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Dear Professor Sir Ian

## **CENSUS 2021: ACHIEVING AN ACCURATE ESTIMATE AND UNDERSTANDING OF CAMBRIDGE'S POPULATION**

I write to you to set out my concerns about the risks to the validity of the possible outputs from Census 2021 at this time of coronavirus lockdown. In my opinion, there is a risk that the constraints imposed by lockdown and the implications of coronavirus on migration and migratory workers/students may end up misrepresenting the demography of our dynamic city, now a decision to press ahead with Census 2021 has been taken.

I would like reassurance that the “missing people”, who would otherwise be included in normal times, are taken into account and that we will be able to have a say about the realism of any approach that is applied to account for shortfalls that will inevitably have to be made.

### **Cambridge as an outlier**

It has been acknowledged in recent years by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) that Cambridge City has a population that is difficult to estimate and we have looked to the Census to provide a “reality check” to help realign our mid-year population estimates to where we think they should be – recognising the city as a place of rapid growth and increasing diversity.

Our population is similar to inner London boroughs (and of course Oxford City) because we have high migration rates and population churn, a significant bulge in our young adult population people (aged 25 to 34 years), and high levels of private renting. We are truly an international city with migrants attracted to us in increasing numbers in recent years to enjoy our relative economic prosperity, academic opportunities and the high quality of jobs on offer here.

## **ONS population estimate methodology's perverse impacts on Cambridge**

Just prior to Census 2011 we were concerned at a new method for assessing the distribution of international migrants that had been incorporated into mid-year population estimates. This produced an estimate of 105,000 people in 2011 that we considered deeply flawed and seriously under-counting Cambridge's population at the time, causing us to make representations to get it corrected.

Fortunately, the Census 2011 population estimate put us back on track, to where we thought we should be, showing 123,900 people. However, the new method for estimating immigration that we considered flawed, at least in terms of our dynamic population, continued to feed into ONS population projections and estimates prepared for the city, effectively suppressing our estimated population growth against a new base derived from Census 2011 for the next ten years.

As evidenced by our administrative data and local and regional plans, Cambridge was and continues to be a "place of growth". Annual Monitoring Report data shows that 6,929 new homes were completed in the city between 2011-19, for instance.

Following our representations to Bob Neil MP, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State at the Department of Communities and Local Government in July 2012, we gained some reassurances from ONS that impending improvements to the estimation of student numbers and further refinements to the estimation methodology for migration may close the gap to where we thought we should be and bring about a realignment with local forecasts, incorporating our Housing Trajectory figures, provided by Cambridgeshire County Council's Research Group.

However, in the intervening period mid-year population estimates assigned to the city continued to flat-line and fail to recognise our growth – we consider them to be adrift by around 10,000 people - and whilst we have made further representations to point out the flaws, in partnership with Cambridgeshire County Council, we once again started to look to Census 2021 to make the necessary corrections.

If the Census 2021 had been able to go ahead as planned, with all the outreach and engagement work that ONS had planned, we would have been more confident that the outputs would help more accurately re-based our population estimates going forward and give us an updated insight into our increasingly complex and diverse population.

## **Coronavirus & constraints on engagement and field work**

With advent of coronavirus, however, we have become increasingly concerned that community engagement and fieldwork envisaged in the original planning for Census will be constrained by current restrictions including the current national lockdown. This creates the risk that it will not be possible to reach out sufficiently to our diverse resident population (one person in three is born outside the UK), for it to provide an accurate representation of either the number or make-up of our population.

The criticality of this has been illustrated very vividly during coronavirus when we have sought reliable data on which to contact vulnerable residents and communities with public health messaging and services relating to testing and vaccination. Given

what the research has shown about the disproportionate impact of covid on more deprived communities and the BAME population, it is essential that we are able to have good base data on which to determine for instance the take-up rate of the vaccine among BAME communities. The census has an essential role to play in creating this accurate picture – but in order for that to be the case, our view is that the full extent of engagement activities, as originally planned, would be needed.

Whilst Cambridge is a prosperous place overall not everybody in our communities shares in this prosperity and we have nearly one in ten households in the city living on benefits, where many people simply cannot afford the hardware or data packages to get online. We have an ongoing digital inclusion strategy and a number of anti-poverty initiatives to give a degree of support, in partnership with our community and voluntary sector.

But in the absence of face-to-face contact it will make it difficult to enable vulnerable people to get the support they need to complete an online by default Census and to plough through a paper copy – particularly where English is not their first language, or where there are other literacy issues.

The City Council is keen to do what it can to support Census completion but at the moment a great deal of our resources are directed at responding to the pressing needs of local people struggling to cope with the fall-out from this crisis. We want to better understand the needs of our disadvantaged communities and vulnerable people but feel this Census runs the risk of insufficiently engaging and reflecting these groups. This would leave them under-represented in any count, making it an unreliable picture of our situation.

This in turn would have serious implications for future years in terms of public services' ability to understand the local community and to plan for, target and provide the services that they need.

### **Migrant workers and overseas students - absence during Census 2021**

In addition, we believe that the issues we had previously raised, in tracking and reflecting migration in the city, both external and internal, in mid-year populations estimates will be exacerbated in this Census as many students (particularly international students, who will not be picked up by the census algorithm) have chosen to stay at home to study, deferred their study or been unable to gain access to the country to study.

Cambridge's student body is more than people in communal halls, so it isn't a matter of just counting bed spaces or people at home who should be at their place of study - many students, post graduates in particular, are tied into research centres or work arrangement and simply won't be here to take up a placement or may be difficult to reach.

This about more than migrant students though. The city, as place of world-leading enterprise and research, draws upon skilled people from around the world to work here. For the EU alone we currently have 24,000 people that have applied for settled status. Many, however, will have been unable to take-up opportunities in the past year due to covid restrictions, in a range of sectors from health and social care, science, entertainment and construction because of the pandemic restricting their

movement or the uncertainty around lockdowns deterring them from international travel.

### **Quality assurance and Cambridge's unique factors**

We have raised these matters in the Quality Assurance section of our Partnership Agreement and expect ONS to give them due regard. The particular international and dynamic aspects of our population will need to be recognised in order for our usual resident population to be properly reflected in final Census outputs, especially if the national modelling (on which we know Cambridge is an outlier) is applied. This is vital for us in restoring the shortfall in our population estimate, restoring trust in the population data and enabling a shared understanding of our population to be gained.

I would ask you to ensure that perverse counts are not provided as estimates for the city (and other places like us) and that our international employee and student absences and our vulnerable, hard-to-reach and hard-to-engage residents who may be excluded from the count due to the constraints on engagement, are properly taken into account.

Ideally, we would have preferred the census to be postponed until the coronavirus impediments were not so severe, perhaps in a year's time. I understand that is not now likely to happen but would suggest that you run a repeat census in say 2026 to ensure we have that fuller, accurate understanding of our changing, growing and globally-fluid population much sooner than having to wait to 2031.

I appreciate that these are difficult times and we are all doing the best we can but it is vital that an accurate picture of the city's population is achieved, so that resources, services and the fabric of the city can be planned for, provided and allocated in accordance with the true number and characteristics of our residents.

Yours sincerely



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Leader, Cambridge City Council