

2021 Census

Sexual Orientation Topic Report

April 2019



Northern Ireland
Statistics and Research Agency

Gníomhaireacht Thuaisceart Éireann
um Staitisticí agus Taighde

1. Executive Summary

- Information on sexual orientation has not previously been collected in the census in Northern Ireland.
- A comprehensive process of user consultation, evaluation and prioritisation of user requirements, as well as qualitative and quantitative question testing, has been carried out to inform proposals on whether a question on sexual orientation should be recommended for inclusion in the 2021 Census.
- The 2015 Topic Consultation and subsequent stakeholder engagement have shown that there is a strong user need for this information to
 - inform policy development on both service planning and provision; and
 - monitor equality given obligations arising from Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.
- The question development process has identified that a sexual orientation question is generally acceptable to the public in Northern Ireland with the vast majority of the population indicating that they would provide an accurate response to a sexual orientation question.
- The findings from respondent research indicates that:
 - there will be no negative impact on census completion from the inclusion of a sexual orientation question; and
 - the acceptability of a sexual orientation question is highest for young adults with acceptability decreasing with age. Acceptability increases if the question includes a “Prefer not to say” option.
- To maximise response rates, given the sensitive nature of a sexual orientation question, it is proposed that:
 - the question is only asked of those aged 16 and over;
 - the question in Northern Ireland includes a ‘Prefer not to say’ option; and
 - there are mechanisms for those who wish to make an individual return as opposed to a household return to do so

2. Introduction

Information on sexual orientation has not previously been collected in the census. This Topic Report sets out the evidence gathered in developing a sexual orientation question for the 2021 Census in Northern Ireland.

3. Research specific to Northern Ireland

The Northern Ireland Statistics & Research Agency (NISRA) has conducted a range of research into the availability of statistical information on sexual orientation in Northern Ireland, and the development of an acceptable question for potential inclusion in the 2021 Census.

NISRA conducted a 2021 Census Topic Consultation between¹ late September 2015 and mid-December 2015. The Topic Consultation introduced sexual identity as a potentially new topic to be included, acknowledging that there was a user need for data to inform policy development and enable organisations to meet and monitor their statutory obligations stemming from Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998² and other relevant legislation.

The Topic Consultation revealed a strong user need for information on sexual identity but also noted concerns regarding individual privacy when responding to the census, the public acceptability of the inclusion of a question on sexual identity, the quality of the data that would be captured by the question and the potential effect of its inclusion on overall response rate.

Since then NISRA has worked with a range of Northern Ireland-based stakeholders and conducted research within Northern Ireland. The research on a proposed sexual orientation question was also carried out in a UK context with shared learning and experiences used. NISRA has worked with the Office for National Statistics (ONS), responsible for the census in England and Wales, and National Records of Scotland (NRS), responsible for the census in Scotland.

An assessment of the information that is readily available has shown that a question on sexual orientation is asked in several social surveys - the

¹ See <https://www.nisra.gov.uk/statistics/2021-census/planning/consultation/topic-consultation>

² See <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1998/47/section/75> and regulations made <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/nisr/2006/439/memorandum/contents>

Northern Ireland Omnibus survey and the Northern Ireland Continuous Household Survey (CHS)³. These asked respondents either 'how they think of themselves' or what 'best describes you'.

A question on sexual identity is also asked in the self-completion questionnaire of the Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey⁴.

The latest figures from the NI Continuous Household Survey and the NI Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey are shown in the table below:

	Northern Ireland Continuous Household Survey 2017/18	Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey 2017
Heterosexual/Straight	97.8%	97%
Gay/Lesbian	0.6%	1%
Bisexual	0.5%	1%
Other	0.3%	1%
Don't know/Refusal	0.7%	-

In July 2016, NISRA met with a range of stakeholders from across Northern Ireland including representatives from the Demographic Statistics Advisory Group, The Equality Commission and colleagues from the Department for Communities and the Department of Health. At that stage, the question discussed was the Government Statistical Service National Harmonised question on sexual orientation:

Which of the following options best describes how you think of yourself?

Heterosexual or Straight

Gay or Lesbian

Bisexual

Other, write in

Prefer not to say

The discussions established that there is also a need for information to inform work on health inequalities, including sexual and mental health services, and,

³ See <https://www.nisra.gov.uk/publications/chs-results>

⁴ See <https://www.ark.ac.uk/nilt/2017/Background/ORIENT2.html>. A sexual orientation question is also asked in the Labour Force Survey see <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/sexuality> for more information

given that sexual orientation is a 'Section 75' characteristic, it is needed for equality monitoring and service provision and delivery.

The discussions also suggested that any proposed question should retain a 'Prefer not to say' option to encourage response and that although there is a strong requirement for sexual identity information for those aged under 16, securing that information might be more challenging in a compulsory survey like the census.

In August 2016, NISRA met with representatives of the Rainbow Project and a range of representative groups including Stonewall to discuss these issues. The group were very keen to support the consideration of including a question in the 2021 Census and suggested that NISRA 'ask a straightforward question'.

In September/October 2017, NISRA conducted a Census Test, involving 15,000 households, to test a proposed sexual orientation question and to examine whether the positioning of a potential question on sexual orientation, before or after the two established religion questions, affected the response distributions. Findings suggest that the response to the religion questions was not affected by the relative location of a sexual orientation question.

In October 2017, NISRA hosted several focus groups to discuss a potential question on sexual orientation – all participants were aged 16 or over and they were grouped based on their sexual orientation and gender. The key findings were that the question would be welcomed, a 'Prefer not to say' option was required, that the question should be asked only of those aged 16 years or more, that the question should offer a write-in option and that the census should have a mechanism to support individual privacy when completing a household questionnaire.

4. Acceptability Research with ONS and NRS

In early 2017 NISRA joined ONS and NRS to carry out UK-wide research into the public acceptability of including a question on sexual orientation in the 2021 Census⁵. Up to two people aged 16 or over, in 5,000 households selected at random from across Northern Ireland, were invited to take part. The survey achieved a response rate of 20% across Northern Ireland.

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<https://www.ons.gov.uk/census/censustransformationprogramme/questiondevelopment/sexualorientation>

Overall, 79% of Northern Ireland respondents reported that they did not find the inclusion of the sexual identity question unacceptable – the corresponding figures for England, Scotland and Wales were 86%, 85% and 84% respectively. UK-wide figures indicated that the question was more acceptable for younger adults and that acceptability decreases with age. The UK results also showed that the inclusion of a ‘Prefer not to say’ option increased the acceptability of the question.

In addition, more than three in four (77%) Northern Ireland respondents reported that they would answer the question accurately. The main concerns of those who said they would not answer the question were around why the information was needed and that it was personal or private. As noted above, these concerns can be addressed by publicity and guidance surrounding the 2021 Census, the inclusion of a “Prefer not to say” option and the availability of individual questionnaires.

These findings suggest that the inclusion of a question on sexual orientation would not impact overall response rates.

In August 2018, ONS reported on their research into including the term ‘Sexual Orientation’ in the question stem of the Government Statistical Service National Harmonised question on sexual orientation. The final recommendation was that stakeholders supported the inclusion of the term ‘sexual orientation’ in the question stem and that its inclusion did not affect the response rate to the sexual orientation question or the distribution of response. The revised form of the question is:

Which of the following best describes your sexual orientation?

Straight/Heterosexual

Gay or Lesbian

Bisexual

Other sexual orientation, write in

Prefer not to say

NISRA will continue to work with ONS and NRS with the aim of ensuring that a harmonised question is used throughout the UK in 2021.

5. Position in the Republic of Ireland

In conducting the census, NISRA works closely with the Central Statistics Office, Ireland (CSO). A census is planned for the Republic of Ireland in Spring 2021 and to facilitate the development of a 2021 Census questionnaire a Census Pilot Survey⁶ was conducted by CSO in Autumn 2018. Whilst a question on sexual orientation was not included in the Census Pilot Survey, a question on sexual orientation has been introduced in household surveys in 2019⁷. Proposals for the content of the Republic of Ireland 2021 Census questionnaire will not be published until later this year. However, a sexual orientation question will not be included in CSO's content proposals as it has not been tested in the pilot survey.

6. Conclusion

NISRA has conducted an extensive research and testing programme into the potential inclusion of a sexual orientation question in the 2021 Census.

Research specific to Northern Ireland has shown that there is a user need for information on sexual orientation to inform work in a number of areas including equality monitoring and service provision and delivery.

The latest findings from social surveys indicate that there is a significantly sizeable population that are Gay/Lesbian/Bisexual and who would be willing to indicate this in official surveys. This would make measurement of the size of this population in a census viable and would provide data that would paint a much wider picture than could be achieved through survey data.

The research has also indicated that the most viable option is for the question to be asked only of those aged 16 or over and to include a 'Prefer not to say' option. These will address concerns identified about privacy and the potential that some respondents might not wish to answer the.

Research into the public acceptability of a question on sexual orientation in Northern Ireland has shown that the question is only marginally less acceptable in Northern Ireland than in the rest of the UK. The results also showed that the inclusion a 'Prefer not to say' option increased the public acceptability of the question.

⁶ See https://www.cso.ie/en/census/census_pilot_survey/

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https://www.cso.ie/en/media/csoie/census/census2016/pdfs/CAG_First_Meeting_Minutes.pdf

Research specific to the census questionnaire structure has also shown that the distribution of response to the religion questions would not be affected by the inclusion of a subsequent question on sexual orientation.

7. Recommendation

NISRA proposes that a question on sexual orientation should be included in the 2021 Census (question shown above).

The information gathered would provide a Northern Ireland-wide, definitive, baseline estimate of the population identifying as Straight/Heterosexual, Gay or Lesbian, and Bisexual.

This question should be asked only of those aged 16 and over and it should include a 'Prefer not to say' option. Concerns around privacy can be addressed by providing the option to request an individual online or paper questionnaire.

Census Office

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