

The Census and the law

The legal background to census-taking in Northern Ireland



The Census Act (Northern Ireland) 1969

The law supports census-taking in Northern Ireland. This legislation authorises the conduct of a census from time to time – but no more frequently than every five years.

The Act empowers the making of an Order directing that a Census be taken. The Census Order (Northern Ireland) came into operation on 23 June, 2000 and specifies the date of the Census, the people who are required to fill in the forms, and the people whose details are to be included on the forms. It also sets out the information to be given in the returns. More detailed regulations on the conduct of the Census are provided in the Census Regulations which came into force on 26 June, 2000 for Northern Ireland.

The responsibility for making the necessary arrangements to carry out a Census in Northern Ireland rests with the Registrar General. Similar arrangements apply in Great Britain.



The Census is compulsory

Every household must return a form by law. This is because it is important for people not to be missed out – the Census is designed to be a complete count of the population. Failure to make a completed return, or giving false information, is an offence which may attract a fine of up to £1,000.



Confidentiality is protected by law

Just as people are legally required to provide information requested on a census form, so the confidentiality of that information is protected by law. The Census Act (Northern Ireland) 1969 (as amended by the Census (Confidentiality) (Northern Ireland) Order 1991) and regulations made at the time of each census prohibit the unlawful disclosure of any information given in the Census by anyone involved in taking it or in any other census-related activities.



Other factsheets:

1. *The Census*
2. *Why We Need a Census*
3. *Census 2001 – What's New?*
4. *Counting Everyone in
– the Big Challenge*
5. *The Census Organisation*
6. *Census Jobs*
8. *Census Taking Through the Ages*
9. *The Census Questions*

It is unlawful, for example, for the Census Office to pass information to any Government department, or to any individual or other organisation, except for the purposes specified in the Census Act.

The law also prohibits any member of the public who is given personal information by someone else for the purpose of completing the Census form (e.g. a head of a household who has to include a lodger on the form) from disclosing that information.

The confidentiality of the information collected in a census is further protected in a number of other ways:

- Anyone aged 16 and over on Census Day who does not wish other members of the household to see their particulars may ask for a separate form and make their own return in a sealed envelope. This envelope is then included with the main household form in the reply paid envelope for the household.
- The information collected will only be used to produce statistics, and no information will be released which allows the identification of any individual or household.
- The computer systems used to process census data will have safeguards which prevent unauthorised access to the information.



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