

Advisory Groups Paper (97)02

BUSINESS CASES FOR TOPICS**Business Cases For Questions In The 2001 Census**

This paper presents an abbreviated version of Paper CWG 22 which has recently been distributed to the members of the 2001 Census Working Group on Content, Question Testing and Classifications.

The paper sets out the format in which business cases for questions in the 2001 Census should be presented and the criteria by which the Census Offices will assess them.

Advisory Group members are invited to:-

- **Note** the proposals for setting out the business cases for topics;
- **Comment** on these proposals, in particular, the approaches to prioritising questions
- **Note** that the Working Group is currently providing the information required for 'first-cut' business cases for all questions being considered for the Census, and that these cases should become available around the middle of 1997. These 'first-cut' business cases will then be considered further by the Advisory Groups;
- **Suggest** any additional bodies that should be included in wider consultation; and
- **Note** that the final version of the business cases, resulting from the wider consultation, will feed into the proposed White Paper on the 2001 Census.

John Dixie
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14 March 1997

THE BUSINESS CASES FOR QUESTIONS IN THE 2001 CENSUS

0 Summary

0 The 2001 Census Content Working Group is moving into the second stage of the consultation about the topic content of the 2001 Census which involves producing and assessing business cases for each possible question.

1 The purposes of this paper are to:

- raise some issues associated with preparing business cases for the possible questions and indicate the format that the cases will take; and
- indicate the methodology for assessing the business cases.

1 Assumptions underlying plans for the 2001 Census

0 *Funding of the Census*

0 The way in which the Census questions are to be funded has major implications for the way that business cases are presented. The Census Office's working assumption is that all of the 2001 Census questions will be centrally funded, and that information collected from every question will be used to produce at least some output under Section 4(1) of the Census Act 1920. Policy on funding will be confirmed once firmer information about Census costs is available in the light of the 1997 Census Test.

1 Whilst users will not be expected to be asked to sponsor particular questions in the Census, they will need to budget for purchasing outputs. The balance and nature of outputs from the 2001 Census will be discussed later in the consultation process. However, Section 4(2) outputs may form a greater proportion of the total Census output than was the case in 1991.

1 *The criteria for considering questions for the census*

0 The criteria for including questions in the Census also have major implications for the way business cases are presented. The primary criterion for considering a question for the 2001 Census is that there is a demonstrated need for the information by a substantial number of census users, and that it is not available from any other source in the detail or area level required. The 'detail required' is taken to include the combination of the information with that from other questions. The selection criteria are outlined in Annex A.

1 In the first stage of the consultation about Census content, now completed, the requirement for each topic was considered in isolation against these criteria. The process was designed to identify each topic or question for which there was a *prima facie* justification. The further work proposed in this paper is needed to consider the questions in combination.

Advisory Group Members are asked to consider approaches to prioritising questions.

2 The approach to producing the business cases

0 *'Core' questions*

0 The starting point is to consider if there are any questions that are so fundamental that a census could not be taken without asking them. These 'core' questions will not require a business case but are justified because they underpin the other questions for which business cases are required.

1 The Census Offices are taking these core questions to be:

- the count of the number of households; and
- the counts of the number of people, classified by age (through asking for date of birth), and sex.

2 **Working Group Members have been asked to consider if there are any other variables that demonstrably should be regarded as 'core variables'**

1 ***Non-core questions***

0 For every other question there will need to be a business case for asking the question, and for asking each category or group of categories in the response classification. The Census Offices will need to establish and document in some detail the way in which each piece of information would be used, and what users would do if the information was not available from Census and any risks that might result from this. There will also be a need to assess the importance of Census information taking into account any information from other sources that could be used as a substitute.

1 If the classification of the responses to a question is not fully pre-coded, then a case for coding the write-in answers will also be required. Write-in responses may not necessarily be coded to produce Section 4(1) outputs and therefore the cost of coding more detailed write-in answers may need to be covered by the customers for Section 4(2) outputs.

2 ***Information required because of legislation***

0 The Census Offices propose to assess the value of 2001 Census information by considering it under three headings, in decreasing order of importance:

- any information that legislation stipulates must come from the census; as far as is known there is no census item falling in to this category;
- information that is required in order to implement or comply with legislation, for which the census is the only practicable source; and
- information which is not required because of legislation but which, if available, would result in a benefit to the nation.

1 It is not yet clear what information, if any, will be required as a result of European legislation. For the moment the Census Offices are proceeding on the assumption that all 2001 Census questions will need to be justified by UK uses.

2 **Working Group Members will inform the Secretary of any legislative requirements in their constituency for census or census-type information.**

3 The format of the business cases

0 It is clear that the business cases must take account of the fact that, for many purposes, a number of census questions are used together to provide the information required. The Census Offices propose to take account of this by preparing the business cases in a three-part format comprising:

- the list of possible questions, and part questions, which are being considered for the census, together with notes setting out the underlying definitions and the classifications of the responses;
- a list of the possible uses of census information, structured by user sector, together with notes giving further detail and, in particular, an assessment of the benefit deriving from each use; and
- a matrix relating the uses to the questions, to show the inter-dependencies.

1 *Uses of census information*

0 The second part of the business cases will consist of a list of the uses that would be made of the information collected and their importance. Although this has been done partially in preparation for the 1997 Test, the list of uses for some topics is incomplete and it is not easy to understand exactly how the census information would be used.

1 Clearly one important use of census information is for resource allocation. The Census Offices need to develop an approach to assess the value of the information for the allocation of resources. In order to give an appropriate weight to uses of this sort there might be a need to quantify the amount of resource being allocated and the extent to which the item of census information improves the allocation formula, and to have some weighting of the value of the improved allocation if more information is available from the census.

For example: *in the case of resources for the Health Service the basic input to the planning formulae might be a count of the number of people in the area concerned. The addition of information about age and sex might enable the allocation, or plans, to be refined to match more closely the public's need for services. The allocation might be improved by introducing information on long-term limiting illness; and improved further by the addition of information about general health. In that case we need to demonstrate that the extra value of bringing in additional variables justifies the extra costs of collecting fuller information.*

In particular, the level of detail required from write-in responses will need to be carefully examined.

2 *Interdependencies between questions and uses*

0 The third part of the business cases will be a matrix showing the inter-dependencies between questions and the uses of these questions. In particular, it needs to be clear where including one question would remove the need to include others.

For example: *if a question about income is included, other questions asking for information as a proxy for income may not be needed.*

1 It may be that for a particular use certain census variables are essential in that without them little or no use could be made, whereas other census variables would be valuable but not essential.

2 If there should be some constraint on the total number of questions that can be accommodated, this matrix will enable the Census Offices to see which uses would be possible for any particular sub-set of questions to be included in the Census.

4 The consultation process and timetable

0 Annex B sets out the timetable for consultation about the business cases. The Census Offices expect to have completed the cases by the end of 1997, in order to feed into the preparation of a White Paper on the Census to be published in mid-1998.

5 The procedure for assessing the business cases

0 In assessing the business cases the Census Offices will be looking firstly at the acceptability of a topic as assessed during the 1997 Test and the follow-up studies. If there are reasonable grounds to believe that including it would reduce coverage or response significantly then it will have to be excluded from further consideration.

1 It is also possible that there might need to be constraints on the way a question is worded in order to ensure a high degree of public acceptability and a good overall response to the Census. Particular response categories might need to be included for this reason, rather than because users specifically require that information.

2 The Census Offices will be assessing the quality of data that can be collected against the purposes for which the information would be used. Clearly the statistics produced as census outputs must be of sufficient quality to meet the users' requirements. If the achievable quality of some item of data is found to be poorer than expected then both the uses made of that item and the assessment of the value of those uses would have to be reviewed.

3 The selection of topics in the Census may have to be made within further constraints. Two such possible constraints are:

- some limit on the overall cost of the Census; and
- some overall limit on the burden on the public expressed in terms of the number and complexity of the questions.

4 The Census Offices will be pursuing the first possibility as part of ongoing financial planning, but at the moment the assumption is that this will not be a constraint. The second is being researched this year, particularly in connection with the results of the 1997 Test.

5 Particular attention will need to be given to the possibility of using information available from other sources where this is available. For example, some surveys may be able to provide information about a topic such as income, together with other variables, such that synthetic estimates might be produced as an alternative to collecting the information in the Census. The matrix showing the interdependencies between questions and uses will be particularly valuable in assessing the extent to which an existing source could or could not meet the needs for census information.

6 The final assessment of the business cases will be approved by the United Kingdom Census Committee. The Government's proposals for the Census will then be published in a White Paper, and the final decision will be taken by Parliament.

John Dixie and Heather Russ
Office for National Statistics
12 March 1997

ANNEX A

THE CRITERIA FOR considering a QUESTION for THE CENSUS

The chief criteria for considering a question are that:-

- a) the information is needed by a substantial number of census users. The primary purpose of recent censuses has been to gather information that is essential for the Government and Local Authorities to allocate resources at a local level and to monitor major Government policies;
- b) the information is not available from any other source in the detail or area level required;
- c) it is practicable to collect good enough data to meet the needs of census users; and
- d) the topic itself and the form of the question are acceptable to the general public.

A basic planning assumption for the 2001 Census is that the burden on the public should not be increased unduly, and should be reduced as far as possible by good form and question design. As there are likely to be more questions meeting the criteria above than could reasonably be accommodated on the census form, the final selection will be on the basis of strength of need for the information, either in its own right or when cross-analysed with other questions, and approved by Parliament. Any new questions included for 2001 may need to be offset against questions included on the 1991 form.

Other points to be taken into account are any legal implications or statutory requirements; possible controversy with form-fillers which might affect the overall response; and whether or not the policy needs for the question are likely to dissipate before the 2001 Census results are made available.

ANNEX B

Content Working Group timetable

11 February	Issue QWG22 Start drafting business cases
18 March	Content Working Group meeting to consider first draft business cases
End April	Receive replies to Census Offices' queries about business cases
End May	Census Offices produce second draft business cases
June	Meeting of the Content Working Group to consider second draft business cases
End July	Revised business cases sent out to Census Advisory Groups and for wider consultation
October	Road show of local meetings around the country
End November	Further revision of business cases
December	Start assessing business cases
January / February	Clear up any queries Final revision, and assessment of business cases Recommendations to the UKCC on Census content