

CENSUS ADVISORY GROUP

AG (10) 02 Rehearsal Evaluation

Evaluation of the 2009 Census Rehearsal

Introduction

This paper sets out the headline findings from last year's Rehearsal. Fuller details will be set out in the full evaluation report.

This paper covers the Rehearsal in England and Wales only, although many of the systems were the same as those used in Northern Ireland's rehearsal run at the same time. GROS held a separate rehearsal in Scotland earlier in 2009.

Background

ONS's overall objective from the Rehearsal was to confirm the viability of the final, integrated 2011 Census field procedures and supporting systems by integrating them and running them in the same timescale as the 2011 Census. We wanted to minimise the risk of failure in 2011 particularly by rehearsing new and innovative procedures and systems.

The areas selected included some 135,000 households across three Local Authorities: all of Anglesey and Lancaster and some of Newham. These were chosen to give a range of area types and specifically to include:

- A large contiguous area.
- Areas a considerable distance from ONS in Titchfield.
- Areas with both one and two tier local government structures.
- An area in London with a multi-cultural population.
- An area in North Wales with a high population of Welsh speakers.
- Areas that included particular Communal Establishment (CE) types (namely a military base, a large hospital, university halls of residence, a prison and traveller sites as well as a good number of care homes and hotels).

In addition a small scale test involving 17,000 households in Birmingham was run alongside the Rehearsal using the same systems and with the same "Census Day" – 11 October 2009.

What worked well?

In terms of our overall aim of proving that our systems worked and worked together, the Rehearsal was a success. No significant problems were encountered with any of our systems:

- Questionnaires were printed and delivered successfully
- Questionnaire receipting and tracking worked: centrally and locally, we had accurate information on which addresses had (and had not) made a return
- Internet data capture, web self help and the contact centre all ran smoothly
- We recruited, trained staff in the required numbers and of the required quality and skills and paid them accurately and on time.
- Our publicity campaign clearly reached and influenced people.

Areas for improvement

Despite all our systems working, having sufficient staff and our publicity and engagement strategies we did not achieve the return rate targets we had set ourselves. The final return rate for the Rehearsal was 41%, lower than expected and achieved in the 2007 Census Test. In general, this shortfall was not from a particular geographic area or socio-demographic group; return rates were lower than hoped across all groups. An exception was students in halls of residence whom we particularly struggled to enumerate.

Although generally our systems and processes worked, there were aspects that did not work as well as hoped:

- Internet return rates (8% of total returns) were lower than hoped. Feedback on the actual site was good so this low response was related to public attitudes and awareness rather than the site itself.
- Targeting follow up resources at areas with Local Authorities with poor return rates (minimising variability in return rates improves the accuracy of Census estimates).
- The proportion of respondents returning their questionnaires the wrong way round in the envelope, meaning manual receipting was necessary, was 21% (unmanageable with Census volumes).
- Area Managers and Census Coordinators did not have enough time to complete all the tasks required of them.

As expected across all systems and working practices, there were many low level issues. One of the main benefits of conducting a Rehearsal is identifying these now rather than in the real Census.

Improvements for 2011 arising from the Rehearsal

Given the findings from the Rehearsal, most of the changes we are implementing are designed to improve return rates. Some other minor changes to processes and systems are needed but no major re-designs.

We have analysed the reasons for our lower than expected return rates. The main reasons identified have been associated with the Rehearsal not being compulsory: people were just not willing to fill in a questionnaire for a voluntary exercise. Some potential reasons for non response that we had previously been concerned about did not feature highly as reasons for non participation:

- general anti-government attitudes
- concerns about data protection/security

Although we have identified some reasons for Rehearsal return rates being lower than expected, we are still concerned about the implications if we don't make changes for 2011. This is especially in light of other evidence that suggests the general environment for survey activity is getting harder, return rates for other ONS surveys have been falling year on year.

In light of these events we are making improvements to our plans for 2011. The main ones are:

- Increasing the resources we are putting into the non response follow up
- Putting a greater proportion of those resources into the areas we anticipate achieving high return rates being a challenge.
- Increasing the resources put into managing the field operation generally and particularly in challenging areas (increasing the number of Area Managers from 118 to 157 and reducing the average number of staff a Coordinator manages from 15 to 12 in the more challenging areas).
- Increasing our publicity spend.
- Increasing our community engagement activities. We will appoint Community Advisors to work with target population groups to raise their understanding and trust of the Census. Community advisors will begin work in September 2010 and will work closely with Area Managers.

Other changes under consideration are:

- Reducing or eliminating hand delivery to households (due to lack of impact on return rates) and putting the resources saved into more non response follow up and/or publicity.
- Options for improving the processes for enumeration of students in halls of residence.
- Use of targeted reminder letters alongside non response follow up visits in more challenging areas.

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