

Jane Frost, Chief Executive Officer of Market Research Society Comments on ONS Census Decision

Contributed by Jane Frost - Market Research Society
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Jane was part of the consultation group advising the government on the retention of the 2021 census and its revised format.

“We should welcome the decision by the Office of National Statistics (ONS) to retain the Census. The UK census is invaluable to businesses and services, providing an authoritative and accurate data source for reliable, evidence-based decisions by both the public and private sector – whether that be funding for local healthcare services or the right locations to site new shops, cinemas, sport and leisure facilities so that they can thrive and best support economic growth. Such data lies at the heart of many corporate investment decisions. It could help a supermarket decide whether to stock a larger link of halal goods or more Polish food. A business could find out if there are enough graduates in an area to provide the skills it needs, or a telecoms company might decide whether to invest in broadband infrastructure. While the decision to move the Census to a predominantly online format is consistent with technological developments it is not without its risks. One of the benefits of the Census is that it provides solid evidential data to identify “hidden groups” in society, but these groups won’t necessarily have access to technology. The ONS also needs to ensure that the correct data protection and security measures are implemented to prevent data hacking or leaks. While the shift to online will make it easier for most people to fill out the Census, there is a risk of alienating households that don’t have internet access and older people who might be less familiar with technology. The quality and reliability of the data submitted will also need to be safeguarded against input errors such as typing inaccuracies or not filling out all forms online. Although the Census has been secured for 2021, there is a concern that the Government could then look to abandon it. Without the Census, we would create the conditions for an unknown “hidden” class to develop in the UK, causing the emergence of a society that is inadequately informed about excluded and isolated groups – people without bank accounts, who work cash-in-hand jobs and who don’t show up on the usual radar. We must know about these groups so we can adequately resource schools, clinics, hospitals and other services to provide for them and to ensure the system is not overburdened. We would also call on the ONS to protect trend data as it is only via trend data that we can identify if an issue is isolated or changing over time.”

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