
Chair of the UK Statistics Authority, Sir Michael Scholar KCB

Rt. Hon. John Healey MP
Minister of State for Housing
Department for Communities and Local Government
Eland House
Bressenden Place
SW1E 5DU

8 July 2009

Dear Minister

ESTABLISHING A NATIONAL ADDRESS REGISTER

The statistical needs for a regularly updated address register are well established. It would greatly increase the value of the population Census and also make more achievable current proposals to replace future, very costly, censuses with other approaches to gathering the information required. It would also give much needed support to more accurate population estimates and also to other household data in non-census years. Without an address register we will never have continuously up-to-date knowledge of the size and distribution of the population.

I am therefore writing to you and other Ministers with an interest in the issue to set out why, in the view of the UK Statistics Authority, action is required.

The debate across government about a single national address register has gone back and forth in recent years. However, the need for such a register has continued to grow. The Statistics Authority believes that despite the pressures on public expenditure, indeed because of them, it is now time for the Government to take urgent action to create a single definitive register.

In a statement in the House of Commons in 2003, the then Minister for Local and Regional Government said that his department agreed with the need for an 'accurate address register'. However, the subsequent initiative, called the National Spatial Address Infrastructure (NSAI), failed to deliver. A DCLG press release in June 2007 stated that 'government departments are able to deliver their business without the NSAI'. It added that 'considering the competing demands on departmental resources, we have concluded that we should not carry out any further work on the NSAI at this time'.

In evidence to the House of Commons Treasury Committee's inquiry *Counting the Population* in 2008, a Treasury Minister made clear that competing intellectual property rights were at the heart of the obstacles to the NSAI. The Committee concluded:

"We heard repeated references to the necessity of establishing the register yet were surprised to hear that no business case had been published. We recommend that such a case is prepared engaging all potential beneficiaries. It is unclear whether leadership weakness, lack of legislative means or the financial obligations of the

trading fund status have contributed most to the failure. We recommend that the Government consult the Statistics Authority and others to remove any outstanding obstacles to the production of an address register.”

In its response, the Government said again that government departments are able to deliver their business without a national address register but went on to add that the Government would consider the possible wider use of the work ONS is doing to create an address register for the 2011 Census and the process and responsibilities for maintaining the data once collected.

This position was revisited most recently in the 2009 Power of Information Taskforce Report which argued that:

“The government should create a freely available single definitive address and postcode database available for the UK. Once created it should be made freely available for (re)use and maintained by the Ordnance Survey, Royal Mail and Local Government. This could be seeded by the census.”

The main reason behind the decision that ONS should invest a substantial budget in the development of a special one-off register of addresses was that it needed it for the Census: the existing sources of address data were some way short of the comprehensive and accurate coverage that was required for Census purposes.

The ONS work will lead to an improvement in national address information but unless the Government takes steps to build on it, the register will almost immediately become out of date again. ONS is not in a position to maintain a register for the longer term; it is not resourced to do so, nor is it part of its core business to maintain such a register. The necessary raw information comes from the Royal Mail, Ordnance Survey and local government administrative records. It is these sources that would need to be more effectively exploited by the Government Departments and Agencies whose core business this ought to be.

It seems likely that the development of a single comprehensive register would involve non-trivial costs. However, we are confident that there would also be substantial benefits in terms of the more efficient management of public services (e.g. the use for collecting local taxation, use by the emergency services, etc), as well as in the efficiency of many commercial activities, such as the operation of utility companies.

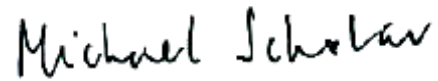
Government departments may be able to manage somehow without an address register. But there is no doubt that they would find it cheaper, quicker and easier to deliver their business with an address register, and that is the fundamental consideration here.

At the very least, a full and up-to-date business case needs to be developed, as the Treasury Committee recommended, such that all parties can see costs and benefits of an address register set alongside one another. In this, full recognition should be given to the aggregate benefit to local government, public services and the commercial sector in having reliable and comprehensive addressing information, and on the savings in time and effort currently spent on coping with less reliable information from multiple sources. As noted above, there would also be large and real benefits to statistical and analytical work, with improved population and migration statistics, local resource allocations and for policy and operational decision-making.

If we in the Statistics Authority are able to assist with the implementation of such a register, we will be glad to do so.

I am copying this letter to Angela Smith MP, Minister of State at the Cabinet Office; Phil Woolas MP, Minister of State for Borders and Immigration; Sarah McCarthy-Fry MP, Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury; Ian Pearson MP, Economic Secretary to the Treasury; and Tony Wright MP, Chair of the Public Administration Select Committee.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Michael Scholar". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Sir Michael Scholar KCB