
Professor Sir Ian Diamond | National StatisticianCat Smith MP
House of Commons
London
SW1A 0AA

08 January 2021

Dear Ms Smith,

As National Statistician and Chief Executive of the UK Statistics Authority, I am responding to your Parliamentary Questions asking what steps the Government is taking to ensure the 2021 Census is covid-secure (**133011**); what plans the Government has to postpone the Census scheduled for March 2021 in response to the covid-19 outbreak (**133012**); what steps his Department is taking to ensure face-to-face surveys for the March 2021 Census can take place during the covid-19 outbreak (**133013**); and how the Government plans to survey (a) homeless people and (b) other people without access to the internet or a computer (**133014**).

Coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic and Census 2021

The Office for National Statistics (ONS) is working to deliver a successful census in England and Wales in March 2021. Since the start of the pandemic, the ONS has updated the operational design to build in safety and flexibility to allow for continued success. The ONS has also continued to adapt its plans as the course of the pandemic has changed. Additional assurance has been carried out in the form of regular readiness assessments. The last assessment was in December and the ONS's operational readiness was externally assured by the Infrastructure and Projects Authority.

Following the recent announcement of national lockdowns in England and Wales, the ONS is currently ensuring that the right plans and resources are in place to deliver a successful census safely and securely.

The health of both census field staff and the public with whom they interact to deliver the census is of the utmost importance to the ONS and the UK Statistics Authority. Details of how census preparations have been adapted and the contingency measures put in place are set out in the article '*Operational planning response to the coronavirus (COVID-19) for Census 2021*', published in October.¹ These changes include ensuring that we can conduct the main Census field operation without anyone ever needing to enter a house. Contacts on the doorstep and the provision of support will all be socially distanced and field staff will be equipped with PPE in line with government guidance. Recruitment for field staff has been moved online where possible. Additionally, engagement with local communities is happening virtually with many community groups now meeting online. The ONS is utilising the increased opportunity to engage with the public online.

Completion of the census by people who are homeless

Homeless people and rough sleepers are classed as a Key Population Group for Census 2021 and it is important that this group, who face severe problems in reaching public services, are included.

Rough sleepers in particular are a small, visible and very disadvantaged subgroup within the wider homeless population. The ONS is continuing its engagement activities and preparations for the census to ensure that as many homeless people as possible are able to take part.

In outline, the ONS's proposals for completion of the census by homeless people remain as set out in the 7 October 2019 letter from the then Minister for the Constitution to Jon Trickett MP and Christian Matheson MP, deposited in the House of Commons library.² Many homeless people will be able to complete the census at an address where they are temporarily staying on census night, for example, with a friend or in a hostel. Others will be able to use the address of a hostel or shelter where they regularly stay. As circumstances for people in this group can change very quickly, the ONS is planning to make census questionnaires and assistance available at day centres and night shelters for people who are homeless and those sleeping rough around census day. Homeless people will also be able to use a mobile phone to obtain an access code and complete the census.

We would be happy to meet you to discuss further the plans and engagement work relating to the homeless population in the census.

Completion of the census by people without internet access

While Census 2021 will be digital-first, there will be help for those who need it and paper questionnaires for those who prefer to fill it in on paper. Ninety percent of households will receive initial contact letters inviting them to complete the census online, rather than paper questionnaires. The use of paper questionnaires as the first contact will be targeted where the take-up of the online option is likely to be relatively low.³ In our 2019 Rehearsal of census operations, the online response rate was over 80%. While the Rehearsal was digital-first and 90% of households received initial contact letters, in Ceredigion paper questionnaires were sent as initial contact to 46.8% of households and half of returns there were made on paper.⁴

Whether online or on paper, all households will be able to complete the census through the method that suits them best: the initial contact letter will make it clear that they can request a paper questionnaire, just as the paper questionnaire provides an access code for online completion. The Census Support Centres will be provided, in line with government safety guidelines, at a variety of locations (such as libraries, community centres, youth groups or social housing communal areas) for those who wish to complete the census online but may need help to do so. There will also be a Census Contact Centre to assist respondents and a telephone capture facility. We regularly assess how support can be delivered most effectively and safely in line with government guidelines, including increased availability and promotion of telephone capture.

Yours sincerely,



Professor Sir Ian Diamond

² <https://depositedpapers.parliament.uk/depositedpaper/2281767/details>

³ For more information see the 'Digital-first census' section of the ONS's October 2020 article 'Statistical design for Census 2021':

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/census/censustransformationprogramme/censusdesign/statisticaldesignforcensus2021englandandwales>

⁴ <https://www.ons.gov.uk/census/censustransformationprogramme/testingthecensus/2019collectionrehearsalevaluationreportforcensus2021englandandwales>

