After a year of living with the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, Census 2021 will be essential to our long-term understanding of the health, social and economic impacts on the people and households of England and Wales.

The census, taking place on 21 March 2021, will shed light on the needs of different groups and communities, and the inequalities people are experiencing, ensuring the big decisions facing the country following the pandemic and EU exit are based on the best information possible.

Our main focus in planning and delivering the census at this time is the health and safety of the public and our staff, and we are ensuring that everyone can be safely counted.

**Why the census is so important now**

The census is coming at a critical point. It will be fundamental to our understanding of the impact the coronavirus (COVID-19) has had on different communities and how we all live.

Information from the 2011 Census has already been crucial in our [understanding of mortality for different groups](https://blog.ons.gov.uk/2020/06/19/ethnicity-disability-religion-which-groups-are-at-most-risk-of-death-involving-covid-19/) during the pandemic, for example, to understand deaths by [ethnicity](https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/deaths/articles/updatingethniccontrastsindeathsinvolvingthecoronaviruscovid19englandandwales/deathsoccurring2marchto28july2020), [religion](https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/deaths/articles/coronaviruscovid19relateddeathsbyreligiousgroupenglandandwales/2marchto15may2020) and [disability status](https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/deaths/articles/coronaviruscovid19relateddeathsbydisabilitystatusenglandandwales/2marchto14july2020), and is the only source of local-level information on occupation and household composition. With fresh data from 2021, we will be able to update the analysis we have already done and use it alongside new data sources to give us the richest data we have ever had.

Census 2021 will not only provide a fresh picture of the population and our health – it will also shed light on social and economic changes to our lives. It will provide us with new information that we will be able to use for years to come. This information will inform decisions on public services, including hospitals, schools, universities and job centres, to meet the needs of our changing society.

**Safety of our people and the public**

We are committed to ensuring that everyone is kept safe as they take part in Census 2021 and we are continuing to monitor the pandemic and adjust our plans in line with the latest government guidelines.

We have designed Census 2021 to be simple, straightforward and safe to complete. This will be a digital-first census, and we will be encouraging people to respond online on their mobile phones, laptops, PCs or tablets with extensive online support, including help by email, social media, text message and on a webchat facility on our website. People can also complete their census over the phone, with the help of our trained staff, or by using the traditional paper form.

The main census field operation will begin only after Census Day. Field staff will never need to enter people’s houses; they will always be socially distanced, wear PPE and work in line with all government guidance.

The role of field officers is to give help and encouragement to those who have not yet filled in their census questionnaire online or on paper after Census Day and direct them to the support services they need. They will be operating in the same way as a postal or food delivery visit.

Census plans have often had to anticipate and respond to events; 20 years ago the census was delivered effectively during the foot and mouth crisis. Based on our contingency planning, our flexible operation, which can adapt to changing circumstances and the impact of lockdown restrictions and the vaccine roll-out over the coming months, we are confident Census 2021 will be successful and provide a wealth of data reflecting the society we live in today, enabling national and local government, community groups, charities and businesses to better serve communities and individuals across England and Wales.

**Considerations in deciding whether to delay**

We have been reviewing the delivery of the Census 2021 operation in light of the pandemic on a regular basis since March 2020, taking in expert views.

We have kept all options open throughout the decision making process, prioritising our ability to ensure the health and safety of the public and our staff. Consideration has been given to the fact that to delay would have meant waiting a whole year. This is because the census needs to take place in late March to allow sufficient hours of daylight for field officers to work, and avoiding periods when people are likely to be away on holiday. An added consideration is the cost of a delay which would have been approximately £360m, to take account of the need to repeat many activities already undertaken (for example printing) and extending contracts with suppliers and leases for equipment.