

# Recommendation from the UK Statistics Authority on the future of population and migration statistics in England and Wales





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## Foreword from the Chair of the UK Statistics Authority

As Chair of the UK Statistics Authority it is my pleasure, on behalf of our Board, to endorse the advice given to us by the National Statistician on the future development of population and migration statistics for England and Wales and to present this recommendation for the necessary next steps to ministers.

The recommendation was presented to the Board on 27 March 2025 by Sir Ian Diamond, who subsequently stepped down as National Statistician on 9 May 2025. The Acting National Statistician Emma Rourke endorses the recommendation, and the Board continues to support it enthusiastically. We would like to thank Sir Ian for all his hard work along with colleagues in helping to develop the proposals.

Population and migration statistics matter to us all, both in our local communities and at the regional and national level. Their quality, inclusivity and representativeness are intrinsic to our understanding of the society we live in and to the ability of public service providers, the private sector and civil society to make informed decisions.

The National Statistician's recommendation is to commission a mandatory questionnaire-based census in 2031 – building on the success and lessons of the last census in 2021 – and to continue to develop the ONS's path-breaking population and migration statistics based on administrative data to provide more frequent and timely estimates. The recommendation urges the UK and Welsh Governments to commit to a regular and reliable flow of administrative data, which is necessary to maintain and further improve these estimates and would hold out the potential of moving to a system more fully reliant on administrative data in the future should ministers wish to do so.

The Authority Board believes that this recommendation is well aligned with the needs expressed by a wide range of users, including at the recent UK Statistics Assembly. It will deliver the granularity and detail regarding people's characteristics that many users want, while making our population statistics more dynamic and responsive to evolving demands. Importantly, we believe that this recommendation for England and Wales provides a constructive foundation for the equivalent decisions that will need to be taken in Scotland and Northern Ireland and would underpin sound UK-wide estimates.

**A mandatory census in 2031 is an exciting opportunity to build on past achievements, allowing the ONS to explore new ways to improve accuracy, inclusivity and accessibility and to harness statistical and technological innovations to enhance data collection, processing and analysis in a safe and ethical way.**

The 2021 census already made use of administrative data to complement conventional census returns and there would be greater scope to do so in 2031. This underlines the fact that in the dual-track approach being recommended here, each track strengthens the other.

If ministers accept this recommendation, the ONS and the Authority Board will focus determinedly on delivering a high-quality census in 2031 and further developing population estimates based on administrative data in a way that meets user needs and delivers value for money. We will monitor progress carefully and transparently and ensure that users remain fully engaged as the plans are further developed and implemented. My thanks to everyone who has contributed to the development of these proposals.



**Sir Robert Chote**

Chair of the UK Statistics Authority

**June 2025**





## Foreword from the Acting National Statistician

As Acting National Statistician I present this recommendation on behalf of the Office for National Statistics (ONS), proposing that preparations begin for a census in 2031 in England and Wales.

Should the Government accept this recommendation, the ONS will once again invite the whole population to participate in this exercise that makes all our communities visible and is so important for informing decisions about all of our lives.

The ONS ran a highly successful census during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2021, at a pivotal time for the country. Early data from the census were used by policymakers, including informing key issues such as vaccine uptake by occupation. The high response rate and richness of the census data ensured it provided a high-quality snapshot of the whole population and its characteristics, which continues to provide countless benefits to statistical users.

**It has been clear from consultation and engagement that the decennial census, asked of the whole population, remains of enormous value for informing the most important decisions facing our country.**

In addition to a census data collection, we also know that there is strong interest in - and enthusiasm for - the improvements to quality, frequency and range of outputs we can see by making greater use of alternative data sources, especially administrative data.

Through the ONS's research with administrative data over the past decade, which I have overseen in recent years as Deputy National Statistician for Health, Population and Methods, we have demonstrated its enormous potential for meeting users' needs.

**While the administrative data is not yet sufficiently mature to replace the need for data collection through a census, the progress we have made means we are well placed to use administrative data to contribute to our census activity and provide improved outputs between censuses.**

Taking the best from our Census experience and our ever increasing digital and data capabilities enables us to deliver a population and migration statistics system which supports decision making and enriches our understanding of the economy and society.

I look forward to continuing to work with our users to develop population and migration statistics that inspire confidence and enrich decision-making for us all.



**Emma Rourke**  
Acting National Statistician and Chief Executive  
of the UK Statistics Authority  
**June 2025**

# Executive summary

Statistics about the population and migration are a vital input into decision-making by public, private, and voluntary sector bodies. They help people understand the evolving society that we live in. They help central and local government ensure that public services are delivered to the people who need them, and that resources are allocated effectively. They help businesses invest in the right places. And they help users of UK-wide statistics gain a coherent understanding of the population across the UK.

**For decades, the Office for National Statistics has asked questions of the whole population through the decennial census for England and Wales. This has been pivotal in this system and has underpinned reliable and consistent measures of population and migration statistics.**

The Authority's vision is to deliver a sustainable population statistics system that generates high-quality, trustworthy data. Through consultation the ONS has found that users continue to find the decennial census an invaluable asset in meeting their needs. But they also told us they require more frequent and timely statistics to understand the changes that are occurring within society.

**The Authority recommends that the Government commission a questionnaire-based census of the whole population in 2031.**

Delivering a census in 2031 is an exciting opportunity to build a system of population and migration statistics that combines the strengths of whole-population data collection with the additional value that administrative data can provide.

The ONS has decades of experience in delivering censuses. In 2031, the ONS would build on its experience from Census 2021, this was the first census to be completed primarily online, achieving a high response rate, and made greater use of administrative data [see Annex A, link 1] than its predecessors.



In 2031 the ONS would look to broaden the use of administrative data to create further efficiencies and be more inclusive, in light of the progress it has made with administrative-based (admin-based) statistics over the past decade and in line with changes seen internationally.

Our use of administrative data has developed considerably since 2021. While it is not yet mature enough to negate the need for a census, it can and should play an increasingly important role in the future system, supporting the Census and enabling more frequent, higher quality estimates on a broader range of topics before and after the census.

In the Beyond 2011 [see Annex A, link 2] programme, ONS explored the ways in which population data are collected and since then, progress has been made in providing admin-based population and migration statistics. This includes published in-development administrative-based population estimates for mid-2023 [see Annex A, link 3] and our official estimates of long-term international migration, published in May 2025 [see Annex A, link 4].

The safety of the public's personal information is a top priority. The ONS has a strong track record of protecting sensitive data, underpinned by legislation and built over many decades of delivering the census in England and Wales and the UK's biggest regular household surveys. The ONS's recently updated Data Strategy [see Annex A, link 5] reaffirms and updates its commitment to data protection and security. Published statistical outputs never identify individuals.

The Government has made a clear commitment to a transformative digital agenda [see Annex A, link 6] as a significant driver of reform in public services. This is an important opportunity to drive the use and quality of administrative data – not just for population and migration statistics but more widely. These data hold the potential to deliver benefits across society through the ONS statistics, while the necessary improvements to the quality of the underlying sources would also benefit supplier organisations, and help to measure progress with the Government's five Missions and Plan for Change.

Several countries have mandatory population registers that help to improve the linkage of administrative data for the creation of statistics. International comparisons on this theme were made in the recent Independent Review of the UK Statistics Authority [see Annex A, link 7]. This matter is beyond the remit of the Authority, but new Government initiatives relating to digital identification may provide similar statistical benefits and the ONS would seek to be a partner in their development.

The combination of a questionnaire-based census of the whole population with the effective use of administrative data would create a resilient and future-focussed population statistics system. This will help to provide users with the detail they require, while also providing an improved understanding of how society is changing in the years between censuses.

As a result of this, on the advice of the Acting National Statistician, and following a review of all evidence, the Authority recommends a statistical system for population and migration that combines the strengths of data collection through a questionnaire-based census of the whole population with the increased value from administrative data, both to support the delivery of a census in 2031 and to deliver improved outputs each year. The following three actions are recommended to deliver this vision:

1. That the UK Government commission and resource the ONS to conduct a mandatory questionnaire-based census of the whole population for England and Wales in 2031. This should support coherent UK outputs and maximise the benefits from the ONS's work with administrative data to date, enabling further delivery of such benefits in the future.
2. That the UK Government commission and resource the ONS to develop statistical outputs using administrative data which provide more frequent estimates and are inclusive in representing society. This should include an administrative-based census of the population.
3. That the UK and Welsh Governments provide a commitment to the regular, reliable and ongoing flow of the critical administrative datasets required, ensuring that data owners deliver on that commitment, and invest in the required improvements to those sources and address the known points of friction that prevent data transfer.

These recommendations would allow the ONS to maintain the pace and ambition of its work to embed administrative data in its population and migration statistics, while responding to user feedback for a comprehensive and inclusive data collection.

The ONS is responsible for carrying out the census in England and Wales, but the power to call a census rests with government ministers. Decisions on the future of the census in Scotland and Northern Ireland will be made by the relevant ministers, based on advice from their statistical authorities, in due course.

As highlighted in Professor Denise Lievesley's recent Independent Review of the UK Statistics Authority [see Annex A, link 7], it is vital that the UK's statisticians work together to ensure that coherent and comparable UK population data and statistics continue to be produced to inform communities across the UK. The Authority has published its 2024 report [see Annex A, link 8] on this collaborative work to support UK coherence.



## Background

High-quality population and migration statistics paint a detailed picture of our society. They supply local and central government policymakers, public service providers, private sector businesses and voluntary sector organisations with the information they need to make good decisions and deliver services and products effectively. They also help citizens, the media, think tanks and researchers understand how the size and make-up of the population is evolving.

For more than two centuries, the traditional, questionnaire-based census of the whole population has been one of the critical sources of this information in England and Wales, providing a snapshot of the population every ten years. Originally a straightforward population count, the census has evolved over time, with increasingly sophisticated methods being used and the questions reflecting shifting priorities in our rapidly changing society.

Census 2021 made greater use of administrative data than ever before [see Annex A, link 1] and was the first to be held primarily online, following a recommendation from the National Statistician in 2014. It achieved a high response rate, with 97% of all households completing the questionnaire, and all local authority areas reached response rates of at least 88%. It also saw a timelier release of data than ever before, with the first results released a year after the data-collection operation, and all major England and Wales releases published by the end of 2023.

The 2018 white paper, 'Help Shape Our Future' [see Annex A, link 9], included the commitment to present a recommendation to the UK Government on the future of the census, a commitment that the publication of this document fulfils.

The breadth and depth of administrative data held across Government represents a huge opportunity for the transformation of statistics. Extensive work undertaken by the ONS over the last decade has demonstrated what is possible with these data. This progress demonstrates great promise in the development of official statistics using administrative data. It is the Authority's view that this work should continue to be resourced over the long term, so that these outputs can reach full maturity, paving the way for a more sustainable and predictable statistical system that takes full advantage of developments in technology and data availability.

Across the world national statistical institutes are exploring greater use of administrative data [see Annex A, link 10] as part of their strategy to address challenges around quality, coverage and data availability. Many of these countries rely on the strength generated in combined methods.

The progress made in recent years with administrative-based statistics provides the opportunity to iterate our approach to the design and delivery of a traditional census operation. This will build resilience into the delivery of the census in 2031, drawing strength from different data sources and responding to the risk presented by low response rates to social surveys and recent censuses in other countries since the pandemic. This would combine the efficiencies and opportunities of administrative data with the scale and precision provided by a mandatory questionnaire-based census.

The Government has made clear its commitment to a transformative digital agenda [see Annex A, link 6] as a key driver of reform in public services, which would be a significant catalyst to realise the full power of administrative data. This commitment will be significant in unblocking the challenges currently experienced with data-sharing and will be critical in the ongoing development of the ONS's long-term ambition with administrative data.

**The wealth of analysis enabled by administrative data is increasing each year and in time, with the right investment, could one day surpass the benefits of a traditional census.**

As part of the Census and Data Collection Transformation Programme, the Authority set out the following three evaluation criteria for assessing any potential recommendation:

1. The ONS's plans for the future statistical system are supported by users as meeting their core user needs for statistics about the size and composition of the population of England and Wales, its characteristics, and housing stock.
2. This statistical system will be flexible and resilient enough to respond at pace to future and emerging user needs, adapting to changes in available data sources; and will be capable of going beyond core needs.
3. Methods and approaches are peer-reviewed and compliant with relevant legislative and ethical considerations, and our plans are accepted by the public, with a business case and programme plan in place to deliver a sustainable statistical system.



To support the development of a recommendation aligned with these criteria, the Authority has considered a range of evidence drawn from the ONS's research, a public consultation and expert advice. It is ONS's assessment that users will welcome a questionnaire-based census of the whole population in 2031 and the recommendations made in this document.

The ONS has published extensive research on its website in consultation with independent experts in methodology, data ethics and inclusivity. It also conducted a public consultation on the future of population and migration statistics, between June and October 2023. Coinciding with the consultation launch, the ONS published a summary of the population and migration statistics transformation research [see Annex A, link 11] and assessed it against the evaluation criteria.

The ONS's Data Strategy [see Annex A, link 5] aims to realise the full value of data as a strategic asset, while maintaining high levels of trust and transparency. As the ONS works to implement this, linked administrative datasets will play an increasingly important role in the production of its statistics. Given the sensitive nature of the data contained in these datasets, maintaining the trust of the public is crucial.

Following advice from the National Statistician's Data Ethics Advisory Committee [see Annex A, link 12], the ONS has engaged directly with members of the public to explore contemporary attitudes to data and whether these are changing over time. In January 2025, the ONS published a summary of public attitudes to data [see Annex A, link 13] including views on data linkage and the use of administrative data for statistical purposes. This draws on a range of ONS and external sources between 2014 and 2025. The latest research indicates that the public is broadly accepting of data-sharing and linkage, and that this has consistently been the case over the decade. Furthermore, members of the public increasingly assume that data-sharing and linkage are already widespread practices across government organisations.

The Authority recognises that the ONS must work to maintain high levels of trust. The ONS should retain and strengthen its commitments to maintaining transparency with the public about what data sources are used and how. This includes communicating information on the privacy and security measures in place to maintain trust and protect privacy.





## 2023 consultation and user engagement

On 29 June 2023, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) launched a consultation on the future of population and migration statistics in England and Wales [see Annex A, link 14]. This sought views on how the ONS's proposals to create a sustainable, admin-based system for producing essential, up-to-date statistics about the population would meet user needs. A total of 706 responses were received. The ONS has published a report on the consultation's findings [see Annex A, link 15].

Responses came from a variety of organisations and individuals from the public and private sectors and beyond. Feedback was also collected through engagement events with stakeholders during the consultation period.

**Respondents showed widespread support for the continued development of a system that increasingly uses administrative data, delivering the benefits of more timely and frequent data.**





Alongside this, there was a strong appetite for further assurances on some of the technical details of an administrative system and its delivery. Users required a greater understanding of the proposed statistical design, particularly for producing individual-level data. There were consistent views across all broad user groups, including government, researchers, third sector and individuals, that:

- **more frequent and timely population and migration estimates** would provide improved supporting evidence for service provision and delivery
- **better monitoring of internal migration** through the proposed alternative definitions would enable users to understand changing trends at specified times
- **detailed characteristics data** are essential for many users and organisations to function effectively and fully understand the needs of specific populations
- **data at granular geographic areas** are needed to understand differences between communities, particularly in relation to inequality or deprivation
- **certainty is needed in the sustainability of underlying administrative sources**, including the full coverage of characteristics
- **certainty is needed in the supply, quality, harmonisation and coherence of data** across sources and different parts of the UK
- **collection of data at an individual level is essential** to enable bespoke aggregation into outputs to meet a wide range of needs
- once sufficient time has passed, **population data are valued** by social historians and for genealogical research.

Whilst it is clear many users welcome the continued development of population and migration statistics based increasingly on administrative data, and the ONS's focus groups with members of the public have indicated acceptance of this approach, it is apparent from responses that the ONS's evidence to date, including the consultation document [see Annex A, link 16], that the time is not yet ripe to forego a whole-population questionnaire-based census. This theme also came through in contributions to the UK Statistics Assembly 2025, as described in the independent report [see Annex A, link 17] about the event. The Authority has listened to this feedback, and the need to demonstrate this capability has shaped the priorities and timeline of this recommendation.

The National Statistician's Inclusive Data Advisory Committee [see Annex A, link 18] provided a formal letter to the National Statistician in response to the consultation, which the ONS has published [see Annex A, link 19]. The feedback centred on the need for population data to be inclusive, in which people of all protected characteristics can be counted and visible, thereby ensuring the accuracy of administrative data and ability to produce data on at-risk populations.

Furthermore, the committee emphasised the importance of verifying the accuracy of administrative data, particularly in the potential absence of a traditional, questionnaire-based census of the whole population in 2031. The committee noted that the proposed plan to validate the data was in its early stages and that significant progress in these methods would be required to produce accurate information on at-risk populations after 2031.

## Advice from the Methodological Assurance Review Panel

During the Office for National Statistics' (ONS) research programme into the use of administrative data for population and migration statistics, it consulted the Methodological Assurance Review Panel (MARP) [see Annex A, link 20]. This section includes summaries of the main points and feedback provided by the MARP on the proposals in the consultation and the emerging recommendation.

The MARP was formed by the National Statistician to review and provide advice and assurance on methods used to produce official statistics. These align with the guidelines in the Code of Practice for Statistics [see Annex A, link 21] on quality assurance through peer review.

Following a review of methods and research associated with Census 2021 and the future of population and migration statistics, the MARP produced in November 2023 initial advice for the National Statistician [see Annex A, link 22].

In March 2025, the MARP agreed the following statement for inclusion in this document, based on the emerging advice for the Authority from the National Statistician:

“The National Statistician’s recommendation envisages increasing reliance on administrative data for the future population and migration statistics system, in combination with a decennial census in 2031. For this combination to fulfil its potential, a fundamental condition is a secure and reliable supply of good quality administrative data to support ONS’s production of official statistics suitable both for its own purposes and for those of users. Therefore we strongly support the recommendation that the relevant governments (UK and devolved, as well as all relevant parts of the state) provide a commitment to deliver and develop this.

“The methodological proposals that MARP have reviewed to date follow sound methodological practice, and show promise and progress in the context of the proposed vision. Full details of the work reviewed are available on the MARP website. As we have advised, there are methodological issues still to resolve to deliver the vision, and indeed the experience gained as the process unfolds is likely to pose questions that will benefit from methodological consideration. We are confident that the ONS understands what is needed and will regard this as part of the task of developing the new approach in practice. But there remains much that needs to be done.

“An example where particular attention will be needed is the measurement of characteristics, as there will be differences in the definitions, categorical detail, and granularity available in the various administrative data sources, and these will be under the control of the individual data providers. Data collection mechanisms will change over time, and so there may be an effect on temporal consistency. Some characteristics will not appear in very much, if any, administrative data. Both for characteristics, and more generally, quality assessment of the administrative data sources will be needed to ensure that the data are fit for purpose. In addition, assurance will be needed that this quality will continue into the future. Appropriate coverage adjustments will also be necessary.

“Overall, the 2031 census will provide a very important checkpoint for the outputs based on administrative data in the interim, and it will make it possible to assess progress on the delivery of the necessary administrative data. This assessment will need to consider issues such as the temporal consistency and continued availability of administrative data, as well as whether new data sources coming on stream have been appropriately introduced. Nevertheless, we would advise the ONS to prepare contingency options against the risk that the supply, quality or accessibility of administrative data are not sufficient to maintain ONS’s standards including the level of public trust in official statistics. In addition, there should be continued work on the costs and benefits of the transformed approach.”

## RECOMMENDATION 1:

# An England and Wales census in 2031

High-quality statistics about the population are essential to ensure people get the services and support they need, both within their communities and nationwide. Feedback from user engagement indicates a clear need for the continued provision of very granular statistics which can be achieved through a questionnaire-based census of the whole population. This would provide a strong foundation for the ONS's continued work with administrative data as it continues to mature.

The UK Government should therefore commission and resource the ONS to begin preparations for a questionnaire-based census in 2031. This census should be designed for a 2031 society, building on the ONS expertise gained in 2021, securing efficiencies by further integrating administrative data into traditional questionnaire-based census data collection. The ONS should ensure that the resulting census data support the ongoing development of the admin-based outputs described in Recommendation 2.

The primary purpose of a traditional census operation has historically been to provide the stock measure for mid-year population estimates. Population estimates are used in a variety of ways to inform decision making, as survey weights, and as denominators. Additional aims of a questionnaire-based census include the collection of granular characteristics and attributes data, and the ability to provide a valued research dataset for use by accredited researchers in trusted research environments. These should all be priority outputs from the proposed census in 2031.

As part of its outreach and engagement for this census, there will be a strong focus on groups that are traditionally underrepresented in administrative and survey data sources. Through the resulting census data and outputs, this will enable the ONS and its public sector partners to deepen their understanding of administrative data quality, and support strategies to improve administrative data's inclusivity and representativeness. This will improve the admin-based statistics of the future (as described in Recommendation 2) and facilitate intersectional analysis and insights into minority groups at low levels of geography on a more frequent basis.

Further research and testing, as well as learning from international colleagues and other national statistics institutes, will be essential in determining the design, balancing quality, cost and risk considerations. The approach should be developed alongside statistical producers in other parts of the UK to support delivery and coherence, dependent on decisions by ministers in Scotland and Northern Ireland. The approach should also be developed around user needs including conducting a topic consultation as early as possible.

In the design, delivery and outputs of a 2031 census ONS will seek to implement innovations, utilising recent developments in modern technology including Artificial Intelligence. The ONS will:

- design a digital-first census with primarily online questionnaires for every household and communal establishment in England and Wales in 2031
- use administrative data to support census data collection and quality
- use administrative data to cover additional topics of high user interest (e.g. income), and drive improvements to timeliness
- ensure coherence across the UK, including (subject to decisions in Scotland and Northern Ireland) all nations benefiting from cross-UK publicity and a shared data-collection platform, balancing the needs of users in each nation with UK coherence

The ONS will, as part of its plans for delivering a digital-first, questionnaire-based census, consider the needs of people who may face barriers in responding digitally, taking an inclusive approach that enables all parts of society to respond.

The 2031 census can help deliver an increasingly admin-based system of population and migration statistics in the future, underpinned by the benchmarking provided through a census data collection. Through the census operation, ONS will work with the citizen to deliver a step change in public acceptability and understanding around administrative data sharing, empowering citizens to be more aware of data, as described in Recommendation 2.

**The Authority recommends that: the UK Government commission and resource the ONS to conduct a mandatory questionnaire-based census of the whole population and housing for England and Wales in 2031. This census should support coherent UK outputs and maximise the benefits from the ONS's work with administrative data to date, enabling further delivery of such benefits in the future.**



## RECOMMENDATION 2:

# Continue to resource administrative-based population and migration statistics

Through its 2023 consultation, the ONS identified a strong ongoing user need for individual-level data about the population. In its research, the ONS has demonstrated the feasibility of producing a de-identified individual-level dataset including age and sex from administrative sources, which can be analysed by low geographic areas. The ONS made this dataset available securely to accredited researchers through the Integrated Data Service in December 2024 [see Annex A, link 23]. The operationalisation and continued development of this dataset into an ongoing and resilient admin-based census would pave the way for a more sustainable statistical system over the long term.

The ONS should seek to produce the admin-based census annually, increasing the number of available topics each year. Centred on the admin-based census, and using survey data where appropriate, the ONS should commit to delivering the outputs described in the section Monitoring and reporting progress.

The census in 2031 will both make use of this work to increase its efficiency and precision. Additionally, the data from the census in 2031 will provide a high-quality point of comparison to understand the quality of the ONS's statistical population dataset and admin-based census.

As the UK's independent national statistical institute, the ONS must work in close partnership with colleagues across the UK when developing this work and develop shared methods to ensure UK coherence is maintained into the future.

Delivering an admin-based population and migration statistics system will require investment and ongoing funding. The ONS and its partners within the UK Government and across the UK statistical system must be appropriately resourced to do so.

In addition to operationalising a record-level admin-based census, the ONS should commit to producing other outputs about the population using administrative data.

The ONS has already moved to admin-based international migration estimates as 'official statistics in development', with the latest figures published in May 2025, and will aim for these to be designated as accredited official statistics. Through the census in 2021, it has demonstrated these admin-based estimates have improved the measurement of migration statistics in comparison to historical survey-based measures. The ONS is also developing its approach to internal migration estimates, making use of more administrative data sources.



The ONS is working to establish what administrative data sources will allow for granular, intersectional estimates of key characteristics (such as protected characteristics including ethnicity and disability; income; Welsh language; housing statistics) that are more frequent and up-to-date. This has historically only been achievable through bespoke large-scale data collection, but improvements to the public sector's administrative data estate described in Recommendation 3 would support the delivery of this ambition. The ONS should aim to produce estimates of high quality, produced in line with the principles set out in the Code of Practice for Statistics [see Annex A, link 21], and should seek for these to be designated as accredited official statistics.

The data assets underpinning these estimates, including the admin-based census, should be made available to researchers through the ONS's trusted research environments, enabling the realisation of additional benefits for the public good.

Informed by the ONS's research into public attitudes and the importance of transparency and trust (see Background section), the ONS should initiate a project to explore citizen data as an approach to improving trustworthiness in population and migration statistics. Citizen data, as defined by The Copenhagen Framework on Citizen Data [see Annex A, link 24] is an approach where citizens or Civil Society Organisations meaningfully participate in data collection and design.

**The Authority recommends that: the UK Government commission and resource the ONS to develop statistical outputs using administrative data which provide more frequent estimates and are inclusive in representing society. This should include an administrative-based census of the population.**

### RECOMMENDATION 3

## Commit to the flow of critical administrative data

High-quality official statistics are an essential public service. The infrastructure that delivers them needs to be suitably robust and reliable so they can be published to the high standard users expect at the time users expect them.

A successful admin-based system requires a regular, timely and stable supply of critical administrative data from partners across the public sector, including certainty in its format and supporting metadata. Additionally, the ONS needs suppliers to notify them and work with them on any planned operational changes affecting the quality or content of critical administrative datasets, giving adequate notice, to assess and minimise the impact of such changes on statistical production.

The Digital Economy Act 2017 provided clearer legal routes for acquiring administrative data for statistics. Since then, the ONS's work with data owners has made good progress accessing administrative data, which has enabled the research underpinning this recommendation.

However, experience shows this is not the guarantee of a predictable data supply on which a reliable system of population and migration statistics can be built. Agreed-upon supplies are interrupted too often, sometimes at short notice, and when data arrive, they are not always delivered in a usable form. This risk cannot be mitigated by the ONS alone, and the ONS will have greater success in producing admin-based statistics over the long term with support from across the public sector. Professor Lievesley's Independent Review of the UK Statistics Authority [see Annex A, link 7] called for an 'effective system of responsible data sharing' in order to 'fully realise the potential of the data held by government', a sentiment echoed by the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee's report [see Annex A, link 25] "Transforming the UK's Evidence Base".

In a UK context, it is important that opportunities for improved population statistics are not limited to the ONS. Producers of statistics in Scotland and Northern Ireland need support in acquiring the data required to research admin-based estimates, with a potential future requirement for regular supply to support ongoing statistical production.

Investment and improvements in the public sector's administrative data estate will have widespread benefits across the system, including improving the data used for operational purposes across government service delivery. This would ensure that the information the ONS needs is present in these sources to the right level of quality, and this in turn is likely to create a virtuous circle by improving the quality of data for departments' own operational uses.

The Authority would also welcome the Government's support in implementing a previous recommendation of the Children's Commissioner [see Annex A, link 26]: that the ONS work with Cabinet Office to establish the best practice for designing administrative systems (across government) to facilitate bringing together family records.

The Authority encourages the UK and Welsh Governments to support the ONS in conversation with bodies responsible for administrative data collection. It should be a shared objective of all parties to identify means to improve the detail available from administrative sources. The ONS has expertise in designing and harmonising data collection, which could be applied to make improvements to administrative systems. This would ensure that variables are consistently measured. While the ONS would seek to make improvements to better suit statistical purposes, departments would reciprocally benefit from greater quality, consistency and value in the data collected.

**The Authority recommends that: the UK and Welsh Governments provide a commitment to the regular, reliable and ongoing flow of the critical administrative datasets required, ensuring that data owners deliver on that commitment, and invest in the required improvements to those sources and address the known points of friction that prevent data transfer.**

## Monitoring and reporting progress

The expected outputs from the Authority's long-term ambition to put administrative data at the core of population and migration statistics are:

1. Population and migration statistics at national and local level, including coherent UK estimates.
2. Statistics on characteristics, housing and living arrangements, improving our understanding of society and communities at national and local levels, including multivariate statistics.
3. Population and household projections including variant projections in response to user needs.
4. Expert insight into structural demographic change and the related demographic challenges facing our society (including ageing, fertility and mortality), building understanding of demography across government.
5. Cross-sectional and longitudinal data assets that allow for research and analysis.
6. Additional indicators and insights providing new or early insights into the population, built from existing and novel data sources.

The Authority will monitor and publicly report on the ONS's progress in delivering of these recommendations on a period basis in the future. The first of these reports should be made in 2026.

To support this reporting, the Authority proposes to establish a focused subcommittee of the Board, with a remit to advise the Board regularly on progress on the full breadth of the population statistics system. It would include senior leaders from across government and beyond, alongside relevant experts and Authority non-executive directors.



## ANNEX A

# Related links

### 1. Administrative data used in Census 2021, England and Wales

[www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/  
populationandmigration/populationestimates/methodologies/  
administrativedatausedincensus2021englandandwales](https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationestimates/methodologies/administrativedatausedincensus2021englandandwales)

### 2. Beyond 2011

[www.ons.gov.uk/census/censustransformationprogramme/  
beyond2011censustransformationprogramme](https://www.ons.gov.uk/census/censustransformationprogramme/beyond2011censustransformationprogramme)

### 3. Population estimates for England and Wales: mid-2023

[www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/  
populationestimates/bulletins/populationestimatesforenglandandwales/mid2023](https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationestimates/bulletins/populationestimatesforenglandandwales/mid2023)

### 4. Admin-based long-term international migration estimates for year ending June 2024

[www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/  
internationalmigration/bulletins/longterminternationalmigrationprovisional/  
yearendingdecember2024](https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/internationalmigration/bulletins/longterminternationalmigrationprovisional/yearendingdecember2024)

### 5. The ONS's Data Strategy

[www.ons.gov.uk/aboutus/transparencyandgovernance/datastrategy/  
ourdatastrategy](https://www.ons.gov.uk/aboutus/transparencyandgovernance/datastrategy/ourdatastrategy)

### 6. A blueprint for modern digital government (HTML)

[www.gov.uk/government/publications/a-blueprint-for-modern-digital-  
government/a-blueprint-for-modern-digital-government-html](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/a-blueprint-for-modern-digital-government/a-blueprint-for-modern-digital-government-html)

### 7. Independent Review of the UK Statistics Authority by Professor Denise Lievesley CBE (HTML)

[www.gov.uk/government/publications/independent-review-of-the-uk-statistics-  
authority-uksa-2023/independent-review-of-the-uk-statistics-authority-by-  
professor-denise-lievesley-cbe-html](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/independent-review-of-the-uk-statistics-authority-uksa-2023/independent-review-of-the-uk-statistics-authority-by-professor-denise-lievesley-cbe-html)

### 8. Annual report on the functioning of the Statement of agreement for cooperation on future UK population and social statistics: 2024

[uksa.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/publication/annual-report-on-the-functioning-of-  
the-statement-of-agreement-for-cooperation-on-future-uk-population-and-social-  
statistics-2024/](https://uksa.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/publication/annual-report-on-the-functioning-of-the-statement-of-agreement-for-cooperation-on-future-uk-population-and-social-statistics-2024/)

**9. 2018 white paper ‘Help Shape Our Future’**

[www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-2021-census-of-population-and-housing-in-england-and-wales](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-2021-census-of-population-and-housing-in-england-and-wales)

**10. The future of population and housing censuses: prospects for the 2030 census round and beyond (PDF)**

[unece.org/sites/default/files/2022-09/WP5\\_UNFPA\\_CangianoJongstra\\_ENG.pdf](http://unece.org/sites/default/files/2022-09/WP5_UNFPA_CangianoJongstra_ENG.pdf)

**11. Population and migration statistics transformation in England and Wales, research overview: 2023**

[www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/internationalmigration/articles/populationandmigrationstatisticstransformationinenglandandwalesresearchoverview/2023](http://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/internationalmigration/articles/populationandmigrationstatisticstransformationinenglandandwalesresearchoverview/2023)

**12. National Statistician’s Data Ethics Advisory Committee (NSDEC)**

[uksa.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/the-authority-board/committees/national-statisticians-advisory-committees-and-panels/national-statisticians-data-ethics-advisory-committee/](http://uksa.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/the-authority-board/committees/national-statisticians-advisory-committees-and-panels/national-statisticians-data-ethics-advisory-committee/)

**13. What we know from engaging with the public on data: January 2025**

[www.ons.gov.uk/aboutus/usingpublicdatatoproducestatistics/peoplesattitudestodata/whatweknowfromengagingwiththepublicondatajune2023](http://www.ons.gov.uk/aboutus/usingpublicdatatoproducestatistics/peoplesattitudestodata/whatweknowfromengagingwiththepublicondatajune2023)

**14. Consultation on the future of population and migration statistics in England and Wales**

[consultations.ons.gov.uk/ons/futureofpopulationandmigrationstatistics/](http://consultations.ons.gov.uk/ons/futureofpopulationandmigrationstatistics/)

**15. A report on the consultation’s findings**

[www.ons.gov.uk/file?uri=/aboutus/whatwedo/programmesandprojects/censusanddatacollectiontransformationprogramme/futureofpopulationandsocialstatistics/getinvolved/2252nationalstatisticianrecommendationconsultationoutcomesreportenglishweba1.pdf](http://www.ons.gov.uk/file?uri=/aboutus/whatwedo/programmesandprojects/censusanddatacollectiontransformationprogramme/futureofpopulationandsocialstatistics/getinvolved/2252nationalstatisticianrecommendationconsultationoutcomesreportenglishweba1.pdf)

**16. The future of population and migration statistics in England and Wales (PDF)**

[consultations.ons.gov.uk/ons/futureofpopulationandmigrationstatistics/supporting\\_documents/Future%20of%20Population%20and%20Migration%20Statistics%20Consultation%20Document.pdf](http://consultations.ons.gov.uk/ons/futureofpopulationandmigrationstatistics/supporting_documents/Future%20of%20Population%20and%20Migration%20Statistics%20Consultation%20Document.pdf)

**17. Independent report on the 2025 UK Statistics Assembly**

[uksa.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/publication/independent-report-on-the-2025-uk-statistics-assembly/](http://uksa.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/publication/independent-report-on-the-2025-uk-statistics-assembly/)

**18. National Statistician’s Inclusive Data Advisory Committee (NSIDAC)**

[uksa.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/the-authority-board/committees/national-statisticians-advisory-committees-and-panels/national-statisticians-inclusive-data-advisory-committee/](https://uksa.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/the-authority-board/committees/national-statisticians-advisory-committees-and-panels/national-statisticians-inclusive-data-advisory-committee/)

**19. Letter from the NSIDAC to the National Statistician**

[uksa.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/publication/nsidac-advice-on-future-of-population-and-migration-statistics/](https://uksa.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/publication/nsidac-advice-on-future-of-population-and-migration-statistics/)

**20. Methodological Assurance Review Panel**

[uksa.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/the-authority-board/committees/national-statisticians-advisory-committees-and-panels/methodological-assurance-review-panel/](https://uksa.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/the-authority-board/committees/national-statisticians-advisory-committees-and-panels/methodological-assurance-review-panel/)

**21. Code of Practice for Statistics**

[code.statisticsauthority.gov.uk](https://code.statisticsauthority.gov.uk)

**22. Initial advice for the National Statistician from the Methodological Assurance Review Panel**

[uksa.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/publication/marp-advice-on-future-of-population-and-migration-statistics/](https://uksa.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/publication/marp-advice-on-future-of-population-and-migration-statistics/)

**23. In-Development Admin Based Census for England and Wales**

[app.integrateddataservice.gov.uk/data-catalogue/admin\\_based\\_census\\_experimental\\_england\\_wales](https://app.integrateddataservice.gov.uk/data-catalogue/admin_based_census_experimental_england_wales)

**24. The Copenhagen Framework on Citizen Data**

[unstats.un.org/UNSDWebsite/statcom/session\\_55/documents/BG-4c-CGD\\_Framework-E.pdf](https://unstats.un.org/UNSDWebsite/statcom/session_55/documents/BG-4c-CGD_Framework-E.pdf)

**25. Transforming the UK’s Evidence Base**

[committees.parliament.uk/publications/44964/documents/223187/default/](https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/44964/documents/223187/default/)

**26. A positive approach to parenting: Part 2 of the family independent review**

[assets.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wpuploads/2022/12/cc-a-positive-approach-to-parenting-part-2-of-the-independent-family-review.pdf](https://assets.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wpuploads/2022/12/cc-a-positive-approach-to-parenting-part-2-of-the-independent-family-review.pdf)

