

Senate Economics Legislation Committee, 21 October 2015
Australian Statistician, Mr David W. Kalisch opening statement

With less than one year to go until the 2016 Census of Population and Housing, I would like to update the Committee on Census preparations.

As you know, the Census provides a five-yearly snapshot of Australia's people and their housing. It helps estimate Australia's population, which is used to distribute government funds and plan services and infrastructure for all communities, across all sectors, including housing, transport, education, and health.

The ABS has a long and proud Census history spanning more than 100 years. In 2016, we are seeking to maintain our reputation as a world leader in Census taking and demonstrate ongoing innovation with our first predominantly digital Census.

Our preparations are on track and momentum is building as we accelerate preparations to count close to 10 million dwellings and approximately 24 million people in Australia on Census night. This is set to be one of the biggest online events in Australia, with 65% of households, or more than 15 million people, expected to do the Census online.

Our transformed operations will see most households across Australia receive an online login code in the mail. Of course, we also provide the option for people to request a paper form.

We will send reminder letters to give people as much opportunity to respond as possible, and only after this will Census field staff follow up with non-respondents. For the first time, our field staff will carry mobile devices that will allow them to receive and communicate information in real time.

All of this will make the Census considerably more efficient and accurate, and save significant taxpayer dollars. It will also be easier for people to complete.

We have tested this new approach extensively, with 100,000 households in 2014, and again with 35,000 households this year. The tests have confirmed our strategies and assumptions for 2016.

The 2015 test has also informed the final design of our household letters and envelopes, which are obviously critical to our new approach. I'd like to highlight our exciting collaboration with the CSIRO to apply behavioural economics principles to our contact material, making us one of several agencies leading the way in this field in Australia and amongst other national statistical organisations.

This is just one of many partnerships and collaborations that are being built and nurtured through the 2016 Census. The ABS is working with the ATO on the Census telephone inquiry service, partnering with IBM to develop the online Census form, working with the Department of Communications on the Address Register, and with National Archives to digitise the 99 year retention of Census data for those who opt in.

The next stage in our preparations is the development of a public communication campaign. High levels of public awareness of the new, fully digital model for the 2016 Census will be key to achieving our targets for a lower-cost, high-quality Census outcome.

This will capitalise on the already high levels of trust in the ABS, as revealed in a recent independent Community Trust and ABS Statistics Survey released just yesterday by the ABS as part of our contribution to World Statistics Day.

We know can rely on a high degree of community goodwill and support to ensure required rates of Census participation next August.

We look forward to the 2016 Census continuing to chart Australia's history and shape its future.