

Census Risk Assessment – Jan 2021

Following the announcement by the Prime Minister on 4th January about the need for a further nationwide lockdown, likely to last into March, an assessment of the impact on the Census collection operation has been undertaken.

The framework for the assessment of the changed risk profile has been undertaken around the following four questions:

1. Can we keep everyone, our people and public, safe?
2. Can we finish the remaining preparations to reach go live, both in terms of digital build, final testing internally and with suppliers as well as the recruitment of field staff?
3. Can we run the Census operation?
4. If we do run the operation, can we meet our key performance indicators around response rate and the quality of public statistics?

Additionally, to support the assessment, an assessment of costs and likely potential alternative options has also taken place.

To frame this risk assessment, two key planning assumptions have been made. These are:

1. Current lockdown is likely to last for 12 weeks. 4th January to 19th March. Assuming all activity during this period should be virtual where possible, or where this is not possible in a socially distanced way.
2. Restrictions are likely to continue beyond 19th March, but at what level and where is unknown.

Can we keep everyone, our people and public, safe?

The Census operation has been built to be COVID safe. Both in terms of the recruitment processes and the activities field officers are being asked to undertake. Sufficient PPE has been ordered, based on current guidelines, to protect our field force and training will be provided on its use. All field work will run socially distanced and for the main Census operation there is no need for any of our people to cross the threshold and enter someone's home.

Up to Christmas 2020 all field work has been virtual and plans to start to make it more interactive were due to realise from Jan 2021. This can all be undertaken in a “safe” way, however, consideration for a completely virtual operation for the next 12 weeks (to 19th March) should be considered.

Recruitment had been moved online and is complete virtual apart from 2 elements. Right to work check and the collection of kit. We are unable to find virtual options for this work and are therefore investigating a safe way to conduct these two elements.

Supplier checks have been ongoing since April 2020 and need to continue and provisions are in place for PPE and social distancing guidelines are followed. However, permission to travel is sought for those people who will need to travel to undertake these essential checks and less effective virtual options are in place if needed.

The United Nations Statistics Division (UNSD) and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) have provided guidance to statistical institute regarding the running of a Census during a pandemic https://unstats.un.org/unsd/demographic-social/census/documents/ppe_in_censuses.pdf.

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Whilst they recommend the postponement of Census during a pandemic, for those countries wishing to continue a priority goal is to reduce the risk of transmission for all census personnel, and for the general public. The choice of PPE products for census should be defined by census authorities in government, in consultation with national health authorities, and in light of WHO guidelines.

Assessment:

We believe that the operation is safe. However, we recommend the following mitigations to support the running of the operation to account for the latest restrictions:

- Review of Health and Safety procedures, including how to ensure PPE is used effectively and on an ongoing basis
- Access the mass testing that will be made available for those that can't work from home for the field force.
- Review of recruitment processes has been conducted we now need to review how we make right to work checks and kit collection COVID safe. Review of the Community Engagement work to ensure it remains virtual until the 19th March – this will include completion events
- Review of the opening of Local Census Support Centres during the restrictions
- Review and implement virtual community engagement events until the end of national lockdown or throughout the whole operation.

Can we finish the remaining preparations to reach go live, both in terms of digital build, final testing internally and with suppliers as well as the recruitment of field staff?

A number of factors will impact our ability to complete the remaining build:

- Digital Build
- Final internal technical testing
- Final supplier testing
- Final end-to-end testing
- Recruitment
- Availability of staff due to caring responsibilities – both internally, with suppliers and within Local Authorities/Supporting Organisations
- Stakeholder and user perception of continuing with Census and possible impact to reputation of ONS – including the political dimensions to this debate
- Physical building availability – kit hand over, assisted digital etc. (operational section)
- Field parallel process – issues with childcare.

Build is on track for completion as planned and testing is underway. Support is being provided by DST who are also readying themselves for go live. A reduction in staff numbers could provide pressure on readiness for go live which could in turn lead to more operational issues. The same is true for testing.

Assessment:

We believe that we can complete the build. However, we recommend the following mitigations to support the running of the operation to account of the latest restrictions:

- Assess the impact of a reduced technology out-of-hour service.
- Cancel the planned early enumeration of Halls of Residence at the three universities selected for early enumeration– in parallel investigate alternative methods to enumerate.

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- Make the remaining CE follow up operation online/virtual up to the 23rd March once initial contact has been made
- Talk to suppliers more about their assessment of success
- Recruitment – consider the timings for the commencement of the T1 officers and the CE Officers – tie into thinking about a possible delay of field work (see end of paper)
- Community Engagement – ensure completion events are virtual until 23rd March. Also consider running whole operation with no physical completion events, make all virtual.

Can we run the Census Operation?

The high-level timeline of events for the Census Operation is:

- 12th Feb paid advertising campaign starts
- 14th Feb commence university halls
- 23rd Feb engagement with public opens (households and CEs), eQ goes live, contact centres open etc.
- 1st March initial contact letters will be issued, and community completion events start
- 8th March commence distribution of manager packs to CEs
- 23rd March main field operation commences
- 4th of May CCS commences
- 11th of May Non-compliance work commences

A number of factors will impact our ability to run the operation:

- Ability to update and flex the media campaign - to get public on board and manage perceptions
- Continuing public support from Welsh Government and Northern Ireland Assembly.
- Ability to maintain an effective and willing field force
- Ability to move the field force as required to support response rates
- Ability to maintain effective and willing HQ operation to support the field
- Ability to run community engagement and completion events.
- Public perception of government and its impact on willingness to complete
- Working practices required for CCS
- Working practices required for Non-Compliance
- Suppliers ability to maintain sufficient cover to run operations.
- Suppliers are not impacted by any other priority commitments related to vaccination rollout and have the permission to go ahead with Census work if they are challenged.
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Assessment:

We believe that we can run the operation. However, we recommend the following mitigations to support the running of the operation to account of the latest restrictions:

- Build in additional flexibility to delay or extend further ensuring a responsive and agile approach to planning appropriate to the environment.
- We support suppliers and the supply chain in their efforts during lockdown restrictions and any further changes to these.
- We investigate further what we can and cannot ask our field staff to undertake even if they are unwilling to do so.

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- We investigate mass testing for field staff, utilising any capacity there may be as a result of school closures.
- We will continue to invest in the wellbeing and motivation of all our people.
- For CCS we will investigate further how we can assure households that is safe for us to enter the home and our PPE provision is in place or amend field procedures or delay if necessary.
- Non-compliance could be delayed and will be reassessed later.

If we do run the operation, can we meet our key performance indicators, response rate, statistical quality etc.?

The current quality indicators for success are 94% response rate across England and Wales with no rate dropping below 80% in any one Local Authority and minimal variability in response within LAs.

We know, from the launch of online social surveys such as the Labour Market Survey during 2020, that online take up is likely to be high. However, this will almost certainly be from the majority of the population who would normally take part anyway, without further follow up. Of absolute critical importance to Census quality is to achieve response from those areas and population sub-groups that are at risk of exclusion e.g., the hard to reach, do not want to participate etc, and thereby providing an accurate count of the whole population.

There is likely to be a relationship between those geographical areas and population sub-groups and those areas that present most challenge in terms of keeping the public and our workforce safe. Issues with staff and public perceptions about the safety of entering communal areas within tower blocks for example could result in a lower response from such accommodation, increasing variability in response rates within LAs. There may be lessons we can learn from Royal Mail and the Covid-19 infection Survey in this area

Assuring ourselves of optimal response rates is not easy at any time. However, the pandemic makes our estimates of success more challenging. Trust in government will be important. The handling of the pandemic has received a mixed response, although school closures have generated very strong feelings. To date the EU Transition has not the raised major implications around civil unrest that had been predicted in the event of food shortages etc. The next big test of public attitude toward government is likely to be the COVID Vaccine roll out. We will monitor the response to this.

Additionally, respondent fatigue may also be an issue, with many households already participating in the various COVID surveys underway.

Of vital consideration is that the data is now unlikely to fully meet the originally identified needs of some users. Under and over-enumeration is an ever-present risk for which we are prepared but the pandemic will now result in many atypical scenarios within Census outputs. We are aware that travel to work statistics will not meet originally identified user needs and that this will need to be revisited as a package of future post-pandemic research. However, population statistics are now a more fundamental and pressing risk for some areas.

Students are an important component of many local authority and small area population estimates. We now know that many students are being instructed not to return to their term time addresses. Some will not have been present during the 2020/21 academic year at all. March 21st already fell in the Easter holidays and so enumeration of some halls of residence was due to begin early – from February 14th. Many will now be empty and, as discussed, early enumeration is now proposed to be cancelled or moved online. Whilst we are revising guidance and student specific comms to attempt to ensure term time addresses are captured there will be an impact. We are unlikely to capture any

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information for overseas students who have not returned to the UK for this term; this may also be true of overseas boarders.

Mitigations include making adjustments based upon administrative data and where a term time address is captured (even if individual is currently elsewhere), however, current administrative datasets are not promising. An additional post-Census quality survey for students may be required. However, even in making aggregate level adjustments for mid-2021 or mid-2022 population estimates this will not deliver multi-variate small area data required by some users, e.g. local authorities.

Student populations are not the only group likely to be affected. Temporary shifts away from urban areas and shared accommodation are also likely to have occurred. As a result, this could lead to some significant variations in population counts expected at Local Authority level, and, even where entirely justifiable, pose some risk to usability of the data at small area level. Given that small area multivariate statistics from the census will form the basis of local planning for the next decade, there is a risk that the utility and benefits from the census outputs will be reduced.

It is a matter of judgement as to whether any of these potential statistical impacts undermine arguments presented elsewhere (e.g. balance of risk versus importance of data).

The additional mitigations contained within this document will assist in providing assurance. In addition to that the following mitigations should be explored:

- Monitor public trust and consequent willingness to participate.
- Investigate the use of data collected from vaccination rollout and how this may inform for example number of residents in care homes.
- Talk to users and stakeholders about the likely issues with the outputs as soon as possible – many local authorities are already seeking clarification on student enumeration issues.
- Take advice from the Covid-19 Infection Survey team about safety concerns and mitigations relating to accommodation such as tower blocks
- Implement a task force to assess the methodological challenges faced and how these may be addressed.
- Produce a strategy to ensure that the small area multivariate outputs can be useful to users. This should include providing users with a clear explanation on nature of the snapshot count and potential limitations of small area multivariate outputs for some areas
- Produce a clear communication plan over how user needs will be fully met, including details of any adjustment process to improve usability of Census data and future population estimates.
- Give consideration to an additional post-Census quality survey of university students.
- Ensure sufficient analytical resource is made available for Census and other data sources to help in understanding results.
- Make clear the benefits of the Census and how this can help with understanding of the UK.

Costs and Alternative Options

Cost of running the census is c£700m. Sunk costs to date £414m. Estimated cost of delay by up to one year £300-400m.

Alternative options:

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- Keep Census Day at 21st March and run no field operation, all digital and push paper and telephone capture
- Keep the Census Day at 21st March and delay all field operations. Given the likely scenario at the moment a 1 month delay might be appropriate. However, the situation is rapidly changing and a degree of flexibility is need to assess the timing of a possible delay.
- Delay Census Day by 6 months to October 2021 (CCS at Christmas)
- Delay Census Day by 12 months to March 2022