

# **Scotland's Census 2021 Sexual Orientation Topic Report**

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## 1. Main Points

- Information about sexual orientation hasn't previously been collected in the census.
- The topic consultation and stakeholder engagement have shown that there is a strong user need for this information for:
  - equality monitoring,
  - service planning and provision, and
  - multivariate analysis.
- The question development process has identified that overall a sexual orientation question is acceptable and the majority of respondents would provide a valid response.
- No negative impact on census completion from the inclusion of a sexual orientation question was identified during testing.
- Acceptability of the question decreased with age and some respondents in testing said that they would skip the question but would continue to complete the census.
- National Records of Scotland (NRS) will carry out further work which will investigate improving the question stem by including the term 'sexual orientation' in order to reduce ambiguity. The terminology used in the response options will also be examined in order to ensure that it is easily understood by the majority of respondents.
- The digital first approach for 2021 requires further development and user testing to fully understand the best way to present the questions online to maximise response, minimise respondent burden and ensure good quality data which meets user needs. An on-going programme of question development, focusing on sensitive or complex questions will further inform the specific question wording.

## 2. Introduction

This topic review sets out the evidence gathered in developing a sexual orientation question for Scotland's Census 2021.

Question development for the 2021 Census began in 2015. An iterative and comprehensive process of user consultation, evaluation and prioritisation of user requirements, and qualitative and quantitative question testing has been carried out to inform decisions on the questions to be recommended for inclusion in the 2021 Census. More information about [research and preparation](#) and [question development](#) for Scotland's Census 2021 can be found online.

The 2021 Census will be digital first. The Census 2021 questionnaire must gather high quality data that meets user needs. More information about [key elements of the design](#) for 2021 can be found online.

Two frameworks have been published by National Records of Scotland (NRS) to evaluate the effectiveness of [question design for existing, alternative and new questions](#) (PDF) and to evaluate the effectiveness of [question design of tick box response options](#) (PDF).

Questions and their response options are evaluated against five main themes:

### Strength of user need

- ✓ Data collected by the census must meet a user need for equality monitoring, policy development, resource allocation and/or service planning and delivery.

### Suitability of alternative sources

- ✓ Data collected by the census must meet a user need that cannot be met elsewhere.

### Acceptability, clarity and data quality

- ✓ Questions asked in the census must be acceptable to the majority of the public, clear and be designed with minimal respondent burden in order to obtain good data quality that meets user needs.

### Comparability

- ✓ Data collected by the census should be comparable over time where possible, and harmonised across the UK where reasonable.

### Operational considerations

- ✓ Census questions must be considered as part of the census as a whole, where effective digital and paper design, space and financial constraints must be considered. Additionally, some questions may be required for operational purposes in the process of conducting the census.

The final decision on the content of Scotland's Census 2021 questionnaire will ultimately be made by the Scottish Parliament.

As in previous years, there will be separate censuses conducted by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) in England and Wales, and the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) in Northern Ireland. The three census offices work together to develop a set of questions that, wherever possible and necessary, will deliver harmonised outputs across the UK.

### 3. Background

#### 3.1 ONS Sexual Identity Project

The ONS Sexual Identity Project was established in 2006 to meet user requirements for information on sexual identity. The project had three main objectives: question development, question testing and implementation and guidance. This was a high-priority project for ONS, involving consultation within and outside government, including academics, non-governmental organizations and lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) groups.

The evidence from the various stages of the project have been consolidated into one document with the aim of providing guidance to both users of sexual identity statistics and those organisations collecting data on sexual identity.

[‘Measuring sexual identity: A guide for researchers’](#) was published in May 2009.

The ONS sexual identity question is now a national harmonised standard.

It should be noted that until 2018 the terminology used in England and Wales was ‘sexual identity’ whereas the term ‘sexual orientation’ is preferred and used in Scotland.

#### 3.2 Scotland's Census 2011

A case was put forward for a question on sexual orientation to be included in the 2011 Census in Scotland. A primary driver for this was the need for data to baseline the monitoring of equality legislation which came into effect in 2010. The General Register Office for Scotland (GROS), now NRS, conducted a small-scale postal survey in September 2005 as a first step to understand public attitudes to a sexual orientation census question and the feasibility of including it.

The results of this 2005 testing showed that the percentage of respondents who did not provide useful data outweighed the percentage of respondents who declared a non-heterosexual sexual orientation. The survey results called into question the accuracy of data gathered by such a question and hence the utility of any such data.

In 2007, GROS consulted users on the topics to be included in Scotland's Census 2011. In the consultation GROS acknowledged that there was an increasing demand for information on sexual orientation but noted in the consultation document that it did not plan to ask a question on this topic in the 2011 Census. The reasons for this were based around GROS' concerns about asking the question in a survey like the census, which may be completed by one household member for all other household members, potentially leading to inaccurate replies or pressure on individuals to disclose information they would prefer not to. There were also concerns that sensitivities around this topic might also lead to reduced census response rates if such a question were included.

The [2007 topic consultation](#) indicated a strong interest in information on sexual orientation, in order to provide a benchmark against which equality monitoring policies could be better assessed and to give sexual orientation the same status as the other equality characteristics, which did have questions in the census.

Despite this response to the topic consultation, a question on sexual orientation was not included in the [Recommendation for Content for Scotland's Census 2011](#). This was because of concerns about individual privacy and the public acceptability of including a question in a compulsory household survey. Following the results of the 2005 postal survey, there were also concerns about the quality of the data that would be produced.

### 3.3 Alternative sources

Since 2012, a set of core questions has been used to provide information on the composition, characteristics and attitudes of Scottish households and adults across a number of topic areas through the three largest surveys in Scotland:

- the [Scottish Household Survey](#) (SHS)
- the [Scottish Health Survey](#) (SHeS)
- the [Scottish Crime and Justice Survey](#) (SCJS)

A set of core and harmonised questions is recommended in order to provide comparable estimates across Scotland. More information can be found on the Scottish Government website ([Core Survey Questions](#)). The Scottish Government also produce guidance for [collecting equality information](#), including sexual orientation.

Sexual orientation is a core survey question in Scotland.

The core survey question asks “Which of the options best describes how you think of yourself?” with the following response options:

- Heterosexual/Straight
- Gay/Lesbian
- Bisexual
- Other
- Refused/prefer not to say

### 3.4 Question format

In order to maximise survey response rates, sensitive or personal questions such as sexual orientation, should be optional. There are two formats which provide the respondent with the ability to ‘opt out’. A question may be ‘truly voluntary’ which enables the respondent to choose whether or not they provide an answer. The inclusion of a ‘prefer not to say’ response option in a mandatory question is the alternative method of providing the ‘opt out’.

There is a precedent to asking a truly voluntary question in the census. In 2001 there were two religion questions introduced into Scotland's Census. These questions were included on a voluntary basis and thus required an amendment to the Census Act 1920.

The proposed sexual orientation question for 2021 has been tested as a voluntary question. The voluntary or mandatory status of a question will be for Scottish Parliament to decide.

#### 4. Understanding user need

NRS invited views in the [Scotland's Census 2021 – Topic Consultation](#) (PDF) between 8 October 2015 and 15 January 2016. The consultation was a key step towards understanding what information users will need from the census in 2021, and helped to build strong cases to justify the inclusion of topics. The focus of the consultation was on information required at topic-level, not the detail of the questions that should be asked on the questionnaire.

Following the consultation, NRS worked closely with stakeholders through follow-up events, meetings, focus groups and online surveys to gather more detailed information about data requirements to ensure user needs were understood. Information about these events can be found on our [Get Involved pages](#) online.

There were 31 responses received through the topic consultation on the subject of sexual orientation. A summary of these responses can be found in the [Topic Consultation Report](#) (PDF). In this report, NRS acknowledged the strength of user need which exists for the collection of information on sexual orientation and concluded that further work was required to understand whether including a question in the census is the most appropriate way of collecting the information. NRS committed to undertake question and public acceptability testing to help inform a decision on whether a question should be recommended for inclusion in the census in 2021 and to consider whether alternative ways of meeting the user need exist.

A [Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Stakeholder Event](#) was held on 24 January 2017. A summary of this event is available on the Scotland's Census website.

From the consultation and the event stakeholders identified the following reasons for requiring information on sexual orientation from the 2021 Census:

- Sexual orientation is a protected characteristic as set out in the Equality Act 2010. The main requirement identified in the Scotland's Census 2021 Topic Consultation Report is in relation to the monitoring and reporting duties for public bodies in that respect;
- Information is also required to inform equality impact assessments, which in turn inform policies and practices.
- The Equalities and Human Rights Commission require this information to use in a statutory review of equality and human rights, which is carried out every five years;
- Respondents noted a requirement to undertake analysis of sexual orientation in relation to a number of other characteristics;
- Respondents noted a requirement for data on areas below local authority level for use in service planning and monitoring as existing sources do not deliver this due to sample sizes.

## 5. Question testing

This section provides evidence from the question testing process carried out by NRS during question development for Scotland's Census 2021.

Both cognitive and quantitative testing processes were used in developing census questions. In addition, public acceptability testing was undertaken where relevant.

1. Public acceptability testing is undertaken primarily to ascertain the acceptability of asking a question, whether respondents would answer the question for themselves, or on behalf of others in their household, and the impact on overall response of inclusion of sensitive questions.
2. Cognitive testing is a form of in-depth interviewing with a small number of respondents. It aims to provide an insight into the mental processes respondents use when answering questions. This helps us to identify if there are any problems with a question or question design and gain an insight into the source of any difficulty respondents are having.
3. Quantitative testing is undertaken primarily to identify data quality concerns. NRS included feedback questions in the quantitative testing in order to gather further information on public acceptability and to identify specific difficulties respondents faced if they were unable to answer a question easily.

In 2017, Ipsos MORI carried out public acceptability testing for the sexual orientation topic for the 3 UK census offices. Full details on the methodology and results for Scotland are available in Annex A.

In 2017 NRS commissioned ScotCen Social Research to conduct cognitive and quantitative testing of selected questions for potential inclusion in Scotland's Census 2021. Information about this testing can be found in the [2017 Cognitive and Quantitative Testing Report](#) (PDF).

### 5.1 Public acceptability testing

Public acceptability testing of a sexual orientation question explored acceptability to respondents responding on their own behalf, responding by proxy (for other members of the household), others responding on your behalf, and acceptability of asking sensitive questions of those aged under 16 years. The testing explored the impact of including a question on sexual orientation on item non-response, and on completion of the census.

The survey methodology, questionnaire, and subsequent analysis, were designed to address a number of specific research questions:

1. Would participants answer a question on sexual orientation if it was included in the 2021 Census for usual residents aged 16 and over living in households?
2. Would they answer the amended national harmonised standard question?
3. Specifically, would participants be willing:

- To answer on their own behalf?
  - To answer on behalf of any other household members aged 16 and over?
  - For any other household members aged 16 and over to answer on their behalf?
4. If the question included a 'Prefer not to say' response option would this affect respondents' behaviour (i.e. make it any more acceptable)?
  5. What are the reasons for not answering, for those who would not answer questions?

*Figure 1: The amended national harmonised standard question, as presented in the sexual orientation public acceptability testing questionnaire*

16 If you are aged 16 or over → Go to 17  
If you are aged 15 or under → Go to 19

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

This question is voluntary

Heterosexual or Straight

Gay or Lesbian

Bisexual

Other, write in

Public acceptability testing identified that while the majority (63%) of the general public in Scotland considered it acceptable for the amended national harmonised standard sexual orientation question to be asked in the next census, a notable minority said that it was not acceptable (15%). Nonetheless, 78% of respondents said they would answer the question accurately if it was included in the 2021 Census.

Opinions on the inclusion of a sexual identity question varied notably with age. Almost a quarter of those aged 65-74 (27%) or 75 or over (30%) indicated that a question of this nature was unacceptable, in comparison with smaller proportions of those aged 25-34 (4%) or 35-44 (11%). To highlight this point, just 44% of those aged 75 or over found the inclusion of a sexual identity question acceptable (compared to 63% overall).

Overall, 14% of the public said they would not answer a sexual orientation question if it was included in the 2021 Census. The majority of these (13% of the population) said they would skip the question and continue completing the rest of the form. Only a very small proportion of participants said that they would request an individual form (less than 1%) or stop completing the census altogether.



Cognitive testing identified that:

- All participants were able to answer the sexual orientation question, and almost all participants reported finding the question acceptable and clear.
- A small number of participants described the question as unclear during cognitive interviewing, and therefore difficult to answer. It was noted that the question stem wording was ambiguous, as it didn't mention sexuality or sexual orientation at all, and the question's meaning had to be deduced from the answer categories themselves. Despite reporting that the question felt ambiguous and indirect, there was no evidence of participants giving incorrect answers.
- Whilst all participants were able to choose an answer, some felt they were not entirely satisfied with the answers they gave. Some participants wanted the ability to tick more than one response option, and for other members of the transgender community not having a fixed, binary understanding of gender made labelling their sexual orientation difficult.

### 5.3 Quantitative testing

One question on sexual orientation was included in the individual section of the questionnaire for testing.

#### Sexual orientation 2017 test (paper and online)

**Q13. Which of the following options describes how you think of yourself?**

- This question is voluntary
- Select **one** only

- Heterosexual or Straight
- Gay or Lesbian
- Bisexual
- In another way, please enter:

◀ Previous   Stop ■   Next question ▶



- Of those who did not provide a response to the sexual orientation question, the majority (around 74%) were participants who had fully completed the questionnaire (compared with 26% per cent who had partially completed<sup>1</sup>) - this indicates that, more commonly, not disclosing sexual orientation was the result of participant choice, and not questionnaire 'drop-out'.

## 6. Conclusion

The question development process has identified that overall a sexual orientation question is acceptable and the majority of respondents would provide a valid response. Acceptability of the question decreased with age and some respondents in testing said that they would skip the question but would continue to complete the census. There were also some concerns around question ambiguity as the question stem does not mention the term 'sexual orientation'.

Research and analysis does support taking a question on this subject further at this stage

## 7. Next Steps

NRS are continuing question development of a full question set for the 2021 Census and will be considering questionnaire design and respondent burden. The final decision on the content of Scotland's Census 2021 questionnaire will ultimately be made by the Scottish Parliament.

NRS will carry out further work which will investigate improving the question stem by including the term 'sexual orientation' in order to reduce ambiguity. The terminology used in the response options will also be examined in order to ensure that it is easily understood by the majority of respondents.

The digital first approach for 2021 requires further development and user testing to fully understand the best way to present the questions online to maximise response, minimise respondent burden and ensure good quality data which meets user needs. An on-going programme of question development, focusing on sensitive or complex questions will further inform the specific question wording.

More information about preparation for Scotland's Census 2021 and details about upcoming events can be found on the [Scotland's Census website](#), by subscribing to the [Scotland's Census newsletter](#) and following us on Twitter [@NatRecordsScot](#).

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<sup>1</sup> Fully completed indicates a case where a participant has completed a questionnaire including some or all questions beyond Q12 Marital status. A partially completed questionnaire indicates a case where the participant has stopped completing the questionnaire at or before Q13.

## Annex A: Public acceptability testing for the sexual orientation question

Following the 2021 Census topic consultation, which identified a clear data need for improved information on sexual orientation, NRS commissioned Ipsos MORI to undertake a survey of the public in Scotland to explore the acceptability of including a sexual orientation question in the 2021 Census.

### 1. Question tested and measurement aims

The primary aim of the survey was to explore the acceptability of the inclusion of a sexual orientation question in the 2021 Census. The research explored whether participants would answer a question on sexual orientation (an amended version of the national harmonised standard question) if included and whether participants might wish to request an individual form or stop completing the census form entirely.

Figure A1: The amended national harmonised standard question

16 If you are aged 16 or over → Go to 17  
If you are aged 15 or under → Go to 19

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

This question is voluntary

Heterosexual or Straight

Gay or Lesbian

Bisexual

Other, write in

The survey questionnaire also explored whether participants would be willing to answer on behalf of any other household members aged 16 and over. It also explored whether participants would be willing for any other household members aged 16 and over to answer such a question on their behalf. For participants who indicated that they would not answer the sexual orientation question in the census form, reasons for not answering were explored.

Survey fieldwork took place between 14 January 2017 and 20 March 2017 and used a push-to-web methodology – a sequential mixed modes design: with online, followed by paper, thus replicating the planned ‘online first’ census methodology.

The overall response rate, excluding multiple responses from households, was 22% (1,114 responses).

## 2. Results

It should be remembered that the survey findings are based on a sample of adults in Scotland, rather than the entire population. Therefore, results are subject to sampling tolerances, and not all differences are statistically significant.

The survey dataset was weighted to ensure that it is representative of the usually resident population of adults aged 16 and over in Scotland. Data were weighted by age and sex using the 2015 annual mid-year population estimates.

Where percentages in the tables do not sum to 100, this is due to computer rounding or because questions allow multiple answers. An asterisk (\*) denotes any value of less than half of 1%, but greater than zero. A dash (-) denotes a value of zero.

The analysis is based on a single response per household. Where more than one response from an individual household was received, one response was selected at random to be included in the dataset.

*Table A1: Acceptability of including a sexual orientation question in the census in Scotland*

Country	Scotland
Base: All participants	1,114
<b>Very acceptable</b>	25%
<b>Acceptable</b>	38%
<b>Undecided</b>	18%
<b>Not acceptable</b>	8%
<b>Not at all acceptable</b>	7%
<b>Not stated</b>	3%
<b>Total</b>	100%

*Table A2: Acceptability of including sexual orientation question in the census in Scotland by age*

Age	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65-74	75+
Base: All participants	86	117	192	256	273	210
<b>Very acceptable</b>	34%	26%	27%	24%	17%	12%
<b>Acceptable</b>	47%	44%	35%	34%	36%	32%
<b>I am undecided</b>	15%	20%	21%	18%	17%	20%
<b>Not acceptable</b>	2%	4%	9%	13%	11%	16%
<b>Not at all acceptable</b>	2%	7%	7%	8%	16%	14%
<b>Not stated</b>	-	-	1%	2%	3%	6%
<b>Total</b>	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

*Table A3: Reported response to a sexual orientation question in Scotland*

Country	Scotland
Base: All participants	1,114
<b>I would answer accurately and continue to complete the household form</b>	78%
<b>I would answer inaccurately and continue completing the household form</b>	*
<b>I would skip the question and continue completing the household form</b>	13%
<b>I would stop completing the household form and request an individual form to complete</b>	*
<b>I would stop completing the household form and not submit the Census form altogether</b>	1%
<b>Other</b>	*
<b>Don't know</b>	*
<b>Not stated</b>	7%
<b>Total</b>	100%

*Table A4: Reported response to the sexual orientation question in Scotland by age*

Age	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65-74	75+
Base: All participants	86	117	192	256	273	210
<b>Would answer the question accurately and continue completing the household form</b>	92%	88%	79%	77%	69%	62%
<b>Would answer inaccurately and continue completing the household form</b>	-	1%	-	-	-	-
<b>Would skip the question and continue completing the household form</b>	2%	8%	16%	17%	20%	20%
<b>Would stop completing the household form and request an individual form</b>	-	-	-	-	-	-
<b>Would stop completing the household form and not submit the census form</b>	-	1%	1%	2%	2%	4%
<b>Other</b>	1%	-	1%	-	3%	-
<b>Not stated</b>	5%	3%	3%	4%	6%	14%
<b>Total</b>	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

*Table A5: Reasons for not answering a sexual orientation question in Scotland <sup>2</sup>*

Country	Scotland
Base: All participants who would not answer the question	212
<b>The information is personal and private</b>	57%
<b>I have concerns about the security of the information I provide</b>	20%
<b>I cannot see why the information is needed</b>	66%
<b>I would be worried a member of the household will see my answer</b>	2%
<b>I would be worried my answer might go against me in some way</b>	5%
<b>I do not understand the question</b>	2%
<b>I do not agree with the concept of alternative sexual identity</b>	-

<sup>2</sup> Data for this question sum to more than 100%, as participants could select more than one response.

*Table A6: Acceptability of including a sexual orientation question in Scotland with and without a 'prefer not to say' option*

	Base: All	Very acceptable	Acceptable	I am undecided	Not acceptable	Not at all acceptable	Not stated	Total
<b>Without 'Prefer not to say' response option</b>	1,167	25%	40%	19%	8%	7%	3%	100%
<b>With 'Prefer not to say' response option</b>	1,167	29%	40%	11%	7%	5%	8%	100%

*Table A7: Acceptability of answering a sexual orientation question in Scotland on behalf of other household members aged 16 and over*

Country	Scotland
Base: All who live with others aged 16 and over	577
<b>Very acceptable</b>	23%
<b>Acceptable</b>	38%
<b>I am undecided</b>	15%
<b>Not acceptable</b>	15%
<b>Not at all acceptable</b>	5%
<b>Not stated</b>	4%
<b>Total</b>	100%

*Table A8: Reported accuracy of answering a sexual orientation question in Scotland on behalf of other household members aged 16 and over*

Country	Scotland
Base: All who live with others aged 16 and over	577
<b>Could answer accurately for all members of household</b>	80%
<b>Could answer accurately for some but not all members of household</b>	6%
<b>Could not answer accurately for any members of household</b>	9%
<b>Unsure</b>	4%
<b>Not stated</b>	1%
<b>Total</b>	100%

*Table A9: Comfort answering a sexual orientation question in Scotland on behalf of other household members aged 16 and over*

Country	Scotland
Base: All who live with others aged 16 and over	577
<b>Very comfortable</b>	51%
<b>Fairly comfortable</b>	21%
<b>I am undecided</b>	6%
<b>Not very comfortable</b>	11%
<b>Not at all comfortable</b>	10%
<b>Not stated</b>	1%
<b>Total</b>	100%

*Table A10: Acceptability of responding to a sexual orientation question in Scotland on behalf of other household members by age*

Age	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65-74	75+
Base: All who live with others aged 16 and over	52	67	124	164	139	61
<b>Very acceptable</b>	32%	20%	19%	27%	15%	7%
<b>Acceptable</b>	46%	50%	33%	30%	45%	33%
<b>Undecided</b>	12%	18%	22%	14%	9%	20%
<b>Not acceptable</b>	6%	8%	19%	18%	12%	20%
<b>Not at all acceptable</b>	4%	2%	5%	7%	9%	7%
<b>Not stated</b>	-	2%	3%	4%	9%	13%
<b>Total</b>	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

*Table A11: Acceptability of other household members, aged 16 and over, answering a sexual orientation question in Scotland on behalf of respondent*

Country	Scotland
Base: All who live with others aged 16 and over	577
<b>Very acceptable</b>	29%
<b>Acceptable</b>	34%
<b>I am undecided</b>	12%
<b>Not acceptable</b>	12%
<b>Not at all acceptable</b>	7%
<b>Not stated</b>	5%
<b>Total</b>	100%

*Table A12: Reported accuracy of other household members, aged 16 and over, answering a sexual orientation question in Scotland on behalf of respondent*

Country	Scotland
Base: All who live with others aged 16 and over	577
<b>All members of household could answer accurately</b>	83%
<b>Some members of household could answer accurately</b>	5%
<b>No members of household could answer accurately</b>	4%
<b>Unsure</b>	3%
<b>Not stated</b>	5%
<b>Total</b>	100%

*Table A13: Comfort with other household members, aged 16 and over, answering a sexual orientation question in Scotland on behalf of respondent*

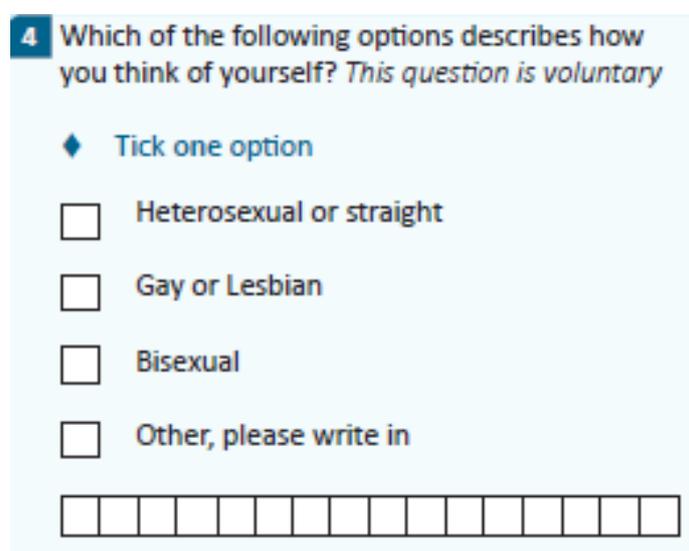
Country	Scotland
Base: All who live with others aged 16 and over	577
<b>Very comfortable</b>	51%
<b>Fairly comfortable</b>	17%
<b>I am undecided</b>	9%
<b>Not very comfortable</b>	10%
<b>Not at all comfortable</b>	10%
<b>Not stated</b>	3%
<b>Total</b>	100%

## Annex B: 2017 Cognitive Testing

In 2017 NRS commissioned ScotCen Social Research to conduct cognitive and quantitative testing of selected questions for potential inclusion in Scotland's Census 2021. Information about this testing can be found in [2017 Cognitive and Quantitative Testing Report](#) (PDF).

### 1. Question tested and measurement aims

The sexual orientation question tested was 'Which of the following options best describes how you think of yourself?' with a set of four response options 'Heterosexual or straight' 'Gay or Lesbian' 'Bisexual' and 'Other' as shown below.



4 Which of the following options describes how you think of yourself? *This question is voluntary*

◆ Tick one option

Heterosexual or straight

Gay or Lesbian

Bisexual

Other, please write in

--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--

The aim of the question was to collect data on participants' sexual orientation. Testing explored, amongst other things, the following key areas:

- Was this question acceptable to both general population participants and trans participants?
- Were participants able to choose an answer?
- Did the question cause any confusion or were all participants able to understand the question as intended?

Participants made their own suggestions on how the question could be amended as part of testing. Findings on all these areas are described in more detail below.

### 2. Acceptability and participant preference

All participants were able to answer the sexual orientation question, and almost all participants reported finding the question acceptable and clear. However, one participant, from the general population, felt uncomfortable with the question, as the question was seen to be too personal and there was not a clear reason for including this in the census. They considered sexual orientation to be a personal preference

and not for anyone else to know. It should be noted that the question on sexual orientation that was tested is marked as being voluntary, therefore all members of the public could opt to not answer.

A small number of participants described the question as unclear during cognitive interviewing, and therefore difficult to answer. For example, it was noted that the question stem wording was ambiguous, as it didn't mention sexuality or sexual orientation at all, and the question's meaning had to be deduced from the answer categories themselves. As a result, some participants suggested the question should be reworded in order to make it clearer. Some rewording suggestions included:

*'Which of the following options describes how you think of your sexuality?'*

*'Which of the following options best describes your sexuality?'* and

*'Which of the following describes your sexual identity/sexual orientation?'*

Despite reporting that the question felt ambiguous and indirect, there was no evidence of participants giving incorrect answers.

### 3. Participants ability to select an answer

Whilst all participants were able to choose an answer, some felt they were not entirely satisfied with the answers they gave. One participant, who answered 'bisexual', found the question complicated because they *"...fits into more than one category and I was limited to one and I had to pick one over the other"*. As a result, this participant felt the question should be made multi-code.

Another participant from the trans community ticked 'other', but left the write in blank. They explained that they typically found questions on sexuality very difficult to answer, as sexuality had little meaning to them in the context of gender fluidity. For this respondent, not having a fixed, binary understanding of gender made labelling their sexual orientation a difficult process.

One participant ticked 'other' and started to write in 'queer', but then crossed out their answer and ticked bisexual instead. As they were answering, they said *"...would I do an 'other'? I think I need to think a bit tactically..."* They made this compromise as they believed it was beneficial to try and select a prelisted category, if possible, to ensure representation. This concern stemmed from a general scepticism of how 'other' write-ins are typically analysed.

Another trans participant expressed concern about using the term 'queer', despite feeling it was an accurate term for their sexuality. They explained there was a worry that their response would be interpreted as a derogatory term and be removed from analysis.

Additionally, one participant who answered 'gay or lesbian' found it odd that these two sexualities were grouped together, and would have felt more comfortable answering if 'gay' and 'lesbian' had been listed as separate categories.

### 4. Participant recommendations

Some participants recommended that adding more answer categories would help to make the question clearer and more inclusive. Some recurring suggested categories

included; 'homosexual', 'asexual', 'aromantic', 'queer', and 'pansexual'. A participant from the trans community explained that adding 'asexual' would be particularly important, as otherwise this group may not answer the question at all; as they may not assume that it was a valid response to a question about sexuality.

Whilst many participants reported the voluntary nature of the question as something that increased its acceptability, one participant from the trans community felt the question should be made mandatory, with a prefer not to say option instead. The respondent was anxious that entirely voluntary questions may be skipped without much thought.

## Annex C: 2017 Quantitative Testing

In 2017 NRS commissioned ScotCen Social Research to conduct cognitive and quantitative testing of selected questions for potential inclusion in Scotland's Census 2021. Information about this testing can be found in the [2017 Cognitive and Quantitative Testing Report](#) (PDF).

### 1. Summary of key findings

- Almost all participants provided a valid response to the question on sexual orientation.
- Less than 1% of participants provided an invalid response to the question, all of which were multi-ticks, as this was the only possible way to provide an invalid response to this question.
- The majority (88%) of participants reported that they thought of themselves as 'heterosexual or straight'.
- The question was voluntary and, as such, 9% of participants chose not to provide an answer.
- Of those who did not provide a sexual orientation, the majority (around 74%) were participants who had fully completed the questionnaire (compared with 26% who had partially completed<sup>3</sup>) - this indicates that, more commonly, not disclosing sexual orientation was the result of participant choice, and not questionnaire 'drop-out'.

### 2. Question tested and aims of testing

One question on sexual orientation was included in the individual section of the questionnaire for testing. The sexual orientation question asked participants to choose from a list the option they thought best described them. Answer options included: 'heterosexual or straight', 'gay or lesbian', 'bisexual', and an 'in another way: please write in' option. The question did not differ by mode.

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<sup>3</sup> Fully completed indicates a case where a participant has completed a questionnaire including some or all questions beyond Q12 Marital status. A partially completed questionnaire indicates a case where the participant has stopped completing the questionnaire at or before Q13.



## 2. Results

### 2.1 Sexual orientation distribution<sup>4</sup>

Provision of a valid response at the sexual orientation question was almost universal with only four participants giving an invalid response to the sexual orientation question.

Those that were invalid were attributable to multi-ticks, meaning the participants selected more than one type of sexual orientation to describe themselves. As the question on sexual orientation was voluntary, choosing not to answer is deemed to be a valid response and 7% chose not to state their sexual orientation. Of those who did not provide a sexual orientation, the majority (around 62%) were participants who had fully completed the questionnaire (compared with around 38% who had partially completed) - this indicates that, more commonly, not disclosing sexual orientation was the result of participant choice, and not questionnaire 'drop-out'.

The majority of participants (around 88%) reported that they thought of themselves as 'heterosexual or straight'. Roughly 3% of participants thought of themselves as 'gay or lesbian', and even fewer reported thinking of themselves as 'bisexual' or 'in another way' (both around 1%).

*Table C1: Distribution of responses to the sexual orientation question (valid responses, weighted)*

2017 test		
	Total	%
Heterosexual or straight	1,270	88
Gay or Lesbian	47	3
Bisexual	20	1
In another way	15	1
Sexual orientation not specified <sup>5</sup>	98	7
Total responses	1,450	100

### 2.2 Sexual orientation by mode

Around half of those who thought of themselves as 'heterosexual or straight' completed the questionnaire on paper and the other half completed the online version of the questionnaire.

For the remaining three options, including 'gay or lesbian', 'bisexual' and 'in another way', modal preference was skewed towards the online survey. However, due to very small base sizes within these groups, this finding may not be significant.

<sup>4</sup> All figures in this report have been rounded to zero decimal places.

<sup>5</sup> 'Sexual orientation not specified' in table C1 refers to item non-response from full completions

Among those choosing not to specify their sexual orientation, responses were fairly evenly distributed across modes (55% online and 45% paper). However, questionnaire 'drop-out' was higher online.

When looking just at those who fully completed the questionnaire, and did not respond to the question on sexual orientation, the opposite is true: around 85% (54 cases) of these instances were attributable to the paper questionnaire, compared with just 15% (9 cases) online<sup>6</sup>.

*Table C2: Sexual orientation by mode (as a percentage, based on weighted estimates of total valid responses)*

		Mode		
		Number of responses - Online	Number of responses - Paper	Total
<b>Sexual orientation</b>	Heterosexual or straight	50%	50%	100%
	Gay or Lesbian	77%	23%	100%
	Bisexual	100%	0%	100%
	<b>In another way: total</b>	93%	7%	100%
	In another way: tick and text	93%	7%	100%
	In another way: text no tick	-	-	-
	In another way: tick no text	-	-	-
	<b>Sexual orientation not specified</b>	45%	55%	100%
	<b>Total valid responses</b>	51%	49%	100%

### 2.3 Sexual orientation by age

The majority of participants described themselves as 'heterosexual or straight' and largely reflected the age distribution of the sample.

Of those who described themselves as 'gay or lesbian' 64% were aged 16-34 while 72% who identified as 'bisexual' were aged 16-34. Those in the oldest age group (65+) were least likely to identify as 'gay or lesbian' (2%) or 'bisexual' (2%). Conversely, most of those who chose not to answer the question were aged 65 or over (59%).

It should be noted, however, that base sizes for all categories except 'heterosexual or straight' were very small. As such, any apparent association between the two variables for categories excluding heterosexual or straight are not significant.

<sup>6</sup> Counts based on weighted estimates.

*Table C3: Sexual orientation by age (as a percentage, based on weighted estimates of total valid responses)*

		Age				Total valid responses
		16-34	35-54	55-64	65+	
Sexual Orientation	Heterosexual or straight	29%	33%	16%	22%	100%
	Gay or Lesbian	64%	27%	7%	2%	100%
	Bisexual	72%	21%	5%	2%	100%
	In another way	27%	48%	14%	11%	100%
	Sexual orientation not specified	6%	22%	13%	59%	100%
	<b>Total valid responses</b>	30%	33%	15%	22%	100%
	<b>In another way</b>					
	In another way: tick and text	27%	48%	14%	11%	100%
	In another way: text no tick	-	-	-	-	-
	In another way: tick no text	-	-	-	-	-
	<b>In another way: total</b>	27%	48%	14%	11%	100%
	<b>Total valid responses</b>	30%	33%	15%	22%	100%

#### 2.4 Sexual orientation by non-binary sex

Sexual orientation did not vary significantly by sex. The only apparent exception to this was that most of those who stated they were 'bisexual' were female. Females also seemed more likely than males to choose not to answer the question.

Interestingly, when looking just at those who had fully completed the questionnaire and not specified their sexual orientation, the same pattern is true: around 56% of women chose not to answer the question, compared with around 44% of men. As the numbers of participants in both of these groups were small, any apparent association between the variables may not be significant.

*Table C4: Sexual orientation by non-binary sex (as a percentage, based on weighted estimates of total valid responses, row)*

		Non-binary sex			Total valid responses	
		Female	Male	Other		
Sexual Orientation	Heterosexual or straight	52%	48%	0%	100%	
	Gay or Lesbian	46%	54%	0%	100%	
	Bisexual	79%	21%	0%	100%	
	In another way	52%	45%	3%	100%	
	Sexual orientation not specified	56%	44%	0%	100%	
	<b>Total valid responses</b>	52%	48%	0%	100%	
	<b>In another way</b>					
	In another way: tick and text	52%	45%	3%	100%	
	In another way: text no tick	-	-	-	-	
	In another way: tick no text	-	-	-	-	
	<b>In another way: total</b>	52%	45%	3%	100%	
	<b>Total valid responses</b>	52%	48%	0%	100%	

## 2.5 'In another way' written responses

All those participants who thought of themselves 'in another way' (around 1% of total responses) went on to provide a written response to the question on sexual orientation.

It should be noted that the majority of 'in another way' written responses did not appear to indicate a different sexual orientation per se, but instead a range of other comments relating to the participants' thoughts on the question. Two participants appeared to confuse the question on sexual orientation with a question on sex/gender, instead answering with a gender identity: 'a woman' and 'trans-gendered'.

Other answers, such as 'none' and 'not applicable' are ambiguous in their meaning. One respondent answered 'asexual', appearing to have understood what the question was asking.

The most common accompanying written response was to use the open text box as a proxy for refusing the question. Such refusals included write-ins stating 'not of any interest', 'do not want to answer', 'I decline to answer this question' and 'if it is voluntary it shouldn't not allow you to progress!' The last write in appears to be in reference to the reminder text that appears at the top of a screen when a participant leaves a question blank, asking if they are sure they'd like to move on - this indicates some issues with usability for this particular participant.

*Table C5: Write in responses to those thinking of themselves 'in another way' (unweighted counts)*

	Number of responses	
<b>Sexual orientation</b>	A Woman	1
	Asexual	2
	Happy and Sad	1
	None	1
	Normal Straight	1
	Not applicable	1
	Trans gendered	1
	Proxy for refusal / non-response	4
	<b>Total</b>	<b>12</b>

## 2.6 Invalid responses to sexual orientation

If no questions beyond marital status question were answered then responses were considered to be partially completed questionnaires. This includes non-response to the voluntary question on sexual orientation if no further questions were answered. For all questions after the marital status question, partial completions are treated as questionnaire non-response and excluded from item non-response discussion.

### Sexual orientation multi-ticks

Of the three participants who provided an invalid response to the question on sexual orientation by selecting more than one valid answer, two participants ticked 'heterosexual or straight' and 'gay or lesbian' in combination. One participant

selected 'heterosexual or straight' and 'in another way'. This participant wrote 'straight' for the 'in another way' write-in.

*Table C6: Sexual orientation multi-ticks (unweighted counts)*

	Number of responses	
Sexual orientation multi-ticks	'Heterosexual or straight' and 'Gay or Lesbian'	2
	'Heterosexual or straight' and 'Bisexual'	0
	'Heterosexual or straight' and 'In another way'	1
	'Gay or Lesbian' and 'Bisexual'	0
	'Gay or Lesbian' and 'In another way'	0
	'Bisexual' and 'In another way'	0
	'Heterosexual or straight' and 'Gay or Lesbian' and 'Bisexual'	0
	'Heterosexual or straight' and 'Gay or Lesbian' and 'In another way'	0
	'Heterosexual or straight' and 'Bisexual' and 'In another way'	0
	'Gay or Lesbian' and 'Bisexual' and 'In another way'	0
	'Heterosexual or straight' and 'Gay or Lesbian' and 'Bisexual' and 'In another way'	0
	<b>Total</b>	<b>3</b>

## 2.7 Feedback to the sexual orientation question

The questionnaire was split into four sections and, at the end of each of the four sections participants were asked to indicate if they had found any questions in the section difficult to answer. Participants were asked to select which questions they had found difficult to answer, and to provide verbatim feedback on these in an open text box.

When asked 'did you find any of the following questions difficult to answer: Q13. Sexual orientation' around 1% of participants selected that they did find the sexual orientation question difficult to answer.

Of those who answered 'yes', the majority managed to provide a valid answer to the sexual orientation question, and only five participants chose not to answer it.

Of participants who had fully completed the questionnaire, 91 suggested that they had no issues with the question<sup>7</sup> whilst choosing not to state a sexual orientation. This suggests they understood the sexual orientation question and actively chose not to answer it. None of the three participants who incorrectly multi-ticked stated any difficulties in answering the question.

It should be noted that all five participants who replied 'yes' - they did find the question on sexual orientation difficult to answer, and chose not to specify their sexual orientation, were fully completed questionnaires as opposed to questionnaire 'drop-outs'.

Much of the detailed information provided by participants who reported finding difficulty with the question on sexual orientation related to their perceived relevance

<sup>7</sup> By not providing an answer to the feedback question

of the question. There was some confusion as to why the question was to be included in a census, and what the information would be used for. Some (around 10 cases) participants reported strong feelings, stating they felt it offensive to be asked about their sexual orientation.

Another participant expressed concern that family members in future years will have access to information about their sexual orientation once the information is made public after 100 years, and explained that this was not something they were comfortable with. As such, they added, they would not answer this question in the next census.

Two participants expressed difficulty with skipping the question, adding that it was problematic, given the question was voluntary.