



Update Evaluation Criteria for Census 2031 Topics and Content Methodological Assurance Review Panel

13 November 2025

A: Introduction

- 1) This paper sets out the proposed Census 2031 Evaluation Criteria (Annex A)
- 2) This paper outlines our work and revisions to the Census 2031 criteria based on Methodological Assurance Review Panel's (MARPs) advice provided at the 01 July 2025 meeting.
- 3) We ask for members of the MARPs to endorse our proposals.

B: Background

- 1) Census 2031 will be a key component of the current and future population and migration statistics system. It will be designed to provide both high-quality statistics that meet user needs in 2031 and as a key component of meeting ongoing future population statistics needs.
- 2) The census will also provide a high value data asset that can be used across the wider statistical system. It will be used as part of the development and assessment of ways to deliver population and migration statistics in the future.
- 3) The topic consultation process plays a critical role in shaping the scope of Census 2031, ensuring it reflects both enduring and emerging user needs.
- 4) The evaluation criteria are a mechanism to support transparent, robust evidence-based decision-making on the future shape of the census. They support the decisions on which topics will be included in the Census 2031 and decisions on which questions and outputs will be included as they are developed.

C: Development of the criteria

- 5) In July 2025, we consulted MARP on the evaluation criteria for Census 2031. MARP agreed with our approach to use a structured evaluation framework like that used ahead of Census 2021.
- 6) Since July, we have considered MARPs recommendations, though numerous methods and discussions.
- 7) We engaged extensively with the Office for National Statistics (ONS) Census Task Force (CTF) and devolved governments, to ensure alignment with census strategies and foster coherent approaches.
- 8) We led cross-ONS workshops, correspondence, and drop-in sessions to seek input and implication of changes and collect evidence. This enabled us to conduct Analytic Hierarchy Process (AHP) to support assigning relative weighting of the user requirement criteria.
- 9) A quality assurance review was conducted by the Methodology and Quality Directorate (MQD) on our AHP outputs.
- 10) We have presented the criteria to the National Statistician's Data Ethnic Advisory Committee (NSDEC) and the National Statistician's Inclusive Data Advisory Committee (NSIDAC) for their expert input. They also be reviewed by ONS legal services.
- 11) We are grateful for the feedback provided and report that we have been able to implement three of your recommendations, as set out in Table 1.

Table 1. Key MARP proposals and the outcome of our work

Recommendation	Outcome
Analytic Hierarchy Process (AHP) could be used to assign weights to the evaluation criteria	User requirement weights have been updated, based on a series of ONS workshops and an AHP approach.
Consider the use of negative weights	We have reviewed criteria and suggest negative weights within 'other considerations' criteria. We are moving from a 3-point to 5-point rating scheme.
Further consider the additional criteria, adopted by NRS, 'Length of paper questionnaire' and	We propose a new criterion of 'Ability to optimise statistical integration' as set out.

'Improvement to linkage rates with admin data'	Existing criteria 'Respondent burden' and 'Questionnaire mode' will be used to consider length of questionnaire, so we will not add 'Length of questionnaire' criterion.
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D: Census 2031 Evaluation Criteria

The evaluation criteria proposed for Census 2031 are summarised in Annex A. High-level categories are:

User requirements

- Purpose
- Small geographies or populations
- Alternative sources (lack of)
- Multivariate analysis
- Comparability beyond England and Wales
- Continuity with previous censuses

Other considerations (impact on)

- Data quality
- Public acceptability
- Respondent burden
- Financial concerns
- Questionnaire mode
- Ability to optimise statistical integration

Operational requirements

- Maximising coverage or population base
- Coding of derived variables and adjustment for non-response
- Routing and validation

13) The following information details the key changes to the evaluation criteria that have been made building on those used in the Census 2021.

a) 'User requirements' criteria changes.

- i) Weights to the user requirements criteria are revised, utilising an Analytic Hierarchy Process (AHP) method as advised.
- ii) The definitions for each criterion have been reviewed, and minor updates have been implemented.

b) 'Other considerations' category is changed from 2021 as follows:

- i) Addition of a new criteria; 'Ability to optimise statistical integration'. This recognises that census content can add value and/or build towards a future administrative statistical system through linkage to other data sources.
- ii) Change from a three-point scale (measuring only negative impact) to a five-point scale allowing assessment of both negative and positive impacts of the census content inclusion.
- iii) Minor change to wording, based on updates and alignment to devolved governments where appropriate.

c) Operational criteria to be retained and remain the same.

- i) As in 2021, we will continue to use the three-tiered categorisation (maximum, moderate and minimum) to determine the importance of sub-topics in supporting census operations. This framework has proven effective in identifying which topics contribute most to key operational functions such as maximising coverage, defining population bases, and enabling routing and validation.

C: Summary and next steps

We thank the panel for their valuable contributions to refining the evaluation criteria for the Census 2031 topic consultation.

This paper details the proposed evaluation criteria for the Census 2031, reflecting on the recommended revisions to the 2021 framework. We have carefully considered feedback and aligned our approach with strategic priorities.

We ask MARP members to endorse these proposals, which will support a sound foundation for the next Census.

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13 November 2025

Annex A: Evaluation criteria overview

User requirements

The user requirements evaluation criteria are critical in assessing the need for information. They aim to ensure that topics included on Census 2031 are chosen because they have a strong benefit to society when collected through a census

A robust case is required for any topic to be included in Census 2031 due to limitations of respondent burden and space. Each criterion directly links to a segment of the consultation questionnaire, to ensure that evidence is gathered for that criterion.

Six user requirements evaluation criteria have been developed. The purpose of these are to support the selection of topics, the development of questions, and outputs for use during testing for Census 2031, Table 1. These criteria are like those used in Census 2021 but have been refined following consultation with MARP, the Census Task Force (CTF), and wider internal and external assurance and input.

Table 1. User requirements criteria descriptions.

Criteria	Description
Purpose	The purpose to which these data will be used if collected is central to the evaluation process. Purposes include, but are not restricted to, resource allocation, service planning, policy evaluation, equality assessment and diversity monitoring. The implications if the data are not collected, such as increased financial costs or reduced quality of data used in planning, are also important. Requirements arising from legislation strengthen the case for inclusion.
Small geographies or populations	The Census provides the benefits of information for small population groups and at detailed geographic levels. Information that is only required for broad geographic areas or large population groups might be better obtained from other statistical sources.

Alternative sources (lack of)	Information should only be collected through the census where user needs cannot be fully met by other sources (such as administrative data), including cases where quality requirements are not satisfied. Consideration will be made as to whether suitable information is available from other sources.
Multivariate analysis	An important benefit of census data is the ability to analyse census variables against one another. User requirements for multivariate analysis for a topic will strengthen the case for its inclusion in the census, if other sources cannot meet this need.
Comparability beyond England and Wales	Data collected from the census are required on a coherent basis across a large geographical area. If there is a user need, the three UK Census Offices will release harmonised census outputs that are coherent across the UK where possible: we will also consider needs for international comparability.
Continuity with previous Censuses	Comparison with previous censuses is a benefit of census analysis and, wherever appropriate, Census 2031 questionnaire will collect the same information as the Census 2021 questionnaire.

The Analytic Hierarchy Process (AHP) was introduced as a structured methodology to assign relative weights to user requirements. Testing was undertaken through pilot studies and iterative reviews, which demonstrated the AHP's effectiveness. The results provided transparent weighting to support decision-making. The 2031 weights and comparison 2021 are in Table 2.

Table 2. Evaluation criteria weights for Census 2031 and Census 2021 topic consultation ‘user requirements’

User requirement evaluation criteria	2031 Relative weight	2021 Relative weight
Purpose	0.30	0.30
Small geographies or populations	0.25	0.20
Alternative sources (lack of)	0.05	0.15
Multivariate analysis	0.23	0.15
Comparability beyond England and Wales	0.07	0.10
Continuity with previous censuses	0.10	0.10

Other considerations

There are several things that need to be considered when designing Census 2031 content. Other considerations are factors which affect the feasibility and practicalities of implementing questions or topics, such as data quality, cost, and respondent burden. These guide the development of census content (question and instructions) alongside user requirements.

The proposed criterion descriptors for 2031, are described in Table 3. Development needs for each topic will be assessed against these criteria, recognising that each topic is likely to have individual needs in the development process. This approach will guide the development of individual questions and detailed content plans. Sometimes, despite strong user need, a topic may be excluded if it cannot be reliably or accurately measured. Each topic will be assessed as to how well it performed in 2021, using relevant evidence from Census 2021 where possible, supplemented by additional sources when data from 2021 are unavailable. The following section covers the six criteria in the other considerations (impact on) criteria group.

Table 3. Criterion descriptors proposed for Census 2031 criterion.

Criterion	Description for 2031
Impact on data quality	<p>The data collected in Census 2031 is intended to be of a quality suitable for producing outputs that meet the required user needs.</p> <p>The information requested should be limited to details that respondents can readily provide or recall accurately.</p>
Impact on public acceptability	<p>The census should not ask sensitive or potentially intrusive questions that may have a negative impact on responses or may lead to respondents giving socially acceptable (rather than accurate answers). It should also not enquire about opinions or attitudes.</p> <p>Additionally, the census is carried out for statistical purposes. It should not collect data that would deliberately promote commercial, political or sectarian groups or sponsor particular causes.</p>
Impact on respondent burden	<p>The inclusion of questions on a topic should not impose an excessive burden on respondents, this may result from: lengthy instructions or explanations, complex routing, large numbers of response categories, or large numbers of questions on a single topic.</p>
Impact on financial concerns	<p>Questions should not present major coding problems, require extensive processing, or significantly add to the overall cost of the census.</p>
Impact on questionnaire mode	<p>The modes (methods) of the collection of data will be considered throughout the design of the questionnaire; the aim is that respondents interpret the questions and answer consistently across all modes, allowing consistent information to be collected.</p>
Ability to optimise statistical integration	<p>The ability for Census 2031 content to increase the value of the census data through linkage, or to support the development of a future administrative data statistical system will be considered in the development of census content.</p>

Criterion descriptors include the new proposal of ‘Ability to optimise statistical integration’ and addition of “commercial” to ‘Impact on public acceptability’

A scoring framework for each criterion has been agreed using a five-point scale that incorporates both positive and negative impact, Table 4.

Table 4. Scoring for the Census 2031 Other Considerations.

2031 Category	Description
High positive impact	The inclusion of questions relating to this sub-topic would have a high positive impact; for example, where the question improves the acceptability of census or other questions within Census 2031.
Medium positive impact	The inclusion of questions relating to this sub-topic would have a medium positive impact; for example, where the question improves clarity or supports respondent understanding, the impact on data quality would be positive.
No or minimal impact	The inclusion of questions relating to this subtopic would have minimal or no measurable impact; for example, where the question is clear and familiar to respondents, the impact on all criteria would be minimal.
Medium negative impact	The inclusion of questions relating to this sub-topic would have a medium negative impact; for example, where questions may require minor clarification or additional time, this could moderately increase respondent burden.
High negative impact	The inclusion of questions relating to this sub-topic have been assessed to have a high negative impact; for example, a question asking for sensitive financial details without clear justification may be perceived as intrusive and potentially reduce response rates.

Operational requirements

The ONS uses some of the data collected during the census to support the delivery of the census or its outputs. For Census 2031, we will assess evidence for topics that were included in Census 2021 to determine whether any associated questions were used operationally and verify this with the ONS delivery teams. This framework is designed to support robust and effective census delivery.

Topics will be categorised as having maximum, moderate, or minimal importance in relation to operational requirements, Table 5.

Maximising coverage is viewed as the most important operational consideration, as the primary aim of the census is to provide a robust estimate of the usual resident population of England and Wales.

Table 5. Census 2031 operational requirements criteria.

Category	Use	Description
Maximum	Maximising coverage or population bases	Where data collected on a topic are used to maximise coverage or to define a population base, they will be given high importance. The Census 2031 questionnaire may include some questions that, for instance, support respondents in identifying who should be included in the questionnaire or are used to produce different output bases.
Moderate	Coding of derived variables and adjustment for non-response	It is expected that some key outputs will be based on derived variables. Topics may be included in the Census 2031 questionnaire if a user need is identified for data that are derived from a variable even if there is no user need for outputs relating directly to the topic, for example, supervisory status has been required primarily for deriving the National Statistics Socio-economic Classification (NS-SEC) in past censuses. Some core topics are used to enable a better assessment and adjustment for the characteristics of non-responders.

Minimum	Routing and validation	<p>In an online census respondents can be automatically routed around questions that they are not required to answer. However, there will still be a paper version of the form which is likely to need some routing questions.</p> <p>Some questions are also used for validation, eg cross-checking between age and marital status.</p>
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Once topics have been selected for further consideration, other considerations will primarily be used alongside the user requirement evidence. This will guide the development of the census questionnaire and the creation of administrative data research outputs. While each topic will be developed according to its specific needs, these other considerations help guide these developments.

Sometimes, even when a topic is assessed as “consider how to collect,” it may still be excluded from Census 2031. This can happen if implementation is not feasible due to factors outlined under other considerations.