

Article

Feedback on the population and migration statistics transformation programme

Summarising the user feedback received to date on the population and migration statistics transformation programme.

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1 . Introduction

We are [transforming the way we produce population and migration statistics](#) to better meet the needs of our users and to produce the best statistics from all the available data. In January 2019 we asked for feedback on our transformation journey so far, to ensure our plans continue to meet users' needs. Our [research engagement report](#) asked a series of important questions, covering the following topic areas (see the Annex for the full list of questions):

- our framework for transforming population and migration statistics, including the current and future use of these statistics
- concepts and definitions: what do we need to measure?
- data sources: What can we use to measure population and migration?
- methods: what methods should we use to analyse administrative data? (including the outputs that we should produce from this analysis)

This report sets out a summary of how we have gathered feedback on these questions, what users of our statistics have told us so far and how this has informed our next steps. We will gather further feedback as our transformation programme progresses and plan to publish further updates on an iterative basis.

2 . How have we engaged with our users?

Since January 2019, we have gathered feedback using a range of different approaches. Alongside receiving written responses to our engagement report, we have also presented and discussed our plans with users at dedicated meetings, webinars, roadshows and round table events.

We have received feedback from a range of users, including representatives from central and local government departments, international organisations, universities and research institutions, think tanks and other independent bodies with an interest in population and migration statistics.

Thank you to everyone who gave us their views. This has been important for ensuring that we are transforming our statistics in the right way and that we understand what you need from the Office for National Statistics (ONS) population and migration statistics in future.

A summary of the feedback so far is detailed in this article. We will continue to gather feedback as our research progresses and plan to provide updates on a regular basis.

3 . What have users told us so far?

Main points

The feedback so far shows clear support for our ambition to transform population and migration statistics. Our users welcome the move to put administrative data at the core of our statistics – while acknowledging that this is an ambitious programme of work and there are many factors we need to take into account as part of our framework to deliver this.

Users are particularly supportive of our aim to deliver improvements to the accuracy of our statistics and to deliver more granular data on a range of different topics. The desire for more detailed local-level data came through strongly in the feedback so far.

Users highlighted the important role that population and migration statistics have in informing a wide range of decisions, such as assessing demand for services nationally and locally (including education, housing and healthcare) and the plans for future UK immigration and labour market policy. As such, users welcomed our plans to use administrative data to broaden the evidence base available to decision-makers through exploring new statistical definitions and a wider range of data sources.

The following sections summarise the more detailed feedback we have received from users on our concepts and definitions, data sources, methods and outputs – and the next steps for our transformation programme.

Concepts and definitions

Our users highlighted the need for further flexibility in what we measure and expressed support for our proposal to move beyond current categories or groupings. Some of the traditional definitions such as “long-term migrant” or “usual resident population” were found to be rigid and do not tell users enough about the way the population changes in a modern world.

The feedback so far demonstrates that users are looking for our statistics to measure a range of different things, and that some user needs will emerge over time given the changing policy context for migration. It is also clear that some concepts are more important to some users than others, for example, some highlighted a preference for grouping migrant populations according to nationality. However, other users found that this can be misleading – especially over time, given people’s nationality can change – and expressed a preference for statistics broken down by country of birth or country of origin.

There was a clear interest in our work on circular (or “repeat”) migration and understanding these types of migrant movements. Examples of other concepts and definitions suggested by users included: temporary or seasonal short-term workers, temporary residents and permanent residents, daytime populations, usual user of services populations and part-year or full-year populations. Users also asked about what more we could do to understand irregular migration to and from the UK.

Some users expressed a need for data based on visa status at both entry to the UK and while resident in the UK, moving beyond the self-reported status captured through the International Passenger Survey (IPS). This would provide more information about how many people are moving to, and residing in, the UK under the different routes available under current (and future) immigration rules. There was also an interest in understanding how migrants may switch or move between definitions during their time in the UK, including transitions from visitor or short-term migrants into long-term migrants or residents.

There was also a clear need to consider likely policy changes in future, particularly for migration given potential changes to future immigration policy as the UK exits the EU. As part of this, users highlighted the growing importance of understanding short-term migration and how short-term migrants interact with the UK labour market and public services.

Many users highlighted the continued importance of internal migration or population churn and ensuring that data and definitions for both internal and international migration fit together as part of a coherent population and migration statistics system.

Our next steps

We will continue our research into how we can use administrative data to better measure existing concepts of long-term and short-term migration, and the options for building in further flexibility or alternative definitions in future. This includes our ongoing research into how administrative data can help us to address evidence gaps on circular migration.

We understand that short-term migration is a high priority area in the current and future policy context and will review our plans to look at how we can develop statistics that shed more light on the impact and contribution of short-term migration to the UK in future.

We welcome the suggestions we have received from users for alternative ways of understanding migration in future – including more closely reflecting visa status, rights and entitlements of migrant groups in the UK – and will consider the feasibility of this as part of our work programme.

As we transform our statistics, we are also considering the importance of international comparability and are engaging with the UN Statistics Division on their work to review UN migration statistics' concepts and definitions.

On irregular migration, we have published [an article that sets out our latest work in collaboration with the Home Office](#) to consider potential approaches for estimating this in future.

Data sources

The feedback we received shows support for how we are reviewing current data sources and looking to maximise the value of administrative data in future.

For migration statistics, it was clear that users felt that the IPS had continued value in providing timely statistics but that it could be uncertain, particularly for local estimates. There was acknowledgement that the ONS should use wider data sources to improve the estimates and address evidence gaps. Users also emphasised the importance of our work to better understand the coherence across existing survey sources – including the IPS, Annual Population Survey (APS) and Labour Force Survey (LFS) – and a need for a greater understanding of how patterns align across relevant statistics produced across government.

With a move towards greater use of administrative data collected outside of the ONS, some users highlighted the need for us to work closely with data suppliers to ensure that data coverage and quality is maintained over time. Similarly, that we should work with suppliers to identify opportunities for administrative data collections to address evidence gaps in future – for example, by collecting new information in a way that works for both operational and statistical purposes.

Users also wanted to have a good understanding of the strengths and limitations of administrative data sources, to ensure there is a good assessment of their quality before any changes are made to the way statistics are produced.

In bringing administrative sources together, users welcomed our approach to identifying a range of different data that each brings different strengths to measuring the population and migration. Some users also referenced the importance of the ONS's approach to using data for public benefit and protecting data security and confidentiality.

In terms of suggestions for other data sources that the ONS could explore, some users noted potential benefits of using local-level intelligence, commercial or big data – although this was balanced with the need to consider potential biases and coverage gaps. Other suggestions included: TV licensing data, Longitudinal Education Outcomes (LEO) data, mobile phone data, utility company data and health visitor data.

Users acknowledged that there is likely to be a need for bespoke surveys to sit alongside administrative data in our future statistics system. These were felt to be important for filling evidence gaps in areas that are not covered by administrative data, for example, understanding migrant experiences in the UK, well-being and integration.

Our next steps

We will continue to progress our planned approach for integrating a range of administrative data sources to better measure population and migration in future. We continue to work closely with our data suppliers to understand the data we receive and are focusing on the main administrative data sources identified in our January 2019 report. We are currently working with data suppliers including the Home Office, Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), NHS Digital and HM Revenue and Customs to acquire further activity data.

As set out in our research to date, the IPS will continue to be a leading indicator for migration and we are designing an approach that better integrates the strengths of the IPS with the strengths of available administrative data sources. Our [work on the coherence of existing survey sources](#) is a priority as part of this, given the further feedback from our users on the importance of understanding the differences between the IPS and other sources. We plan to publish further findings in summer 2019, as set out in our [workplan](#).

Users were also interested in how we are addressing the complexities of administrative data and ensuring that we are confident that these sources are fit for purpose – therefore, an important part of our work will be developing a framework to assess the coverage and quality of the data sources at the core of our future statistics.

We are also working with the ONS Data Science Campus to consider the potential for big data and commercial sources to help us measure certain aspects of population change in future.

All of our work is governed by the [ONS principles](#) for how we use, manage and secure data to provide statistics for public benefit. We use data from surveys, the census and administrative sources for statistical and research purposes only. In our work, we adopt statistical methods that are professional, ethical and transparent. We follow the principles and protocols for the production of official statistics set out in the [Code of Practice for Statistics](#) and on ethical considerations concerning data, we seek advice from the [National Statistician's Data Ethics Advisory Committee](#).

Methods and outputs

Users expressed the importance of understanding comparability over time and a need for a time series that allows a longitudinal understanding of population and migration patterns. It is important for the ONS to understand and explain the strengths and limitations of any new methods for producing estimates and the resulting impact that this has on interpretation of the statistics.

Users noted that the ONS should ensure our data linking methodology is appropriate for data sources that refer to different time periods and consider where there are notable lags in the way they can be used to pick up “signs of activity”. Some users highlighted the value of continued collaboration with international experts, to learn from the experiences of other countries that use administrative data to produce their statistics.

It is clear from feedback so far that population and migration statistics are crucial for local planning and resource allocation. Detailed data, at local level, is therefore important to users and has been highlighted as a priority for our programme.

When commenting on the aspects of statistical quality that were most important (timeliness, frequency, coherence, relevance, accuracy, accessibility and interpretability), views varied depending on how the statistics were being used. However, the importance of accuracy came across strongly in the feedback so far. Users were particularly supportive of plans to deliver more accurate statistics, at both a national and local level.

Suggested areas for additional outputs included data on:

- ethnicity
- labour market characteristics and outcomes
- local authority household estimates
- short-term migration
- financial contributions of migrants

They also included more data covering the devolved administrations and flows of people between the UK and Ireland, and continued analysis of student migration.

When considering the format in which we publish population and migration statistics, users suggested there could be value in a flexible table builder or a similar approach that allows for multiple definitions and population bases if possible. Other users suggested that our statistical bulletins could highlight a broader set of population and migration indicators in future, perhaps through a dashboard, to encourage a more nuanced understanding of patterns rather than a high-level focus on specific statistics such as net migration.

Users also felt that, when producing new outputs and statistics on topics such as the impacts and contribution of migration, the ONS should consider carefully how results are communicated to ensure they are interpreted appropriately by the public and media.

Researchers and academic users also asked about our plans for future data access arrangements and the way in which underlying data could be made available for wider research purposes – with appropriate security controls and restrictions in place.

Our next steps

As we progress our research, we will set out more detail on our methods for analysing administrative data and how this will address factors that users have highlighted as important such as accuracy, granularity and comparability. Our ambition is to provide more data at local levels and we will continue to explore the feasibility of this based on administrative sources.

In parallel, we will review our outputs to consider new ways for making population and migration statistics available in future to address the demand for more flexible data and to present statistics in a way that enables users to quickly get a broad, balanced picture of the latest trends in population and migration.

4 . Conclusion

Your feedback is important

As we progress with our population and migration statistics transformation programme, we will continue to gather further feedback on an iterative basis. This is important for shaping our new statistics system and ensuring this continues to meet user needs.

To make sure that our transformation journey is as open and transparent as possible, we will:

- regularly publish research and methods as we develop them
- continue to present analysis showing the coherence between different sources of information
- engage with our users and stakeholders, seeking regular feedback
- use our research findings, the best available data and methods, and the feedback from users to make decisions about which improvements to make each year
- implement changes to our statistics when and where appropriate, clearly communicating these changes to users in advance of making them

You can find out more about our transformation journey on our [population and migration statistics transformation overview page](#). We will continue to update this with information on our latest research, the latest feedback from our users and any upcoming events.

5 . Contact us

If you would like to send us your feedback or have suggestions for ways we can engage with our users in future, please let us know by contacting pop.info@ons.gov.uk.

6 . Annex: Questions included in the January 2019 research engagement report

Table 1 provides a summary of the topics and main questions for users included in the January 2019 research engagement report.

Table 1: Questions included in the January 2019 research engagement report

Topic	Key questions for users
Our framework for transforming population and migration statistics	<p>How do you currently use statistics on population and/or international migration published by ONS?</p> <p>What analysis or publications would you like to be able to produce from these in the future?</p> <p>Does our outlined framework miss any elements that are important for consideration?</p>
Concepts and definitions: what do we need to measure?	<p>What additional or alternative definitions would support you in better understanding population and patterns of migration? This might include different population bases, such as daytime populations, public service populations, etc.</p> <p>How should any grouping and definitions we develop in the future interact with our existing definitions of long-term migration, short-term migration, usually resident population and overseas visitors?</p>
Data sources: what can we use to measure population and migration?	<p>Are there other data sources that we have not outlined that would add value to our transformation work?</p>
What methods should we use to analyse administrative data?	<p>Does the hybrid approach seem like a sensible way to produce a coherent set of stocks and flows? Are there alternative approaches we should consider?</p> <p>Are there specific methods we should consider when triangulating the two approaches?</p> <p>Are there estimation methods that you are aware of, that would enable us to produce a coherent set of stocks and flows?</p> <p>And thinking ahead to the outputs that we should produce from a new population and migration statistics system:</p> <p>Are there specific new outputs that would be helpful to you?</p> <p>What impact will any new outputs we may be able to produce have on the way you use population and migration statistics?</p> <p>Which aspects of quality (timeliness, frequency, coherence, relevance, accuracy, accessibility and interpretability) are most important to you in the production of population and migration statistics?</p> <p>At what geographic level do you need international migration statistics? How important is it to be able to use these at a regional or local authority level?</p>