



June 2002

2001 Census Review and Evaluation

Data Needs Evaluation Report: Executive Summary

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A detailed Review and Evaluation of the 2001 Census is underway, and information on projects within the 2001 Census is gradually being released.

This report outlines the process of selecting topics, developing appropriate questions and suitable Census forms and broadly describes the user consultation and testing programme involved.

Each report is written in isolation and is subject to amendments as processing progresses and further information comes to light.

Reports will be released on the NISRA website in the form of a high level Executive Summary and a more detailed Evaluation Report.

Data Needs Evaluation Report - Executive Summary

Project Objectives

The Data Needs Project was set up to:

- identify users' requirements for information from the 2001 Census;
- develop questions which would provide good enough data to meet users' needs and which were acceptable to the public; and
- design forms which were clear, easy to complete and capable of being scanned using the latest technology.

This paper outlines the processes affecting key decisions in Northern Ireland.

Background

The project took account of the results of a detailed evaluation of the 1991 Census. In particular, the value of building on the successful programme of user consultation was recognised together with the need to overcome problems with the design of the census forms and the wording of individual questions.

Methodology

Co-operation characterised the work undertaken during the life of the project from early-1995 to mid-2000. Key decisions took account of the views expressed by users and internal and external experts across the UK. An extensive programme of consultation was complemented by a comprehensive programme of research and question testing. In particular, attention focused on:

- identifying users' requirements for information;
- developing suitable questions using a variety of techniques including focus groups, cognitive interviewing, small-scale and large-scale tests;
- designing census forms which were suitable for scanning and met agreed print and technical standards.

Northern Ireland Specific Questions

In addition to the work being carried out across the UK with regard to the 'core' questions, NISRA contracted their Central Survey Unit (CSU) to test certain Northern Ireland specific questions using their Omnibus Survey. This was carried out in September 1999. A short self-completion (Census style) questionnaire was issued by the Omnibus Survey interviewers while they were preparing for the main part of their computer assisted interview. This only took a few minutes after which the interviewers asked

their respondents to comment on the questions. The questions asked referred to the location of rooms, knowledge of Irish and qualifications. The choice of religion question for Northern Ireland was influenced by earlier Omnibus Survey results which showed that the format of the question finally chosen worked well and was acceptable to the public.

Implementation

Although the comprehensive programme of consultation and question testing was carried out concurrently, the following key stages can be identified:

- identification of users' requirements for information and priorities for small-scale testing;
- preparation and testing of questions for the 1997 Census Test;
- the 1997 Census Test including detailed assessment of reactions to a new question on income and new form layouts;
- the preparation of detailed business cases for census questions;
- further testing of key questions and forms;
- the Census Rehearsal;
- final series of small-scale tests on the provision of care and academic and vocational qualifications.

Decisions affecting the selection of questions were based on this detailed work.

Results

The Government set out proposals for the 2001 Census in a White Paper published in March 1999. Decisions about the content of the Census, including details of the questions, were set out in the Census Order approved by Parliament in May 2000. Copies of the Census forms became available when the Census Regulations came into force on 26th June 2000.

Lessons Learned

Despite some unexpected problems with specific questions the work was completed successfully. Among the main lessons learned were:

- the importance of the advice and guidance provided by users and the need to build on the strengths of the 2001 consultation programme;
- the advantages of working with members of the Question Testing Unit of the Office for National Statistics and the value of their

advice and support;

- the need to retain independent print and processing experts;
- better co-ordination of the legislative and census timetables;
- improved awareness and recognition of the possible implications of political developments.

Conclusion

Staff from the Census Office worked co-operatively with users and others to develop effective questions, design suitable questionnaires and put forward proposals for the 2001 Census which would meet identified needs.