

Frequently asked questions about the 2011 Census

What is the census?

The census is an estimate of the population that is carried out every ten years. Everyone is asked the same questions on the same day so that a snapshot of the population can be taken at one point in time. This information is used to estimate the number of people and households in each area, and the results are used to plan the services and resources people need such as transport, housing, healthcare and education and to allocate funding. It is the only time every person and household is counted right across the UK.

When is the census?

Census day is Sunday 27 March 2011.

How often does it take place?

The census is carried out every ten years. The first census in England and Wales took place in 1801 to help plan for the future and has been carried out every ten years ever since (except in 1941 during the Second World War).

Who organises it?

In England and Wales the census is planned and carried out by the Office for National Statistics (ONS). Elsewhere in the UK, the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency and the General Register Office for Scotland carry out the census.

Why is it done?

The census results help government and local authorities to plan the services and resources people need, such as transport, housing, healthcare and education. The amount of money your council has to spend on these important services over the next ten years is directly influenced by population statistics from the census. That's why it is so important that everyone takes part.

What do I have to do?

You will receive a census questionnaire in the post. You can either complete and return this by post, or complete an online version of your questionnaire. The questionnaire should be completed on, or as soon as possible after, Sunday 27 March 2011. Most questions can be answered simply by ticking a box.

Can I fill it in online?

Yes. The 2011 Census will be the first to allow people to complete their questionnaire over the internet. Your paper questionnaire has a unique, internet access code to allow you to do this.

Why are there a paper and online versions of the questionnaire?

This gives you a choice about how to supply your information. For people who don't have internet access, or who simply prefer to complete it by hand, there's the paper version. This also has a code on it which you can use if you want to complete online.

Many people will find it faster and more convenient to complete their questionnaires online. The system will automatically skip any questions that don't apply to you – and gives you prompts and tips along the way.

Online help is just one click away. You don't have to complete everything in one go. Just save the answers you've given so far and come back to it later.

It's very convenient if you've a large household. As many as 30 usual residents and nine visitors can be included in the online questionnaire – far more than can be included on a paper copy. There's no need to ask for extra paper questionnaires.

The online questionnaire is useful for anyone who has difficulty writing down their answers – and it can be displayed in large print for people who are partially sighted. There's also accessible help providing video and audio guidance for all the questions.

It's faster, more accurate and easier for you to collect your data this way because you don't have to bother writing down your answers.

Is it secure online?

Your personal information will be kept confidential. Your personal census information is protected by the law. Completing the questionnaire online is a very secure process. Only you can access and complete the online questionnaire that applies to you. You're given a unique internet access code which prevents anyone else from seeing your answers.

What do I do with my paper copy if I have filled it in online?

If you choose to submit the questionnaire online you should be careful to destroy the address box and internet access code on your paper questionnaire before recycling it.

Does every person have to complete the questionnaire, or is it just the head of the household?

Every person living or staying in the household on census night must be included. It is the householder's or joint householder's responsibility to complete the questionnaire. The householder is the person who owns or rents the accommodation and/or is responsible for paying household bills and expenses.

There are 56 questions in total - 14 about the household and its accommodation and 42 questions for each individual member to complete.

Who should I include?

There are three sections to the questionnaire:

Questions about the household: This should be completed by the householder.

Questions about individuals: This should be completed for every person who usually lives in the household, even if they are away from home on the night of 27 March 2011.

Questions about visitors: These should be completed for all other people staying on the night of 27 March; all visitors should also be included as an individual on their own household's questionnaire. If visitors are not staying the night on 27 March, they do not have to be included on your questionnaire.

Should I include visitors to my home on census day?

Yes if they are staying the night on Sunday 27 March. Each adult and child needs to be counted, whether they are from another part of the country or outside the UK.

What if I live in a communal establishment such as a nursing home or university?

On 27 March 2011, if you have lived for six months or more in a nursing or residential home, a hotel, a university hall of residence, a boarding school, or a hospital, you will be given an individual questionnaire to complete by someone in your organisation, such as a manager. Once you have completed the questionnaire you should return it to the manager, sealed in the envelope provided. Separate arrangements are being made for other types of communal establishments such as prisons and military camps.

If you are only temporarily away from your permanent home (less than a year), you should also be included as a household member at your home address.

What if someone has a disability that makes it difficult for them to complete the questionnaire?

They should ask a family member, friend or carer to help. Video and audio help is available online and the paper questionnaire is available in Braille or large print versions.

What if a relative is in hospital? Should a nurse or carer complete the questionnaire for them?

If the relative has lived in hospital for six months or more, they will be given an individual questionnaire to complete by someone in the hospital, such as a manager.

If they are only temporarily in hospital (and have been there for less than six months) they should be included as a household member at their permanent or home address.

How long is it going to take me to complete it?

There are 56 questions in total and most can be answered simply by ticking a box. The questionnaire should take 10–20 minutes per individual to complete plus 20 minutes for the household questions. Plenty of help is available if you have any questions about the census.

What type of questions do I have to answer?

The questionnaire covers a number of broad topics: household accommodation; relationships between household members; demographic characteristics (such as sex, age and marital status); cultural characteristics (such as ethnic background, identity, religion and language); health, long-term illness and provision of care; migration; employment; qualifications; and workplace and journey to work.

Where do I go if I need help completing the questionnaire?

Plenty of help is available if you have any questions or have difficulty completing the questionnaire:

- Online help at www.census.gov.uk (English and Welsh)
- Census Helpline on
England: 0300 0201 101, in over 60 languages
Wales: 0300 0201 130
- Text Relay (for people with hearing impairment): 18001 0300 0201 160 (English and Welsh)
- Materials in large print and Braille formats from www.census.gov.uk (English and Welsh)
- Video and audio assistance at www.census.gov.uk (English and Welsh)

Can I get someone from the census to come round and help me complete it?

Yes. Just call the helpline to arrange a convenient time to visit.

What if I don't fill it in correctly?

There are many ways for you to get help if you have any difficulties with any of the questions. Any problems, just ask using the contact details above.

Is the UK the only country that has a census?

No. Some 200 countries carry out regular censuses. In fact, the United Nations and European Union encourage all countries to collect census-type information. Countries that do not take a traditional census use other sources of information such as population registers, often supplemented by other administrative records and surveys, to analyse and produce population statistics.

Do I have to complete the questionnaire?

Yes. You do. Everyone must take part in the census so that the results show complete and accurate information about the local community.

What happens if I don't?

Some areas could become under-funded, which would reduce or restrict public services such as education and healthcare. Everyone is required by law to complete a questionnaire and individuals may be prosecuted. There is the potential for a criminal conviction, criminal record and/or fine.

What happens if I'm not at home on 27 March 2011?

You should complete your questionnaire as soon as possible after Sunday 27 March 2011.

Anyone who usually lives in your household, even if they are away from home on the night of 27 March 2011, should be included.

If you are staying as a visitor in another household on census night, you should be included in their questionnaire as well as your own.

If you have visitors staying in your household overnight, they need to be included as a visitor on your questionnaire. They will also need to be included as an individual on the questionnaire for their own household

Why has Sunday been chosen for census day?

Sunday has been chosen because that's the day people are most likely to be home.

Do I have to send my questionnaire back on census day? Is there a time limit?

You should complete the questionnaire and return it on, or as soon as possible after, Sunday 27 March 2011.

If I fill it in after census day, do I have to complete it for the people who were in the house then, or on the day that I complete it?

You should include all the people who were in the house on 27 March 2011. Everyone is asked the same questions on the same day so that there's a snapshot of the population at one point in time.

What happens to the information I provide?

The information is collated into statistics about your community and groups within it. All personal information is strictly confidential. Your individual information is protected by law and will not be disclosed to anyone, including other government departments.

Where can I find more information on the data from previous censuses?

Further information can be found at www.ons.gov.uk or www.ukcensusonline.com