

POPULATION STATISTICS: A REVISIONS POLICY

This Revisions Policy, formally approved by the UK Population Committee, comes into effect from 5 July 2007.

The policy relates to the population statistics produced under the National Statistics Centre for Demography work programme by the Office for National Statistics, the General Register Office for Scotland, the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency and the Statistical Directorate of the Welsh Assembly Government.

Four general principles will guide our approach in planning revisions to our population estimates and projections:

- We will revise our population statistics following a new Census, deriving a new population base;
- Between Censuses, we will continue to examine methodology and sources. We will revise our outputs when significant effects have been established and quantified. There will be an element of judgement in deciding what is significant in this context, taking account of user needs;
- Substantial methodological changes will always be announced before the release of statistics based on the new methods, together with an indication of the likely effects;
- We will seek to avoid frequent revisions and will attempt, as far as is possible, to ensure that any revisions are in place prior to the production of the biennial population projections rounds.

In addition, from time to time, there will be a need to make revisions outside of the planned schedule, for example because of unforeseen errors. Such unplanned revisions will be monitored and the possibility of such revisions minimised. If errors are discovered after publication, their impact will be investigated further. Where the changes are significant, revisions will be issued as soon as is practicable. Where corrections are assessed as being minor they will be incorporated in the next planned release if it is practical and cost effective to do so. In all cases a full explanation will be included in the release.

All revisions, both planned and unplanned, will be pre-announced. Where practicable, revisions will include the provision of revisions to the historic series to ensure consistency over time. Appropriate explanatory material will be issued with revisions.

Revised data in output tables, whether planned or unplanned, will be marked with an 'R' when they are released for the first time, or the whole table will be labelled in the title to show that it is a table of revised figures. Superseded data that have been published on the web will be marked as such.

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BACKGROUND NOTES ON THE REVISIONS POLICY

1. The National Statistics Revisions Protocol is available for inspection at: http://www.statistics.gov.uk/about/national_statistics/cop/downloads/revisions.pdf
It requires that each organisation responsible for the production of National Statistics publishes and maintains a general statement describing its practice on revisions.
2. Key outputs, or group of outputs, which are subject to scheduled revisions should have a published policy covering those revisions; this particular policy refers to those population statistics produced under the National Statistics Centre for Demography work programme, including by the devolved administrations. The policy has been formally approved by the United Kingdom Population Committee (UKPC) which has the Registrar Generals for England and Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland as members.
3. The policy covers how both planned and unplanned revisions to population statistics will be published. Planned revisions are a normal part of the statistical process and hence are managed systematically and pre-announced. Unplanned revisions, for example when there are corrections because of errors, do not fit into the managed patterns of revisions. Most revisions should be planned and hence are to be expected.
4. The proposed revisions policy for population statistics reflects the guidance in the Revisions Protocol in that:
 - specific policies should reflect the ways in which the key output is used and the resources available for production;
 - the policy should be stable over time and consistent across related outputs;
 - there is a need to avoid frequent revisions which will undermine user confidence;
 - in general revisions should only be made when they can make a significant contribution to good decision making;
 - substantial methodological changes will be announced before the release of statistics based on the new methods, together with an indication of the likely effects;
 - the possibility of unplanned revisions will be minimised;
 - appropriate explanatory material will be issued with revisions;
 - where practicable, revisions will include the provision of revisions to the historic series to ensure consistency over time;
 - the effects of revisions on key outputs will be monitored.
5. The policy covers all releases of population and migration statistics produced under the National Statistics Centre for Demography work programme, whatever the form of dissemination. As at 5 July 2007, the date of its introduction, the statistics covered (some produced only for parts of the UK) included:
 - mid-year population estimates
 - national, regional and local authority levels
 - primary care organisation level (experimental statistics)
 - marital status
 - household population (experimental statistics)
 - estimates of the very elderly, including centenarians (new product)
 - population estimates by ethnic group (experimental statistics), cohabitation, lone parent families

- quarterly population estimates (QPEs) (experimental statistics)
- small area population estimates (SAPE)(experimental statistics)
- national population projections
- subnational population projections
- international migration
- internal migration
- population turnover rates
- national life tables
- electoral statistics.

Over time, the portfolio of population statistics will change and this policy will equally apply to new products - for example, if estimates of short term migration are developed.

6. Population statistics have a wide range of users and uses. For example, they are used in planning, resource allocation, target setting, policy considerations and in understanding the labour market. Population estimates are also regularly used as denominators to calculate rates, as well as being used to weight survey results and as inputs to various models. Thus revisions to the population statistics have wide reaching implications and the need for them has to be carefully assessed. There are implications for producers and direct users of population statistics and also for the producers of other statistical series/outputs. Key issues that need to be considered include the balance between the need for the most reliable estimates and their timeliness against the need for stability and the ability to plan.

7. It is crucial that there are effective communication channels with users when dealing with revisions to population and migration statistics. Users must be made aware in advance of the programme for planned revisions, the timing of their release and the magnitude of the impacts. Users also need to know that unplanned revisions will be made in a transparent way.

8. The main reasons why there is a need for planned revisions to population and migration statistics are:

- the Census providing a new population base;
- Methodological changes; and
- Implementing new data sources.

Changes due to boundary changes are not counted as revisions.

9. In some cases, provisional population estimates will be produced and then finalised later, according to a planned timetable - for example, for quarterly population estimates. For these outputs, the provisional data will be clearly marked as “provisional” and then “final” at the appropriate point. If “final” estimates have to subsequently be changed, then they will be treated as a revision under the revisions policy. In exceptional cases, such as for estimates of the very elderly, the estimates may continue to change slightly as each year builds up the evidence base available to produce the estimates; in these cases, they will be marked each year as "provisional" and then "revised" with appropriate guidance notes.

10. The first set of planned revisions under this policy will start occurring from August 2007 onwards - the first output affected will be the mid-year population estimates for England and Wales.

National Statistics Centre for Demography, July 2007