response has been achieved. The Electoral Registration Officer should have documentary records of this contact, such as postal dockets evidencing what has been sent and records from the canvasser showing the date(s) and time(s) when the property was visited. In addition, in circumstances where no response has been obtained, the Electoral Registration Officer should consider taking the step of inspecting other records using their powers to do so”.

As advised by the Electoral Commission, an ERO is permitted to use administrative records to assist with ensuring that their register is as complete and accurate as possible, and to source additional information when no response is received from the canvass. The data sources which the ERO is permitted to use are; any records kept by the council which employs them (such as registers of births and deaths) and any data held by a company or organisation which provides services to the employing council, including ‘outsourced’ services (Electoral Commission 2008).

It is important to note that in England and Wales; only EROs working in unitary authorities will have access to all of the council records for their area (Electoral Commission 2008). This is because non-unitary authority EROs are appointed by their district council and not the county council, and the county council holds more data than the district council; for example, education records (Electoral Commission 2008).

If a non-responder to the canvass is not found on an ERO’s administrative source the ERO may retain the electors’ details on the new register through the process of ‘carry forward’ for one year (Electoral Commission 2011). This ensures that no individual is wrongly removed from the register. However, an incorrect ‘carry forward’ may result in duplication if the person has re-registered in a new local authority.

The other method of data collection is rolling registration which was introduced in 2001. It was introduced to allow EROs to update registers on a continuous basis, allowing new registrations and those who have changed address to update before the next annual canvass. A similar form to the annual canvass is used and can be obtained from the local authority directly or online. The number of people using this rolling registration process is limited. However the uptake on rolling registration is higher nearer the time of an election, as registration awareness increases (Electoral Commission 2011).

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* Future changes to the electoral register are discussed in section 8.
4.6 Overview of the data ONS receives

ONS obtains both record level and aggregated electoral register data from every local authority within England and Wales. The record level data are used by ONS in part of the operations for the data collection of social surveys. The aggregated data (sent as separate counts) are used to produce Electoral Statistics which are published on an annual basis by ONS.

Unfortunately there is no national register at the record level and therefore these data are sent to ONS in 348 individual files (one for each local authority in England and Wales). It is not simple to collate a national register from the record level data. There is no standardised format for inputting registration details and consequently, there are numerous different formats of the register across the local authorities and the information recorded is not consistent. These differences may be a result of the numerous IT systems available to an ERO for creating their electoral register. Consequently, to create a national register would be both time consuming and difficult.

It is important to note that despite it being a legal obligation to provide electoral registers to ONS, a number of local authorities did not deliver record level data relating to December 2010. For this analysis, when 2010 data were unavailable the previous year’s data were used instead. Consequently, the record level data ONS use for these local authorities may be out of date.

The aggregated data sent to ONS, are used to create Electoral Statistics at the national and local authority level. EROs supply ONS with the aggregate counts of electors, within their local authority, in the December of each year. ONS then collate this data and publish the Electoral Statistics every February. These statistics provide annual counts of the number of registrations for the ‘Parliamentary Electorate’ and the ‘Local Government Electorate’ separately. Those registered in the ‘Local Government Electorate’ are also eligible to vote in the European Parliamentary elections and so are included in this count.

Due to the inconsistencies and incompleteness of the individual local authority registers at record level, this report is based on the ONS Electoral Statistics derived from the aggregate data and not the local authority record level registers. However for completeness the quality of the record level registers are discussed in section 5.1.1.

5 Overview of the electoral register data extract

The numbers of local government electors for the 1st December 2010 for England and Wales were as follows:

(i) There were 41,345,546 registered voters in England and Wales (excluding attainers\(^5\));
(ii) 39,064,016 registered voters in England (excluding attainers);
(iii) 2,281,530 registered voters in Wales (excluding attainers).

\(^5\) An individual can register to vote if their 18\(^{th}\) birthday will occur during the canvass period – these are known as attainers.
5.1 Data quality

5.1.1 ONS quality checks

As the ONS Electoral Statistics are aggregated and therefore do not give a sufficient level of detail to carry out an in-depth quality assessment, an initial assessment of the quality of the record level electoral register data has been carried out. This assessment was conducted on a sample of 34 different local authorities within England and Wales (the full list of local authorities is shown in Appendix B). The local authorities chosen for analysis were geographically spread throughout England and Wales covering a range of both urban and rural areas, with some local authorities including specific groups such as large armed forces populations or students.

From the assessment it was identified that each register includes an ID number, a code identifying which elections the elector is registered for, forename, surname (in some cases this is combined), address including postcode (ranging from six to nine fields) and date of attainment (where relevant and indicting when the elector attains 18 years of age). Twelve of the selected registers included a household identification number which identifies those electors living together in the same household. Although all the selected local authorities had address variables, the way in which the address variables were formatted was different between the registers. Some had separate fields for flats and houses, resulting in up to nine address fields, whereas other registers had no more than six address fields. Furthermore, there was not a consistent variable naming convention across all the registers. A possible reason for these discrepancies is the numerous IT systems available to an ERO for creating their electoral register.

5.1.2 Relating the local government register to the population

This section explores how the coverage of the local government register relates to the Beyond 2011 target of measuring the *usually resident* population.

There is evidence that the local government register will include some people not included in the *usually resident* population, and exclude others who are. In December 2010 the Local Government register count for England and Wales was 6.3 per cent lower than the 2011 Census population estimate for England and Wales.

**Definition of usually resident:** According to ONS (2009) a *usual resident* of the UK (for census output purposes only) is anyone who, on 27 March 2011 was (i) in the UK and had stayed or intended to stay in the UK for a period of 12 months or more or; (ii) had a permanent UK address and was outside the UK and intended to be outside the UK for less than 12 months.

There are many reasons why an individual may appear on the electoral register and not be deemed as *usually resident*, according to the census definition and vice versa. Eligibility for inclusion on electoral registers is linked to entitlement to vote as legislated by the Representation of the People Act (1983). Citizens of Britain, the Republic of Ireland, Commonwealth nations and nations of the European Union, who are normally resident in England or Wales, and who will be aged 18 or over during the relevant period, are eligible to vote in an election. Consequently those people intending to stay in England or Wales for a period of 12 months or more who are not a citizen of the eligible nations will be excluded. For example, a migrant from Israel who has been living in the England or Wales for over 12 months would be included in the *usually resident* population according to the census definition, but ineligible to register on the electoral register.
The relationship between the population covered in the electoral register and the *usual resident* population is illustrated in Figure 2. This shows that for a specific area at a specific time, the population covered in the electoral register may differ from the *usual resident* population as a result of: the inclusion of short term migrants who are originally from the EU or Commonwealth; the omission of persons who are ineligible to vote; the omission of persons who are not registered to vote; people remaining registered after they have emigrated, moved or died (erroneous carry forwards); the exclusion of those with a legal incapacity to vote which includes some prisoners and individuals with learning difficulties or mental health issues and the omission of children under the age of 16 and those aged 16 or 17 who will not turn 18 years old during the canvass period.

**Figure 2: Relating the electoral register to the *usual resident* population in area $j$ at time $t$**

Source: ONS 2012

Some of the reasons for differences are as follows:

**Multiple area registrations:** A person may register to vote in two areas if they have two different addresses. For example, students living away from home during term time can register at both their home and term time address. Therefore, it is legal to be recorded on the register in more than one place. If the record level registers for all local authorities were to be combined individuals would therefore have duplicate entries. As a result at local authority level some individuals would be registered to vote in an area where they were not classed as *usually resident*.

Despite some individuals being eligible to be registered at two different addresses, the responsible ERO will decide whether to permit the registration or not on a case-by-case basis (Electoral Commission 2008). Therefore there will be variations from one local authority to the next.
**Time lags in deregistration and re-registration:** Each local authority has their own practices regarding the maintenance of their register. This can result in time lags with removals and carry forwards. This is particularly prevalent with HM Forces service voters and people living in England and Wales but who have no permanent address or no residential address. This is because they are able to register under a declaration of connection (Electoral Commission 2008), which has a longer registration limit than a typical elector and they are not encouraged to re-register if their circumstances change. For example, HM Forces service voters are given an option to register as a service voter, which allows the individual to be registered at one address for three years even if they move around (Electoral Commission 2008). Consequently, their registered address may be out of date. Whilst this would not impact on the *usually resident* population at national level, it would result in differences locally.

The electoral register also suffers from degradation once data is published in December. The completeness may have declined by up to five per cent between December and April (Electoral Commission 2011). This could be explained by population movement and the underuse of rolling registration (Electoral Commission 2010).

**Illegal duplicates/fraud:** There is evidence that the electoral register is used by criminals and organised crime groups to enable a range of criminal activities such as electoral crime and financial crime including passing credit checks and benefit claims (Cabinet Office 2011). The current registration system does not require a ‘new’ elector to provide proof of identification to support their registration. Therefore, the possibility exists for successful fraudulent applications being made by a single person. A fraudulent entry can consist of deliberate multiple registrations when the submission is intentionally false, registering ineligible or ‘ghost’ voters, or using an address that the applicant does not live at (Electoral Commission 2010). Multiple registrations would impact on the relationship between the total number of registered voters and the *usually resident* population, using an incorrect address would affect the comparison at local authority level without impacting the national total.

**A declining motivation to register:** There has been a decline in individuals registering to vote, with a decrease in response rates from an average of 97 per cent in 1994–96 to 93 per cent in 2007–10 (Electoral Commission 2010). The Electoral Commission’s research found that there are 8.5 million unregistered people in Great Britain as of April 2011. From their research the Electoral Commission (2011) also found that 44 per cent of respondents who were not registered, believed that they were registered and that 43 per cent of respondents thought an individual was automatically registered to vote once they reached 18 years of age (Electoral Commission 2011). This fits with the finding that the number of people on the Local Government register in England and Wales is lower than the 2011 Census estimate of the population.

**The growth in immigration amongst Commonwealth and European Union citizens:** Despite being eligible to vote this group are traditionally under-registered (Electoral Commission 2010). Many may be unaware they are in fact eligible to register, or they may not intend to stay in England or Wales for very long. Furthermore, research conducted on behalf of the Cabinet Office found that “a small number of participants who were not born in the UK described a greater interest in the politics of their home country and were not interested in registration or voting in the UK” (GfK NOP Social Research 2012). This under-registration will form part of the wider under-registration discussed above, however the impact would be greater in areas with larger EU or commonwealth immigrant populations, and may also disproportionately affect certain groups of the population.
5.1.3 Geographical variation

Local authorities are responsible for collecting and publishing their own electoral register. Unfortunately there is no standardised format used to collect and maintain the electoral register throughout the local authorities of England and Wales. Consequently there are substantial geographical variations such as different levels of completeness, accuracy, quality, and content between local authorities (Wilks-Heeg 2012).

The Electoral Commission (2010) conducted research on the electoral register in order to assess the completeness and accuracy of the existing registers. This involved a series of case studies (eight local authorities) using automated computer checks of these registers, household surveys and interviews with local EROs, in order to assess the condition of the registers since 2005 (Electoral Commission 2010). From this research it was found that there are “growing local and regional variations in the completeness and accuracy of the registers, with metropolitan and unitary areas outside of Greater London experiencing the greatest levels of decline (Electoral Commission 2010). These variations reflect the changes occurring in local migration rates (Electoral Commission 2010).

5.1.4 Linkability

The electoral register does not provide a unique identifier variable. Despite this, linkage with other sources may still be possible using combinations of other variables such as surname and address information, although the absence of information on date of birth will make this more difficult. It is recognised that this raises concerns relating to the privacy of data about individuals and households and that steps need to be taken to ensure confidentiality of any data used. For this reason, Beyond 2011 is currently developing methods to enable linkage with completely ‘anonymised’ data. The results of our work to date are very promising and have been applied to current research. We will be discussing our approach with experts over the next few months and will publish more details of the methods later on in the year.

6 Comparison between the 2010 local government electorate and the 2011 Census estimates

Section 5.1.2 explains the underlying conceptual differences between these two sources of data about the population. In order to understand how the Local Government register may be useful in estimating the usually resident population it is important to compare results from the two sources to understand how these conceptual differences impact on the numbers.

In this section, the aggregated 2010 local government electorate count\(^6\) is compared with the 2011 Census population estimates at both the national and local authority level. The following analysis looks at the comparison of the 2011 Census population estimates (reference date of 27 March 2011) and the 2010 Local Government Electorate counts (reference date 1 December 2010).

The electoral register does not contain any data on gender and contains very limited information on age. Date of birth is only recorded for those individuals who will attain the age of 18 during that canvass year (referred to as attainers). Consequently, the following analysis will only refer to the total population aged 18 years and over for both sources.

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\(^6\) This data has been published by ONS and is available from: [http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/publications/re-reference-tables.html?edition=tcm%3A77-239648](http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/publications/re-reference-tables.html?edition=tcm%3A77-239648)
6.1 National level comparisons – total population

At the England and Wales national level, there are 41,345,546 electors registered on the local government register and 44,105,545 over 18 year olds recorded in the 2011 Census. Therefore, the 2010 local government electorate count is less than the 2011 Census population estimate by 6.3 per cent (ONS 2012). For England separately there are 39,064,016 electors registered on the local government register and 41,675,496 people aged 18 years and over on the 2011 Census. Therefore, the 2010 local government electorate count is lower than the 2011 Census estimate by 6.3 per cent. In Wales there are 2,281,530 electors registered on the local government register and 2,430,049 people aged 18 years and over on the 2011 Census. This is a difference of 6.1 per cent.

6.2 Local authority comparisons

Figure 3 shows that the 2010 Local Government Electorate count is within 3 per cent of the 2011 Census population estimates in 34 per cent of local authorities across England and Wales. 57 per cent of local authorities were within five per cent of the 2011 Census estimates and 87 per cent were within ten per cent of the 2011 Census. There were only nine local authorities where the local government electorate counts were higher than the 2011 Census estimates, and all of these were less than three per cent higher.

Figure 3: Percentages of local authorities in the local government electorate count, presented as a percentage difference to 2011 Census estimates, aged 18+

Map 1 shows the percentage difference between the 2010 local government electorate count and the 2011 Census estimates, by local authority, across England and Wales. Differences between the local government electorate count and the 2011 Census population estimates are much more
variable across the local authorities and therefore it can be concluded that this variation is dependent on particular local circumstances.

When comparing the local government electorate count and the census estimates at the local authority level, 34 per cent of local authorities show a percentage difference of less than three per cent. The map indicates that the majority of these local authorities are rural areas.

In contrast, Map 1 indicates that the majority of those local authorities that experience more than a ten per cent difference between the two sources are urban although there are some exceptions in England and Wales, for example Warwick and Isle of Anglesey. A large number of Greater London authorities (58 per cent) have a local government electorate count which is at least ten per cent lower than the census estimates. Reasons for this difference could be explained by the more transient population in London or the higher numbers of migrants living in the area who may be ineligible to register to vote. The Electoral Commission’s (2007) research into the completeness and accuracy of the registers in Greater London (in terms of the people eligible to vote) found that the characteristics of being young and living in rented accommodation mean “that it is quite unlikely they will be on the electoral register”. Specifically, the Electoral Commission (2010) identified that “under-registration is notably higher than average among 17–24 year olds (56 per cent not registered), private sector tenants (49 per cent) and black and minority ethnic British residents (31 per cent)”.

Map 1 also highlights the variations between the countries of England and Wales. When comparing the local government electorate with the census estimates, 35 per cent of local authorities within England show the two sources as being within three per cent of each other compared to only 14 per cent of local authorities within Wales. Further to this 87 per cent of local authorities in England are within ten per cent of the census estimates, compared to 82 per cent for Wales.
Map 1: Percentage difference between local government electorate 2010 and the 2011 Census estimates by local authority, aged 18+

**Percentage difference from 2011 Census**
- Electoral Register over 10% lower
- 5-10% lower
- 3-5% lower
- Within 3%
- 3-5% higher
- 5-10% higher
- Electoral Register over 10% higher

*Source: Electoral Statistics 2010, Census 2011*
Contains National Statistics data © Crown copyright and database right 2013
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6.3 Local authorities where the 2010 local government register count shows a lower count than the 2011 Census estimates

The majority of local authorities show lower local government electorate counts than the 2011 Census estimates. Those local authorities which have the largest divergence between the two sources are typically large urban areas. London in particular sees a large gap between the two sources with five London boroughs being within the top ten local authorities with the highest percentage difference (see Figure 4).

Richmondshire also features in the top ten local authorities with the biggest difference between the two sources. The reason for this difference may be explained by the large British armed forces population. The armed forces registration rates often tend to be lower than the rest of the voting population, due to their frequent mobility including base moves and deployments (Electoral Commission 2008). The Electoral Commission are aware of the low numbers of service voters and employ Unit Registration Officers (UROs) to raise awareness of registration amongst their unit through distributing leaflets, organising registration days and advertising in service-orientated press titles (Electoral Commission 2008).

Forest Heath is another local authority where the local government register count shows a lower count than the 2011 Census estimates. Forest Heath is home to two of the largest US Air Forces air bases in England and Wales. Citizens of the US are not eligible to register in England and Wales elections but if they intend to stay for 12 months or more will have been included in the 2011 Census, resulting in the difference between the two sources.

Figure 4: Top ten local authorities where the 2010 local government register count is lower than 2011 Census estimates

Source: Electoral Statistics 2010, Census 2011
6.4 Local authorities where the 2010 local government register count shows a higher count than the 2011 Census estimates

There are only nine local authorities where the local government electorate shows a higher count than their 2011 Census population estimates. All of these local authorities are rural local authorities. Possible reasons for the local government electorate count being higher than the census estimates are multiple area registrations or the registers not having been ‘cleaned’ for some time.

Despite these local authorities showing a higher count on the local government register than the 2011 Census estimates, the largest difference is only 1.3 per cent in Ribble Valley. Consequently the two sources fall within three per cent of each other in each of these local authorities.

Figure 5: Top nine local authorities where the local government electorate count is greater than 2011 Census estimates

![Bar chart showing the percentage difference for each local authority.]

Source: Electoral Statistics 2010, Census 2011

6.5 Local authorities where the local government electorate count shows a similar count to the 2011 Census estimates

There are 117 (34 per cent) local authorities that are within three per cent of the 2011 Census estimates. Without the benefit of data linkage it is not clear whether this does show complete agreement between the actual residents of the area or just coincidental numbers, but it is likely to reflect a higher level of agreement in the data than elsewhere.
7 Further considerations and summary

The comparison between the 2010 local government electorate count and the 2011 Census estimates gives us a greater understanding of how the sources relate to each other. It is evident that the gaps that exist between the two sources vary geographically and that those local authorities which see the greatest difference between the two sources are often large urban areas.

The reasons for the differences between the local government electorate count and the census estimates are unlikely to differ between England and Wales, since the differences are often down to local authority practice. Nevertheless this initial work does suggest that the Welsh local government electorate count compares less well with the census estimates. However, further analysis is limited because the electoral register does not contain any data on gender and contains only very limited information on age.

The comparison between the 2010 local government electorate count and the 2011 Census estimates can only highlight the difference between the two sources and not what proportion of it is attributable to the variety of reasons for the differences. Despite only a small number of local authorities having a higher local government electorate count than the 2011 Census estimates the discussion has highlighted that there are definitional differences that affect the results in both directions, however the more prevalent issues of under-registration and ineligibility lead to the 2011 Census estimate being higher overall. Further research using ‘anonymised’ data linking will help us to understand this better.

8 Future changes

8.1 Individual Electoral Registration (IER)

The Government plans a significant change to the process of electoral registration in the next few years and as part of that process will be taking steps to improve the completeness and accuracy of the electoral register7.

In the past, registration relied on trust and over the last ten years high profile cases of electoral fraud has damaged the public’s confidence in the system (Cabinet Office 2011).

In 2011, the Government announced that it would introduce legislation to move to a system of Individual Electoral Registration (IER). Currently each member of a household is registered to vote on one household form by one household member. From the summer of 2014 each individual will be required to register themselves individually rather than as a household (Cabinet Office, 2011).

When an individual applies to be registered to vote they will be asked to provide ‘identifying information’ e.g. date of birth and national insurance number. Applications can then be verified against other administrative sources to ensure it is a valid registration.

With the introduction of IER, the Government believes “this will reduce fraud and help to make the registration system more accessible to under-represented groups”, and that the current system is “unexpectedly exposed to the risk of fraud” (Cabinet Office 2011).

7 For more information on the Individual Electoral Registration please see: http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/sites/default/files/resources/individual-electoral-reform.pdf
In preparation to the move to IER, the Cabinet Office conducted pilot matching schemes to test Government data sources for use in the elector verification process. Data matching pilots using Government databases, such as the Department for Work and Pensions Customer Information System (CIS), were tested in 23 local areas. These pilots aimed to assess the plausibility of using these databases as a means for elector verification and finding eligible but currently unregistered individuals. As a result of these pilots, the Cabinet Office found, on average, a match rate of 66 per cent between the electoral register and CIS (Steel and Hannan 2011). Consequently, CIS could be very useful for use in the pre-verifying process during the transition to IER (Steel and Hannan 2011).

ONS will continue to work closely with the Electoral Registration Transformation Programme to understand future developments and to consider the potential implications for Beyond 2011.

8.2 Prisoner votes

At present, those serving a custodial sentence are ineligible to vote for the duration of their sentence. In 2005 the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) ruled that a blanket ban on prisoner voting was incompatible with the European Convention on Human Rights. In November 2011 the UK intervened in an Italian prisoner voting case and sought an extension to the deadline to implement the original ruling. On 22nd November 2012, ahead of the deadline set by the Court, the Government published a bill for pre-legislative scrutiny, which outlined three options (Grayling 2012).

These options are that:

- prisoners serving less than four year sentences are able to vote;
- prisoners serving six months or less are able to vote;
- the current blanket ban on prisoners voting remains. (Grayling 2012).

A joint committee of MPs and Lords will scrutinise the bill and make its recommendations to Parliament in due course.

9 Conclusions and recommendation for use in Beyond 2011

This report has illustrated that the electoral register is likely to be an important source for Beyond 2011 as it has a high level of population coverage for persons 18 years and over (based on residential base).

However, the electoral register in its current form would not be sufficient to be used as the sole source of information for the production of population and small area socio-demographic statistics as:

- the electoral register does not contain any data on gender and contains very limited information on age,
- there is evidence of under-registration, and the pattern of this varies across the country
there are key differences between the Local Government Electorate and the *usually resident* population – notably the absence of children under 18 and citizens from outside Britain, the EU and the Commonwealth from the register. This also varies geographically.

there is no consistent format of the electoral register at the record level across the local authorities and therefore there is no national electoral register available.

In conclusion, any method of estimating population size based solely or mainly on the electoral register is unlikely to be suitable for Beyond 2011 purposes. However, the electoral register should still prove to be an important source for the Beyond 2011 Programme as it can be used, in combination with other sources.
10 References


Electoral Commission (2011b) Who we are and what we do factsheet URL: http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/publications-and-research/factsheets-and-case-studies


GfK NOP Social Research (2012) under-registered groups & individual electoral registration: A qualitative study exploring the barriers and levers to electoral registration amongst groups that have traditionally been under-registered URL: http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/sites/default/files/resources/URG_Research_Report_25_07_12.pdf


11 Appendix A: Electoral registration form

Electoral registration form

Only one person can register using this form. Please read the notes carefully before filling in this form. When you have completed every section and signed the form personally, send it to your electoral registration office. Please write in black ink and use BLOCK LETTERS.

1 About you
Surname
First names (in full)
Nationality (include dual nationality if appropriate)
If you are under 18 years old, please give your date of birth.
DD MM YYYY
Tick here if you are 70 years old or over (does not apply in Scotland).

2 Address (where you are currently resident)
You can only apply for registration at your current home. You can apply at your temporary home if you currently have no other home. There are some exceptions (e.g. students). If you have any questions regarding your residency, please contact your Electoral Registration Officer.

3 Other Information
Address where you were previously registered to vote

Previous local council (if you know)

Your name will be taken off the register for your previous address. If you think you should remain on the register at that address, please state the reason below.

Postal vote application forms are available at www.aboutmyvote.co.uk

To receive this information from your electoral registration office instead, please tick one of the boxes below:

☐ voting by post
☐ voting by proxy (someone else voting on your behalf)

4 Declaration
As far as I know, the details on this form are true and accurate. I understand that to provide false information on this form is an offence, punishable by imprisonment and/or a fine.

I confirm that I am a British, Irish, European Union or qualifying Commonwealth citizen.

Qualifying Commonwealth citizens are those who have leave to enter or remain in the UK or do not require such leave.

Signature
Date
12 Appendix B: 34 sample local authorities

County Durham
Newcastle-upon-Tyne
Northumberland
Cheshire East
Manchester
Wirral
Leeds
Richmondshire
Boston
Leicester
Birmingham
Herefordshire, County of
Stratford-on-Avon
Colchester
Forest Heath
Waveney
Brent
Camden
Kensington and Chelsea
Lambeth
Newham
Richmond-upon-Thames
Southwark
Waltham Forest
Westminster
Eastbourne
Oxford
Slough
Windsor and Maidenhead
Bournemouth
East Devon
Cardiff
Ceredigion
Powys