

Response by the Census and Geodemographics Group (CGG) of The Market Research Society to the GROS consultation on 'Usual Residence' for Census 2011

Executive Summary

The consultation document is concerned primarily with the issue of whether to change the 'usual residence' definitions used in the 2011 Census, from those applied in 2001. The document recognises that, among other things, these changes would impact on population estimates and household projections for Scotland.

CGG's principal concern is that 'usual residence' is a fundamental concept in the Census, and that UK-wide consistency of definition is of critical importance to all users of UK-wide data. We are also concerned about the implications for time series analysis of 2001 and 2011 census data, on a stable small area output geography.

In our view, any changes to 'usual residence' definitions should only be made after thorough research has been carried out to quantify the effects, and following full consultation with census users.

There have been assurances from the Registrar General for Scotland and the National Statistician that the various offices would work together to ensure consistency between the UK censuses in 2011. It would be highly disappointing, in the light of these assurances, if GROS and ONS were unable to agree upon a common definition for the single most important and fundamental measure of population to be used.

This submission has the support of the Output Area Classification User Group (OACUG), which regards consistency of inputs to UK-wide area classifications as clearly desirable.

The Market Research Society and its Census and Geodemographics Group

The Market Research Society (MRS) is the world's largest association representing providers and users of market, social, and opinion research. The MRS 2007 annual survey of the UK market research industry showed that total industry revenue increased by 2.4 per cent during 2006 reaching a value of £1.353bn. The UK is the second largest market and social research market in the world.

Full details on MRS and its activities are available via: <http://www.mrs.org.uk>

Geodemographics can be defined broadly as 'the analysis of people by where they live', and involves analysing demographic data within small geographical areas to serve a wide range of clients in the public and private sectors. The annual turnover of geodemographic activities in the UK has been estimated at £200 million. The Census and Geodemographics Group (CGG) is an MRS Advisory Board which was founded in 1989 to represent the interests of researchers in census and related population statistics, and to advise MRS on such issues. The CGG has specialists in market research, retail site location, market and database analysis, as well as census distributors and academic researchers.

The CGG is involved with government statistical services through representation on the ONS Business and Professional Interests Advisory Group, and through membership of the Statistics User Forum as well as through an extensive network of contact in the market research industry.

Detailed Response

ISSUE ONE

The consultation paper presents three options for the issue of where people with more than one address should define as their usual residence.

Option 1 would result in a different definition in Scotland from that used in England and Wales, and so would result in a flawed design with inconsistent results between countries of the UK. We regard this option as extremely damaging.

Option 2 would change the definition in all parts of the UK, which would create non-comparability with previous censuses – we view this option as risky and unsatisfactory.

Option 3 would maintain the 2001 definitions, possibly resulting in data quality problems if the instructions were ignored, but would maintain comparability across the UK and over time.

In our view, Option 3 should be taken. New research should be conducted on the impact of the issue and no actions should be taken until the results are understood and users fully consulted.

ISSUE TWO

The paper presents a second proposed change aiming to introduce a 6 month cut-off to counting as usual residents people who are temporarily outside the UK on census night.

The 2001 instruction was to include anyone temporarily away on census night and who usually lives at this address, whereas the proposed 2011 instruction would be to include people who are temporarily living outside the UK for less than 6 months.

Clearly, the previous and proposed criteria are completely different from one another – in terms of where people are living, as well as for how long.

This change in inclusion criteria would therefore create significant differences in the numbers of household residents – for example, people who are temporarily living elsewhere in the UK would be excluded under the proposed definition. We presume that this exclusion is not intended, and that some further instructions would actually be required. However, the example demonstrates that **a small error in the wording on the Census form could have catastrophic consequences for the data collected.**

However, if implemented as presented in the consultation paper, the proposal would impact on comparability of data across the UK and over time.

From separate communication with Pete Benton at ONS, we understand that ONS are considering changing the cut-off, on length of temporary residence outside the UK, from 6 months to 12 months in order to be consistent with mid-year estimates. **We think it would be most damaging if different usual residence definitions were applied by ONS and GROS.**

In our view, the change proposed by the consultation paper is undesirable and that further research should be carried out to quantify the issue. Users should then be consulted fully on what to do.

In essence, on both issues, we believe that the usual residence definitions should not be tinkered with – unless they are ‘broken’ – and this can be proven and quantified – do not attempt to fix them! Any differences in definition between GROS and ONS would be highly damaging for users of UK-wide census data.

Dr Barry Leventhal
Chair, MRS Census & Geodemographics Group
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