



2011 Census Evaluation

Field Operations and Data Collection

Executive Summary April 2015

Project Objectives

To develop an effective enumeration methodology that targets resources and procedures to maximise response.

To track receipt of census questionnaires to target non-response.

To encourage a high level of online response (with the potential to reduce costs in other areas).

To overcome the problems associated with the recruitment, retention and payment of a large field force.

To manage public participation and co-operation through informative publicity.

To work with the postal service provider and others in planning and executing the enumeration, in particular to make best use of their knowledge of local addresses and residence arrangements and ways of contacting hard-to-count groups.

Background

Census Day for the 2011 Census in Northern Ireland was 27 March 2011.

A census collects information that, in Northern Ireland, underpins the allocation of millions of pounds of funds from central Government, supports the planning and provision of services at a local level, and provides a rich picture of the population.

The UK is also required to provide statistical data to Eurostat (the statistical office of the European Union) under the provision of an EU regulation. This requirement was met for 2011 by collecting the relevant information in the census in England and Wales, in

Scotland and in Northern Ireland. This work was led, on behalf of the three UK Census Offices, by the Office for National Statistics.

Methodology

Planning for the field operation of the 2011 Census began in 2006, alongside other elements of the programme. The issues encountered in 2001 informed several key design decisions that led to further fundamental changes to the structure and management of the large field force.

NISRA assessed these design decisions through a large-scale field test of more than 14,000 households in 2007, and a rehearsal of more than 5,000 households in 2009. The

testing programme enabled processes and procedures to be refined and ensured decisions were evidence based.

The decision in 2007 to make this census the first one to deliver questionnaires by post enabled the size and structure of the field force to be based primarily on the effort needed to follow-up non-responding households, rather than on the effort needed to deliver questionnaires. One fundamental design change resulted from this – the amount of staff effort needed across the country was significantly lower than that in 2001, as in each area the workload was primarily determined by the anticipated amount of follow-up activity, rather than how long it would take to deliver questionnaires. The savings from using Post Out rather than hand delivery meant that the focus of effort shifted to follow-up, with considerably more hours being spent on follow-up activities compared with 2001.

Recruiting and payment of the field force were developed in-house and supported by the Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) service provider. Generally, the approach worked well. Notable achievements were: the calibre of the staff recruited; the robustness and accuracy of the payroll function; and the implementation of required disclosure checks for all field staff. There were some issues: for instance, some areas did not have all staff recruited for the start of activities. However, NISRA had anticipated there would be some localised recruitment difficulties so, to help manage the risk of under recruitment, we arranged to have a contingency in place where the workloads of certain enumerators were doubled. This decision meant that such issues did not adversely affect the field operations.

Much emphasis was placed on field staff encouraging people to complete their census returns. Local liaison by Census Area Managers encouraged a positive response to the census. Field staff at all levels were involved in providing assistance to householders that needed support or advice.

More than 765,000 questionnaires were successfully delivered by Royal Mail in the week from 14 March 2011 – faster than anticipated. By the end of the follow-up operation they had also collected, receipted and delivered to the data capture centre more than 650,000 returns.

The development of a questionnaire tracking system that could track each single questionnaire was significant and provided key field information that was lacking in 2001. This system enabled NISRA and the Census Team Co-ordinators to monitor and manage the follow-up operations far more effectively. The questionnaire tracking system was updated daily as questionnaires were returned.

The enumeration of communal establishments, special accommodation sites and special population groups was improved by NISRA's greater focus on and engagement with such groups in the run up to the census.

It has been generally accepted that the 2011 Census has been highly successful in meeting or exceeding some very demanding targets. The follow-up field operation played a significant part in this success, despite a changing society and lower response rates in survey-taking generally.

Highlights from the 2011 Census

There are many highlights from the 2011 Census, which, where relevant, will be used and built upon for the next Census. One of the key aims of the census was not only to maximise coverage across Northern Ireland but also to minimise variation in levels of response between areas and within population sub-groups (such as between age/sex population groups). In effect, the whole census design and operation was geared to ensuring that this could be achieved through:

- appropriate design of the field operation and the accompanying processes, such as publicity, public interface (being able to answer the public's questions) and online completion;
- maintaining the confidentiality of the information collected to ensure public trust and, therefore, public response both to this census and future censuses;
- user and community engagement to advise and support the operation; and
- capture and processing of census questionnaires and responses, and the effective and efficient cleansing and validation of the associated data.

The key field operation successes of the 2011 Census were:

- better engagement with users and other stakeholders, thereby engendering higher levels of support for and confidence in the census;

- a high level of overall response;
- development of a purpose-build address register to facilitate Post Out of questionnaires and improved management of the field operation, including questionnaire tracking;
- restructuring of field force duties to enable more resource to be focused on following up non-response, while employing a reduced field force;
- introduction of a secure online response facility; and
- outsourcing of a range of support activities to specialist service providers.