

## RSS RESPONSE TO CENSUS 2031 TOPIC CONSULTATION

4 February 2026

### Introduction

This is the Royal Statistical Society (RSS) response to the ONS's consultation on Census 2031 topics.

The RSS is a membership organisation for statisticians and data scientists and we advocate for the importance of statistics and data. We have over 12,000 members internationally, and about 8,000 in the UK. We champion the role of statistics and data in society, and work to ensure that policy formulation and decision-making are informed by evidence for the public good. This involves advocating for a statistical system which delivers reliable and relevant statistics that help us better understand the world and challenge decision-making.

We are not responding in detail to this consultation: we do not use the census as an organisation and we do not have a corporate view on individual questions. We have encouraged individual members who use Census data to respond to the consultation to give detailed responses. Instead, we highlight four recommendations that represent common concerns from among our members.

### Recommendation 1: Explore modernisation of the Census

We recommend that the ONS explores ways to update questionnaire content to better reflect the reality of modern life. In census design, temporal continuity is frequently treated as an overriding good. While continuity matters, over-weighting it can inhibit the introduction of new or more policy-relevant topics and slow adaptation to social and economic change. There has been a significant shift in how people work after the pandemic with changing multi-job patterns, increased hybrid working, and different commuting behaviours. The questions around employment, workplace and travel-to-work should be updated to reflect this to ensure the data can be used to draw meaningful conclusions.

Household vs person-based measures should also be reviewed in order to better capture complex living arrangements, including multi-generational households, Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs) and communal living establishments. Full household relationship data should be maintained to better understand family complexity.

We also suggest that the ONS should explore separating mental and physical health, review disability items and explore parity-specific fertility outputs for policy relevance.

The ONS should also consider modifying questions around care to measure paid and unpaid care, including hours of unpaid care. As the UK population ages, we can expect to observe a rising demand for both formal and informal care; indeed, the NHS identifies in its Long Term Plan a need for better data on unpaid carers, to ensure their responsibilities are recognised and supported.<sup>1</sup> Adding specificity to the questions around care will begin to address these data gaps.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6888a0b1a11f859994409147/fit-for-the-future-10-year-health-plan-for-england.pdf> p. 34.

Furthermore, the ONS should explore the inclusion of volunteering as a census topic, which is currently not measured in official statistics. The voluntary sector plays a vital role in the UK economy, and the census provides a valuable opportunity to better capture its scope and its contribution to society.

Where feasible, we suggest that the ONS should prioritise using linked administrative data, for example around income, qualifications, property attributes, veterans, so far as challenges around privacy, definition and existing biases can be met.

#### Recommendation 2: Preserve geographic continuity

The consultation asks whether any additional statistical and administrative geographies are required by users, which is particularly salient given forthcoming changes to local government, with new authorities expected to go live between 2027 and 2028.

On the question of geographies, we believe that planning and coordination across UK nations is critical for ensuring coherence and compatibilities. We support the design of a robust mid-scale geography ahead of the local government reorganisation, to preserve continuity beneath local authority level. Small area geographies remain important, particularly in rural areas; it is essential that civil parish and ward geographies are not overlooked. Preserving the coherence and usability of small-area data is fundamental. If small-area outputs lose interpretability or stability, much of the distinctive public value of the census is lost. We suggest that the ONS consider precomputing small-area geographies using administrative data before enumeration and then validate and adjust post-enumeration to mitigate risks from concentrated low response and statistical disclosure control (SDC) constraints.

#### Recommendation 3: Build an inclusive, transparent and collaborative engagement model

More broadly, we call on the ONS to build an inclusive, transparent and collaborative model of engagement. The ONS must engage in open, iterative dialogue with users, and embrace challenge and vulnerability in order to build trust. We believe the ONS should engage widely, including secondary and 'missing' users who rely indirectly on census-enabled statistics, and proactively identify under-represented groups.

We want to stress the importance of transparency around how engagement informs decision-making around census topics. We ask that the ONS explain trade-offs and constraints clearly, and how these shape decisions. By clearly communicating which inputs shaped decisions, and why, the ONS can rebuild trust and accountability.

#### Recommendation 4: Prioritise accessibility for census participants

Finally, accessibility for census participants must remain at the forefront of the ONS's considerations around census design. The ONS should be more ambitious in using the census and its preparation as an opportunity to connect with the public, given evidence that trust in official statistics is linked to people's awareness of and contact with official statistics work. As discussion on census topics progresses, investing in wider communications – such as showing how census questions have evolved over time – could help build understanding and confidence.

The ONS must ensure access through multiple languages and formats, digital and paper options, and targeted assistance where appropriate (eg, interviewer support).

