



ONS Census Transformation Programme

The 2021 Census

Sexual identity research
and testing plan

May 2016

Research Plan for Sexual Identity

The Office for National Statistics (ONS) [2021 Census topic consultation](#) identified a clear need among data users for improved information on sexual identity, especially in relation to policy development, service provision and fulfilling duties under the Equality Act 2010.

[National Records of Scotland \(NRS\)](#) and the [Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency \(NISRA\)](#) are currently analysing the responses to their consultations on the topics to be included in their respective censuses. If similar user need is identified in Scotland and Northern Ireland, the three offices will work together to develop a joint research plan and to gather appropriate evidence to decide whether the census is the appropriate vehicle to collect this information.

In parallel with the development work related directly to the census, ONS is continuing work on developing outputs and analysis related to the data on sexual identity collected in the Annual Population Survey. For example, the published regional level data is stable over time and ONS is investigating combining several years' worth of data to produce local authority level estimates.

There are two strands of the 2021 Census testing and development work related to sexual identity. These will be carried out consecutively and will be completed by summer 2017. At this point, all of the evidence will be considered and a decision on the inclusion of sexual identity in the 2021 Census will be taken. This decision will form part of the recommendation to government and Parliament on topics for the 2021 Census. The third strand of work relates to the production of statistics on sexual identity from ONS Social Surveys.

Any change to the Census Act 1920 to enable a question on sexual identity would likely have to be made through primary legislation, as was the case when a religion question was added in the 2001 Census. Such primary legislation had to be passed by both the House of Commons and the House of Lords. Members of the House of Lords were concerned that the religion question could be seen as an infringement of respondents' civil liberties so it was decided that the question would be voluntary; this might also be necessary for any question on sexual identity.

ONS will engage with relevant stakeholders, including representatives of LGB groups, throughout the testing and development work. The results of this research will be published in due course.

Strand 1: Preparation for the 2017 Test:

| Task | Description | Target completion date |
|---|---|------------------------|
| <p>Run focus groups with members of the public to ascertain the current view on being asked a question on sexual identity in the census</p> | <p>Focus groups will aim to present and explore the general public's reactions to the initial proposals for asking a question on sexual identity in the census. In the focus groups the proposed design of the Census 2017 Test question (wording and administration design) will be presented to participants, and participant views sought and opened for discussion. Areas of interest include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • wording of the question stem and response categories • requirement to provide any explanation/guidance • acceptability of inclusion in census including discussion of making the question voluntary, mode of completion, data security and proxy response, and • placement of the question within the questionnaire | <p>April 2016</p> |
| <p>Review existing approaches to the collection of data about sexual identity in the UK and internationally</p> | <p>This work aims to further develop ONS's knowledge of how data on sexual identity is collected. Products of this work will include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • production of an overview document summarising the work of the Sexual Identity Project between 2006 and 2009 • a review of the data on 'Don't know / refusal' respondents in the Annual Population Survey • a review of surveys including a question on sexual identity to update the literature reviews produced as part of the Sexual Identity Project. <p>Separately, a comprehensive literature review of data collected on sexual orientation, including the component concepts of behaviour, attraction and identity, is currently being undertaken by Public Health England and the results from this will be published later in 2016. ONS will consider the implications of this review on its testing plans.</p> | <p>July 2016</p> |
| <p>Review the national harmonised standard question for self-completion to finalise a question for inclusion in the 2017 Census Test</p> | <p>This work aims to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • inform the suitability of the question for the 2017 Test, • help develop the wording and explanatory materials needed for the test, and • provide a body of evidence about people's views and understanding about the question that will help to understand the results from the 2017 Test. | <p>September 2016</p> |

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| | The work will include cognitive testing of the harmonised question on sexual identity in a census context to explore respondents' comprehension and answer processes. This will include further in-depth probing of associated topics such as acceptability and privacy. | |
| Investigate the public acceptability of asking a sexual identity question in the 2021 Census via large scale survey | This work aims to further develop ONS's understanding of the public acceptability of asking a question on sexual identity in the census. Areas of interest are as discussed above in relation to focus groups but will be refined in line with the conclusions of that work. | April 2017 |
| Engage with relevant stakeholders, including representatives of LGB groups | <p>This work will further develop ONS's understanding of users exact data requirements, for example the output categories required.</p> <p>Whilst initially this will involve meeting with identified stakeholders on a one-to-one basis this may also include follow up with focus groups with data users if required.</p> <p>This work will also include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • consideration of the work of Public Health England on producing sexual identity estimates by combining the data from a variety of data sources, and • assessment of the potential of administrative sources to produce data on sexual identity | September 2016 |
| Development of 2017 Test evaluation plan and assessment criteria | <p>One of the main aims of the large scale 2017 Test is to test the impact on response of the inclusion of a sexual identity question. In order to enable this assessment a robust evaluation plan and assessment criteria need to be developed. These criteria will, for example, consider impacts on:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • overall response • quality of response • assistance required to complete the census | October 2016 |

Strand 2: 2017 Test and Evaluation

The large scale 2017 Test will be a split sample test including about 100 thousand households; one of the main aims will be to test the impact on response of the inclusion of a sexual identity question. The details of the work to be done in this space will be developed as an outcome of the development of 2017 Test evaluation plan and assessment criteria.

| Task | Description | Target completion date |
|---|---|------------------------|
| Investigate if the inclusion of a question on sexual identity in one half of the 2017 Test sample has an effect on overall response | Evaluation criteria will, for example, consider if: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> the overall return rate is different in the two halves of the sample substantial field follow-up would be required to get a final return rate equivalent to not including the question the difference in return rates is shown to be affected by the characteristics of respondents (for example Communal Establishment residents) | July 2017 |
| Investigate the quality of response to the sexual identity question | Evaluation criteria will, for example, consider if the: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> online return drop-off rate is different in the two halves of the sample rate of missingness of the sexual identity question is higher than target quality levels agreement of responses in the evaluation survey (where a sample of respondents are asked the question again) is sufficient to indicate that accurate data is being collected (including where responses have been provided on behalf of another household member) | July 2017 |
| Investigate the impact on calls to the census helpline | Evaluation criteria will, for example, consider if: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> the inclusion of the question results in an increased volume of calls to the census helpline the inclusion of the question results in an increased number of individual forms being requested there are any adverse attitudes expressed via the helpline/online help, to field staff or from the media in relation to the question | July 2017 |
| Investigate reasons for not responding to the 2017 Test | Evaluation criteria will, for example, consider if: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> inclusion of the question resulted in non-coverage of individuals within responding households. non-responders' primary reason for non-response was the inclusion of this question. | July 2017 |

Strand 3: Development of statistics from ONS social surveys

| Task | Description | Target completion date |
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| Produce and publish latest sexual identity estimates, accounting for changes in source and back series | This work involves the continuation of production of sexual identity estimates based on the APS. It will include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • analysis to investigate moving from IHS Household Dataset to APS Person level Dataset with sufficient sample size and correct weights, producing back series to 2012 • production of January-December 2015 estimates plus back series (to 2012) • publication of estimates | October 2016 |
| Produce and publish sexual identity estimates at sub-regional (to local authority) level | Annual sample sizes from APS are too small to provide estimates at lower levels of geography for sexual identity. This work will examine the feasibility of combining several years' worth of data to provide a more robust approach. | September 2017 |

