



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

Committee for Finance

# OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Census Order (Northern Ireland) 2020

18 March 2020

# NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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**Members present for all or part of the proceedings:**

Dr Steve Aiken (Chairperson)  
Mr Paul Frew (Deputy Chairperson)  
Mr Jim Allister  
Mr Pat Catney  
Ms Jemma Dolan  
Mr Seán Lynch  
Mr Matthew O'Toole  
Mr Jim Wells

**Witnesses:**

Ms Siobhan Carey	Department of Finance
Dr David Marshall	Department of Finance
Dr Tracy Power	Department of Finance
Ms Kathie Walker	Department of Finance

**The Chairperson (Dr Aiken):** I inform members that the Census Act (Northern Ireland) 1969 makes provision for the taking from time to time of a census of the population and housing and for otherwise collecting statistical information. The census is the largest and most complex statistical exercise undertaken by government, and it traditionally occurs once every 10 years. The rule is subject to the draft affirmation resolution procedure before the Assembly. This is the Committee's opportunity to consider the policies set out in the SL1. It is not possible to amend it once the rule has been made and laid in the Assembly Business Office. I draw members' attention to the following papers: the Clerk's briefing paper; the SL1, Census Order (Northern Ireland) 2020; the statutory rule and explanatory memorandum; and the 2019 proposals document from the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA).

**Ms Siobhan Carey (Department of Finance):** The draft order before you forms part of the legislative process to enable the 2021 census to be conducted. As you said, Chair, it is the largest statistical exercise undertaken by government. It is the most important source of information on the size and nature of the Northern Ireland population. Government, commercial businesses, professional organisations and the voluntary sector all use census information on the number and characteristics of our people and households. In the earlier session, I gave you an example of how it is being used today. Billions of pounds of public funding and resources are allocated using census information. It also provides the only source of comparable statistics for small areas and small population groups. In that sense, it is invaluable.

The primary legislation used is the Census Act (Northern Ireland) 1969. The Act prescribes:

*"First Minister and deputy First Minister acting jointly may by order ... direct that a census of population shall be taken".*

It is then for me, as Registrar General, to undertake the census. In doing so, I am supervised by the Department of Finance (DOF). David is responsible for the day-to-day managing and running of the census, and he will take you through the details of the order.

**Dr David Marshall (Department of Finance):** Chair, the order prescribes the date of the census, the area to be covered, the persons who have to complete returns, the persons who should be on those returns and the questions that should be answered. The order proposes that the next census be held on 21 March 2021, which is just over a year from now. The last census was held on 27 March 2011. The date chosen was influenced by a variety of factors: the tradition that it is carried out every 10 years; we want to maximise the number of people who are at their usual residence; we want, if at all possible, to avoid any elections because they create confusion and difficulties for everybody.

**The Chairperson (Dr Aiken):** We will try.

**Ms Carey:** Yes. Please do.

**Dr Marshall:** We want to ensure that there are daylight hours for the field staff who go out on the ground to support the people undertaking the census. Of course, the end of March suits that very well. The end of March date aligns Northern Ireland with the rest of the United Kingdom. It accords with past practice, and it gives rise to quite significant efficiencies for us. We have joint publicity with our colleagues in the Office for National Statistics (ONS), and we use the same systems and services, as I noted earlier. Many of the systems and services that underpin the Northern Ireland census are run through with our colleagues in ONS. A census is also planned for 2021 in the Republic of Ireland, for the slightly later date of Sunday 18 April.

The second aspect of the order details who should be included and, in particular, who is responsible for filling out the census. Every individual who is resident in Northern Ireland must be included. We also collect a subset of information on visitors to Northern Ireland — people who are here temporarily. We do that to make sure that we do not miss anybody, because, of course, we want to make sure that everyone is counted. Every household — we use the phrase "communal establishment" for nursing homes, student halls and those sorts of places — will receive a census questionnaire. We will make special arrangements for people from the Travelling community and people who are sleeping rough, to make sure that we count them.

It is the householder's responsibility to fill out the form for the house and to ensure that it is returned and completed accurately. In a communal establishment, it is the responsibility of the manager or person in charge to complete the form. That person is also required to make sure that there is an individual return for every member of that communal establishment.

The third aspect of the order relates to the information on the return itself — the questions that we ask. We have had extensive consultation on that over the last number of years. It began in 2014 with a formal paper noting plans for a census, and that was supported by the Executive at that time. We had two further public consultations, in 2015 and 2018, and five public meetings. Members of the Assembly were invited to and took part in those meetings.

We had responses from a variety of people and organisations. Some were very familiar with the census; some less so. We then had discussions with topic experts about what questions to ask. Key users such as partner Departments were also informed, as were academics, businesses, the statutory sector and the voluntary sector. We also met with our statutory statistics advisory committee, which also helped. Following this work, the Registrar General published her proposals on the census in April 2019. I believe that a copy of that document was provided to the Committee.

The size and scale of the census require us to undertake a dry run. Last autumn, we ran a dry run of the census — it is called a "census rehearsal" — in Fermanagh. I am proud of that because I am from Fermanagh. There are specific issues about Fermanagh, which you can ask me about later on. We also ran census rehearsals in Belfast and Craigavon. Such activities helped us to ensure that the census was, essentially, good to go. We want it to deliver consistent data.

**The Chairperson (Dr Aiken):** David, did you run that online as well, to test the IT?

**Dr Marshall:** Absolutely, and that is one of the reasons why we are providing mobile phones to our field staff. Of course, in west Fermanagh, we wanted to make sure that, given the border, all the roaming facilities worked well. The software for the field staff worked remarkably well. Although it is a UK system, it was written, would you believe, by a Belfast-based company?

**The Chairperson (Dr Aiken):** With Belfast being in the UK, that is not surprising.

**Ms Carey:** I did say it had a big tech sector.

**Dr Marshall:** That company is providing the software not only for Northern Ireland but for Great Britain. It is quite a remarkable achievement.

**The Chairperson (Dr Aiken):** There will be a question on this at a later point, but one of the issues that I raised, and I was not joking, is that we have real problems with broadband and data in rural areas in the rest of Northern Ireland. One of the things that we need to be sure about before saying that we are content with the order is that we are content that we will be able to gain the necessary information from the census.

**Dr Marshall:** We have specific arrangements. I will mention those as we come to that point.

**The Chairperson (Dr Aiken):** I am sorry for interrupting.

**Dr Marshall:** The particulars are in the draft order. Most were included in previous censuses. The particulars are the questions: your name, your sex and so on. There are about 42 individual questions, which is the same number as in the last census. The consultation suggested a number of new topics, but we also left out some 2011 questions.

The new topics include a new household question on renewable energy systems: whether the household has solar panels, a wind turbine and those sorts of things. There is a new adult question on apprenticeships completed. Finally, there is a new adult question on sexual orientation. The sexual orientation question in the census will have no penalty for non-response. We amended the Census Act last year, through Westminster, so that people are not required to fill out that question. There is a "prefer not to say" tick box for those who do not want to answer, and that has tested very well.

We want to manage the burden. Therefore, the questions in 2021 are no lengthier than those in 2011. Where there are other sources, we left out some questions from 2011. There are other sources for voluntary work, for example, so we did not have to include the 2011 question on that.

Before I get into the specifics of broadband and how we deliver the census, I reassure the Committee that we treat this information in the utmost confidence. We will never provide census information to anyone outside. We do so only in anonymised or aggregate ways for statistical information. We manage the conduct of the census, and we have a track record of doing that. We make sure that there is data security and confidentiality. That is the highest priority for me, to be frank. In doing so, we work, of course, with our colleagues in England and Wales in the Office for National Statistics, but we also work through the National Cyber Security Centre.

Just under 20% of the population will receive a paper questionnaire upfront. About 80% will have the opportunity to complete it online. Typically, those who get a paper questionnaire are people who, we believe, live in elderly households or in areas of the country where broadband or online facilities are not as good as elsewhere. We partitioned the country into two. Those who get an online facility only will, of course, be able to ring up and get a paper questionnaire if they want to. If, a few days after census day, we do not get a return from them, we will send them a paper questionnaire anyway. I just wanted to reassure the Committee about that.

We will start to appoint field staff, create enumeration districts and specify the questionnaire in detail in regulations that will come before the Committee after the order goes through the legislative process.

**The Chairperson (Dr Aiken):** Thank you very much.

**Mr Lynch:** Did you do your dry run over the whole county of Fermanagh or just a part of it?

**Dr Marshall:** We did it in the area from Belleek, Seán, right through to Belcoo and over to Derrygonnelly. It was over in west Fermanagh. It was about 4,000 households in total.

**Mr Lynch:** Did you fill it in?

**Ms Dolan:** I did not fill it in. I hope that somebody did. *[Laughter.]*

**Dr Marshall:** It was voluntary. The rehearsal is not compulsory, unlike the census itself

**Mr Lynch:** What did you learn from that, David? One of the big difficulties for us, as rural representatives, is access to broadband. I was going to ask you this earlier: what percentage of people in that field study, dry run or whatever you call it, were going to do it online?

**Dr Marshall:** In the rehearsal overall, just over two thirds of households completed online. That differed by area. In Belfast, it was done slightly more online; in Fermanagh, it was done slightly less online, although it was still over 50%.

**Mr Lynch:** What was the return? People knew that this was a dry run and did not take it as seriously as what will happen next year. Therefore, you will not have the same return as in a proper census.

**Dr Marshall:** It was made clear that it was a voluntary exercise. People were not required to take part, and some did not. It was about testing our systems and services as well as the questions themselves. We wanted to make sure that the online system worked, that people could fill out the paper questionnaires accurately, and that the field staff processes with the app worked well. All those elements were key to the process.

**Mr Lynch:** What avenues will you use to alert the public that the census is coming? We, as representatives, along with councillors and councils, could play a role. Will you run an awareness campaign a month or so beforehand? Will you run TV ads or whatever?

**Dr Marshall:** We have quite a significant publicity campaign. We tested some of that in the rehearsal, although not on the same scale. We ran ads in some of the local newspapers in Fermanagh, Craigavon and south Belfast. Social media is a big thing for 2021. In the rehearsal, some of the police's social media facilities were quite powerful. They were able to put it out that census enumerators and census forms were in these areas. Many people follow the police on social media, so that helped as well. We have a whole raft of advertising through social media, papers and television. We also have a raft of other exercises, including a community engagement exercise.

**Mr Lynch:** Finally, what is the accurate return on any census? Is it 90%, 95%, 100%?

**Ms Carey:** When you say "accurate", do you mean "optimal"?

**Mr Lynch:** Yes.

**Ms Carey:** We would like everybody to complete the census.

**Mr Lynch:** Yes. Do you have a figure of 98%, 95% or something?

**Ms Carey:** Our figure is 100%. Let us say that we were to get 98% overall. We would want to make sure that that was right across the board — that it was not 100% in one area and much lower in another area. The metrics on how it is going and the volumes coming in are critical. We are tailoring the messages and resourcing to make sure that it is not a case of everybody in one place but gaps in another.

**Mr Catney:** In the 10 years since the last census, have you had any breaches of your security data?

**Ms Carey:** No.

**Mr Catney:** Brilliant.

**Mr Allister:** Paragraph 2.5 of your proposals document talks about the address check that you carried out in 2017. The third sentence reads:

*"An 'on-the-ground' address check was carried out across 16,000 addresses in September 2017 to test the existing address register. An analysis of the results indicated that the address register, at that point, did not meet the required quality measures for accuracy or coverage and, consequently, NISRA plan to carry out an address check in advance of the census rehearsal and 2021 Census."*

When you road-tested it in 2017, it:

*"did not meet the required quality measures"*

What does that mean?

**Dr Marshall:** We create a register of addresses in the office before the census runs. In 2011, 2017 and 2019, the field staff each had an area to deal with. They get a list of addresses, and they go out and identify whether the list tallies with reality. In 2011, the figure work suggested that 4% of houses on the register should not have been there — for example, they had been demolished — and 3% of addresses were missing. I do not have the figures in front of me, but, in 2017, those figures were lower than 4% and 3%. However, the percentages were still sufficiently large for us to run another address check in the rehearsal.

**Mr Allister:** Is that anything to do with people claiming to live somewhere that they do not?

**Dr Marshall:** No. We have to take the register for the census about six to eight months before census day. As you can imagine, on the ground, we find houses that are being built during that process. We also get the addresses of demolished and dilapidated houses from which we do not expect to receive a return. They are on the register and should not have been there in the first place.

**Ms Carey:** It is more about the physical changes in the environment.

**Mr Allister:** What about the idea of people claiming to live at an address that, in fact, is not their address at all?

**Dr Marshall:** These would be people who live or do not live with parents. As I said earlier, we do this check after the census. We resurvey the houses door to door.

**Mr Allister:** Maybe a son or a daughter is working abroad, but the parents have put him or her down as living there when they are not.

**Dr Marshall:** We do a few things. We get an occasional duplicate on the census. Specifically, children of divorced parents can be recorded twice. If that happens, we make sure that the census database removes one of those occurrences. If the person is duplicated on the census, we can remove that duplication.

**Mr Allister:** What if somebody has an address in Donegal and an address in Fermanagh?

**Dr Marshall:** The rules for filling out the census are on the form and online. You are meant to record on the census the place where you spend the majority of your time. It is down to those rules.

**Mr Allister:** Have you any way of checking that?

**Dr Marshall:** Do you mean specifically with the Republic of Ireland or more generally?

**Mr Allister:** Yes.

**Dr Marshall:** We do not share data with anybody else. Therefore, we do not check it in that way. We have information about previous residents, and we identify whether people said previously that they lived in the Republic of Ireland. We do some checking to understand whether the figures feel accurate or inaccurate. The Northern Ireland census does not record second residencies and such things.

**The Chairperson (Dr Aiken):** When looking at the data sets and residencies, do you compare those against data from Land and Property Services (LPS) and Ordnance Survey, and map them out? Do you have an idea of the degree of statistical inconsistency in those data sets?

**Dr Marshall:** We work hand in glove with our colleagues in LPS, and we use Ordnance Survey maps to help us to deliver the census. You would expect me to say that our data is as good as we can make it. Our colleagues in LPS continually try to make sure that their data is accurate. We do our best to make sure that we cover across, but we cannot share census data with our colleagues in LPS. It is a statutory framework, and it is private. We cannot share that data with them.

**The Chairperson (Dr Aiken):** Elected representatives have all had problems with the Electoral Commission. Somebody comes to our office and says, "I do not appear on anybody's data set. I am trying to register to vote. I can't do it because my address does not appear", or whatever it happens to be. The number is relatively small, but it is probably statistically quite important. Have you experienced anything like this when doing test runs, particularly in somewhere like Fermanagh?

**Dr Marshall:** We share aggregate statistics with Ordnance Survey, LPS and the Electoral Office. After the last census, we were able to say, for example, that certain areas had accuracy issues. The issues are not the same across all of Northern Ireland. Our colleagues in Ordnance Survey were able to use that information to resurvey those areas to make the register as accurate as possible.

**The Chairperson (Dr Aiken):** OK. Thank you very much indeed.

I ask the Committee to agree that it has considered the Department of Finance's proposal for subordinate legislation — the Census Order (Northern Ireland) 2020 — and has no objections to the policy implication of the proposed legislation at this stage. Are we agreed?

*Members indicated assent.*

**The Committee Clerk:** Chair, now that the Committee has done that, it would be appropriate to write to the Committee for the Executive Office to inform it that this Committee is content. The Committee for the Executive Office will then consider the draft order with a view to agreeing that it be made.

**The Chairperson (Dr Aiken):** Are we content?

*Members indicated assent.*