1. Background

On 17 November 2011, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) published details of an improved methodology for estimating long-term immigration to local authorities in England and Wales (see http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/guide-method/method-quality/imps/improvements-to-local-authority-immigration-estimates/index.html). The methodology does not change the total immigration estimates for England and Wales, but aims to give better estimates of the distribution of migrants at local authority level. ONS also published a set of indicative mid-year based long-term immigration estimates for 2006-2010 as well as indicative population estimates incorporating the improved methods. Users were invited to comment on the new methodology and the implications of this change on immigration and population estimates, and on the 2010-based sub-national population projections (SNPPs). The deadline for user feedback was 20 January 2012.

2. Overview

Out of the 376 local authorities in England and Wales, 19 responses were received. Six of these were County level and there was some overlap with responses from local authorities (LAs) within these counties. ONS has also held informal discussions with a small number of LAs who have seen the largest decline in their estimates as a result of the changes to the immigration methodology.

Almost all responses cited some measure of support for the improved methodology. Positive comments included recognition of the increase in methodological transparency and detail, and an appreciation of the increase in user engagement. Nearly all users commented on, and supported, the use of administrative sources to better inform long-term immigration distribution to local authority level.

Responses included some user questions, comments and/or concerns about specific elements of the methodology and the datasets used. Approximately a third wanted the method applied revised back to 2001/2002, and some further recommendations for improvement were offered. Most users raised specific points in relation to their particular LA or area. While many recognised that the new method was an improvement to long-term immigration estimation, there were concerns that other components of the population estimation methodology, such as internal migration and emigration, needed further work.

For those LAs and counties where there was a downward revision to their current estimates, around half acknowledged that their current estimates may have been too high. Concerns were raised by some that the downward revision was too great; others remained neutral. A minority of responses suggested that the method was an improvement for most, but that there was too great a decline in their figures and were concerned that they were ‘outliers’. Most of those who saw an increase in their indicative, compared to current, estimates, were satisfied. A small number felt their populations were still underestimated.

There were general concerns about how these indicative figures would tie in with the 2010-based SNPPs, the 2011 Census and the 2012 Central Local Government funding allocation. There were also questions around how these indicative figures may be used to quality assure 2011 Census results.
3. ONS response

Answers to the frequently asked questions that have come from this feedback opportunity are in Annex A.

ONS thanks those who have provided feedback, and welcomes a continued open engagement with users. A key aim of the second phase of the Migration Statistics Improvement Programme (MSIP) was to improve the method for distributing immigration, and ONS is confident that this has been achieved.

The new method is more transparent, timely and removes known sources of bias and the feedback received from LAs has been predominantly supportive. In addition, ONS has gone through substantial quality assurance processes to ensure method validity. Feedback from Local Insight Reference Panels and demography experts are clear in their support that the new method is an improvement compared to the current.

ONS has therefore decided that the indicative population estimates will be incorporated into the 2010-based SNPPs that will be published in March 2012.

To help LAs more fully understand the quality of their population estimates, ONS will also be publishing a set of Quality Indicators for each LA at the end of March 2011. These will show whether or not individual LAs have relatively high proportions of groups of the population that are difficult to measure.

The first set of 2011 Census results will be published in July 2012 and ONS intends to carry out a reconciliation between the Census and these indicative results. Both the mid year estimates and 2010 based SNPPs will be revised in the light of Census results and the timetable for this fits in with the resource allocation round for LAs.

4. Next steps

In March, ONS will be holding road shows at Manchester, Newport and London to discuss the outcomes of this work. Invitations have already been sent to all LAs and other relevant parties. Should you be interested in attending, and have yet to receive an invitation, please contact the Improving Migration and Population Statistics (IMPS) team at imps@ons.gov.uk
Annex A. Frequently Asked Questions

Q.1. Are the data sources of sufficient quality and suitability?
All existing data sources have limitations in terms of how they capture and identify migrants. The improved methodology addresses this by combining the strengths of the International Passenger Survey (IPS) which is consistent with the United Nation definition of a ‘long-term immigrant’ with the level of detail in the best available administrative sources. The methodology has been rigorously quality assured to address limitations with the data and to ensure the best possible estimates. ONS has worked closely with data suppliers to improve data quality and to ensure that data will be available on an ongoing basis. Other appropriate administrative datasets may be incorporated into the methodology in the future should factors such as quality, coverage and availability be addressed.

Q.2. Can the indicatives be produced back to 2001/2002?
ONS would have ideally applied the new methodology to produce indicative estimates from 2002. Unfortunately this was not possible due to the lack of availability and quality of the datasets prior to 2006. However, applying the methodology to the most recent five years of data allows a full range of indicative estimates to be used to inform the 2010-based SNPPs, as these calculations are based on the previous five year trend. ONS will rebase the population estimates back series to 2002 based on the 2011 Census results for all local authorities in early 2013.

Q.3. Will there be further improvements to the population estimate methodology?
The MSIP has already introduced improvements to national immigration and emigration estimates and internal migration estimates. These latest improvements to long-term international immigration estimates for local authorities add further strength to our population estimates. The release of 2011 Census results due later in 2012 will enable us to review our progress to date and, if necessary, identify further areas for improvement.

Q.4. Will the new indicative estimates be used to quality assure 2011 Census results?
The 2011 Census results will undergo a thorough quality assurance process to ensure that the results are robust. The purpose of the Census quality assurance process is to identify potential discrepancies prior to publication and then focus resources on checking, and resolving issues if necessary, those results to ensure the best possible census estimates. It provides independent validation against a wide range of comparator data sources, including the Patient Register, School Census, independent schools data, council tax and DWP/HMRC data on child benefit and pensions. The indicative immigration and population estimates are also used as comparator data sources, not to adjust census figures, but as additional sources to identify potential issues that may need resolution or explanation.

Q.5. How will the indicatives tie in with the 2010-based SNPPs, 2011 Census results and 2012 DCLG funding allocation?
ONS intends to use the improved indicative population estimates as the basis for the 2010-based SNPPs, which are due to be published on 21 March 2012. ONS intends to rebase both the population estimates and SNPPs utilising the 2011 Census data later in the year. DCLG are aware of this and the timing has been designed to fit in with their requirement for a robust population baseline for the 2013/14 settlement.
Q.6. Why are these indicative estimates being released now, so close to the 2011 Census results?
The Code of Practice for Official Statistics requires statistical reports to be published as they are judged ready. DCLG has also requested that there be a March publication of 2010-based SNPPs in order that they have access to the most up to date estimates for their consultation period, albeit that these will be updated later in the year.

Q.7. Why do the SNPPs not take account of planned house building?
SNPPs are based on the latest available mid-year population estimates and a set of demographic assumptions about future fertility, mortality and migration based on analysis of trends and expert advice. They are produced using the internationally accepted cohort component methodology. This method accounts for changes which increase or decrease the population (births, deaths and net migration) and models the effects of these changes and the passage of time on the age structure of the population. The SNPPs are not forecasts and take no account of local development policy, economic factors or capacity of areas to accommodate population. They simply provide an indication of the future population size and structure if the assumptions about fertility, mortality and migration were to be realised.

Q.8. Why may there be inconsistencies between the indicative population estimates and administrative sources?
It is not straightforward to draw conclusions about population size through direct comparison of the population estimates to administrative sources (e.g. the electoral register, patient register and other local level data sources). There are many valid reasons why population estimates and administrative data sources may not directly compare such as definitional variations, coverage and list inflation. ONS will be publishing a Conceptual Framework for Population Statistics in March 2012 which will provide further detail outlining some of these definitional differences. This will be available via the IMPS webpage http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/guide-method/method-quality/imps/index.html.

Q.9. What if we do not agree with the indicative estimates?
The new methodology has been extensively quality assured and there is evidence that it produces better estimates of the distribution of immigration at the local authority level. When taking all local authorities into consideration it also produces a better set of population estimates. ONS will not make any further adjustments to these indicative immigration and population estimates at the current time. Further evaluation of the method and the figures will be carried out when the 2011 Census results are published and this will underpin any future development work.