

## User Consultation on Census Output Geographies

### Background

- 1 Output Areas (OAs) were developed as the geography for reporting small area statistics from the 2001 Census. Super Output Areas (SOAs) were proposed in 2003 as a layered geography for Neighbourhood Statistics. The Lower and Middle Layers of an intended three layered hierarchy were released in 2004. An Upper Layer is yet to be constructed.
- 2 In the autumn of 2005 a proposed National Statistics small area geography policy for England and Wales was drafted and put forward to Census Advisory Groups (Paper AG(05)09). Its main thrust was to maintain a high degree of stability with OAs and SOAs.
- 3 ONS are now in the middle of a period of research to consider aspects of this proposed policy, and alternatives to it. A public consultation forms a key element of this research programme and is scheduled to commence in **November 2006**.
- 4 This note is intended to bring the research programme to the attention of Census Advisory Groups, and to highlight likely areas of specific interest.

### Census geography policy

- 5 The policy proposed is still one of stability with the OA – SOA hierarchy. Given the current set of circumstances and those that are likely to persist for the foreseeable future, this is ONS' view of the optimal solution available. There is a clear local and national need for small area data that can be consistently tracked and compared over time and space.
- 6 User should be aware that the policy needs to cover intercensal datasets as well as the Census. ONS do not expect to be given unit level administrative datasets with standard geo-referencing, so the opportunity to produce non-Census data for other geographies is, therefore, still some way off. ONS needs to have a primary building block geography for data outputs, and will investigate what is possible in terms of producing outputs for other geographies on a case by case basis.

- 7 Wards will no longer be the main output geography for statistics for all the reasons why a move away from them has been instigated. It is likely, however, that a significant demand for Census outputs based on wards or other geographies will be expressed through the consultation.
- 8 Assuming this is the case, further research will investigate statistical disclosure concerns and methods in relation to releasing data for overlapping geographies. Outputs *could* be produced for other geographies, but subject to the results of this research they may have to be produced on a 'best fit' basis only.

### **Criteria for revising OAs**

- 9 Where there has been significant population gain or loss since 2001, proposals are put forward for implementing OA and SOA maintenance changes. The proposals are aimed at allowing simple look-ups to be maintained, with changes consisting of splits and mergers as opposed to wholesale redrawing. These will be planned on the basis of pre-Census intelligence and confirmed once initial 2011 Census data is available within ONS.
- 10 Research to date using proxy data suggests that the need for maintenance changes could be limited to 5 per cent of all areas.
- 11 The consultation also serves as a review of the usage and usefulness of OAs and SOAs. As part of this, ONS is asking whether specific OAs or SOAs cause problems. If OAs and SOAs are maintained through the next Census, ONS may consider the localised redrawing of areas that have proven to be particularly unhelpful for data analysis purposes. Redrawn areas would lose their consistency over time. Details are being requested in order to understand the potential scale of demand.

### **Constitution of OAs**

- 12 OAs were built from unit postcodes that existed on Census Day 2001. But postcodes are maintained by Royal Mail for the sole purpose of delivering mail. Since 2001, therefore, the link between OAs and postcodes has started to gradually degrade. We propose that this degradation will continue unchecked. ONS will provide a postcode to OA lookup, best fitted where necessary.

### **Other issues**

- 13 Views on these and a number of other issues, including:
  - whether large communal establishments should be isolated in their own OAs;

- the potential alignment of abstract OA boundaries to underlying topographic features; and
- the demand for, and potential benefits of, creating an Upper Layer of SOAs,

are being sought.

### **Action**

- 14 Census Advisory Group members will be asked to respond formally to the ONS consultation paper. The paper covers all aspects of the proposals and attendant issues, and includes a questionnaire to determine stakeholder views.
- 15 It is important that the views of Census Advisory Group members are expressed by responding to the formal consultation. ONS expects to receive a significant amount of opinion on the proposals put forward and the key issues raised. We need to understand these and, critically, the strength of them across all sections of the user community for small area statistics, before deciding on the geography for the 2011 Census.
- 16 All members of Census Advisory Groups will be sent further details once the consultation commences, but are also invited to comment at the current round of Advisory Group meetings.

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