

Briefing Note – Super Output Areas

Super Output Areas (SOAs) are a new national geography created by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) for collecting, aggregating and reporting statistics.

Why Super Output Areas are required

Current geographies used for the analysis and presentation of statistics have a number of disadvantages which it is hoped Super Output Areas can overcome.

Electoral wards are poor for the presentation and analysis of statistical data as they vary in size across the country from less than 1,000 residents to over 30,000 residents. Ward boundaries also change over time causing problems of looking at time series.

Output Areas, the smallest geography for which 2001 Census data is available, similarly have disadvantages, including the fact that although they are good for detailed 2001 Census analysis, they are often too small for many non-Census data sources.

Super Output Areas overcome some of these issues:

- They enable comparison of areas of a similar size nationally.
- This new geography is much better at identifying the pockets of deprivation that are a feature of urban areas – pockets that can be overlooked if only looking at data at ward level.
- The boundaries are durable, enabling ready comparison over time
- The boundaries help to address some of the disclosure control issues, which can result from using smaller geographies.

Relationship between LSOAs, MSOAs and wards

SOAs are currently available at two levels – Lower Level and Middle Level – and are defined using groups of Output Areas. LSOAs nest within MSOAs and MSOAs nest within local authority districts. LSOAs are the only level which nest within ward boundaries. In Bristol MSOA boundaries generally don't fit to wards although there are four exceptions where the ward and MSOA have the same boundary – Southmead, Henbury, Stoke Bishop and Stockwood.

- There are 252 LSOAs in Bristol (32,482 in England) each with an average population of 1,500 people.
- There are 53 MSOAs in Bristol each with an average population of 7,200 people.
- There are 35 wards in Bristol with an average population of just over 11,000 people.

Naming Lower Level Super Output Areas (LSOAs)

- LSOAs all have a 'code' eg E01014688. All codes begin with E0101 and this indicates England and the first level of SOA
- More recently all LSOAs were given a 'name' eg Bristol0002A. This enabled LSOAs to be identified by which local authority they are in (unlike the code above). Example: Southmead names are Bristol0002A to Bristol0002G
- Finally all LSOAs have a 'local name' which has been agreed locally. These names hopefully make sense on the ground eg St Agnes in Ashley ward

Naming Middle Level Super Output Areas (MSOAs)

- MSOAs all have a 'code' eg E02003013. All codes begin with E02 and this indicates England and the second level of SOA
- MSOAs also have 'name' eg Bristol0002. Again this enables MSOAs to be identified by which local authority they are in. Example: Southmead MSOA is Bristol0002. This relates directly to the LSOA names which simply have a letter added to the end of the MSOA name
- Finally all MSOAs have a 'local name'. These names hopefully make sense on the ground eg Sea Mills

Use of Super Output Areas

The LSOA boundaries were used for the first time in the creation of the ODPM 2004 Indices of Deprivation. They have proved more successful in identifying pockets of deprivation within Bristol than using wards. More and more data is becoming available by both LSOA and MSOA rather than by ward. Examples include: unemployed claimants, DSS benefit claimants, population estimates. Other examples of use include Quality of Life statistics which are currently only presented at ward level – in future MSOAs may be used as an alternative geography. It would not be possible however to produce Quality of Life statistics at LSOA as the sample size is too small.

What next?

LSOAs were created by ONS using zone design software and were not subject to consultation. MSOAs were agreed following a period of consultation in 2004. ONS is reviewing the use of SOAs and may undertake a review of the boundaries in 2006.

Maps of LSOAs can be found on the city council web site:
www.bristol-city.gov.uk/wardfinder

For further information please contact:

Jayne Mills, Strategic and Citywide Policy

Planning Transport and Development Services, Bristol City Council

November 2005