

## Information paper

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Guidance for questions on Sex, Gender Identity and Sexual Orientation  
for the 2019 Census Rehearsal for the 2021 Census

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**The Office for National Statistics**

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## 1. Introduction

In Autumn 2019 a rehearsal for the 2021 Census is taking place in four local authorities in England and Wales (Carlisle, Ceredigion, Hackney and Tower Hamlets)<sup>1</sup>. The rehearsal will enable the Office for National Statistics (ONS) to test systems and processes it has put in place ahead of the digital-first 2021 Census. In the rehearsal, guidance will be made available, both online and via a dedicated contact centre, to people responding to the questions.

The ONS develops all census questions with the aim of making them easily understandable and fit to collect high-quality data. To make it clear how to answer the questions, the ONS provides guidance with each question. This report presents the guidance for questions on Sex, Gender Identity and Sexual Orientation for the 2019 Census Rehearsal, and a summary of the research that has informed the drafting of this guidance.

## 2. Guidance for the sex question for the 2019 Rehearsal

For 2021, the ONS proposes to retain the mandatory sex question as asked in the 2011 Census, and which has been asked in every census since 1801. In the 2021 Census form there will be a sentence in the sex question to inform respondents that there is also a later question on gender. Sex is a core demographic variable, of fundamental importance for a range of census users providing vital information for national and local population statistics.

The sex question on the census will be mandatory, so will need to be answered by all. However, for those whose gender is different from their sex registered at birth, who may find the question difficult to answer, the answer they provide doesn't need to be the same as their birth certificate.

The proposed question on sex for the 2019 Rehearsal is as follows:

Question: What is your sex?

Note: A question about gender will follow if you are aged 16 or over

Response options: Female; Male

The guidance to be used in the rehearsal is shown in Figure 1.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ons.gov.uk/census/censustransformationprogramme/2019rehearsal>

**Figure 1: Rehearsal guidance for sex question**

**Sex**

What is your sex?

Select either “Female” or “Male”.

If you are one or more of non-binary, transgender, have variations of sex characteristics, sometimes also known as intersex, the answer you give can be different from what is on your birth certificate.

If you’re not sure how to answer, use the sex registered on your official documents, such as passport or driving licence, or whichever answer best describes your sex.

A later question gives the option to tell us if your gender is different from your sex registered at birth, and, if different, to record your gender.

**Why we ask this question**

Your answer helps your local community by allowing charities, organisations, and local and central government to understand what services people might need.

This information is used to monitor equality between groups of people of different sexes. Equality monitoring helps make sure that everyone is treated fairly.

The sex question has been asked since 1801.

**Don’t want to share a form with your household?**

If you, or someone you live with, would prefer to keep your answers private from other people in your household, you can ask for a personal form, which is called an individual questionnaire.

Don’t worry if you’re already included on the household form. You can still submit a personal form and we’ll take care of the rest.

**Answering on behalf of someone else**

If you’re answering for someone else, where possible you should ask them how they want to answer. If they’re away, select the answer you think they would choose.

**Confidentiality**

The personal information you submit to us is protected by law. We do not share it with anyone. You cannot be identified in the statistics that we publish. Your answers to the census questions are kept confidential for 100 years.

The guidance that was tested is shown in Annex A.

### 3. Guidance for the gender identity question for the 2019 Rehearsal

The ONS is proposing to ask a question on the topic of gender identity for the first time in a census in 2021. The question would be voluntary and it would only be asked of those who are of 16 years of age or older.

The proposed question on gender for the 2019 Rehearsal is as follows:

Question: Is your gender the same as the sex you were registered at birth?

Note: This question is voluntary

Response options: Yes; No, write in gender

The guidance to be used in the rehearsal is shown in Figure 2.

#### Figure 2: Rehearsal guidance for gender question

##### **Is your gender the same as the sex you were registered at birth?**

We ask this question of people who are aged 16 years old and over.

This question is voluntary, so you can leave it blank if you prefer.

Select only one response.

If your gender is not the same as the sex recorded on your birth certificate when you were born (for example, you are transgender or non-binary), tick "No".

If you answered no, please enter the term you use to describe your gender. This is also voluntary, so you can leave it blank if you prefer.

If you would like to record that you have variations of sex characteristics, sometimes also known as intersex, you can use this write-in box. If you would like to, you can also write-in your gender (for example: 'intersex, non-binary').

##### **Why we ask this question**

Your answers help your local community by allowing charities, organisations, and local and central government to understand what services people might need.

Information about gender is used to monitor equality between groups of people of different genders. Equality monitoring helps make sure that everyone is treated fairly.

This is the first time this question has been asked on the England and Wales census.

##### **Don't want to share a form with your household?**

If you, or someone you live with, would prefer to keep your answers private from other people in your household, you can ask for a personal form, which is called an individual questionnaire.

Don't worry if you're already included on the household form. You can still submit a personal form and we'll take care of the rest.

**Answering on behalf of someone else**

If you're answering for someone else, where possible you should ask them how they want to answer. If they're away, select the answer you think they would choose. This question is voluntary, so it can be left blank if they would prefer.

**Confidentiality**

The personal information you submit to us is protected by law. We do not share it with anyone. You cannot be identified in the statistics that we publish. Your answers to the census questions are kept confidential for 100 years.

The guidance that was tested is shown in Annex B.

#### 4. Guidance for the sexual orientation question for the 2019 Rehearsal

The ONS is proposing to ask a question on sexual orientation for the first time in a census in 2021. The question would be voluntary and it would only be asked of those who are of 16 years of age or older.

The proposed question on sexual orientation for the 2019 Rehearsal is as follows:

Question: Which of the following best describes your sexual orientation?

Note: This question is voluntary

Response options: Straight/Heterosexual; Gay or Lesbian; Bisexual; Other sexual orientation, write in

The guidance to be used in the rehearsal is shown in Figure 3.

#### Figure 3: Rehearsal guidance for sexual orientation question

##### **Which of the following best describes your sexual orientation?**

We ask this question of people who are aged 16 years old and over.

This question is voluntary, so you can leave it blank if you prefer.

Select only one response.

You can choose from the following options:

“Heterosexual or Straight” means that a person is attracted to people of the opposite sex

“Gay or Lesbian” means that a person is attracted to people of the same sex

“Bisexual” means that a person is attracted to more than one sex

“Other sexual orientation” enter your answer, for example, pansexual or asexual

##### **Do not record your gender here**

The next question is about gender.

##### **Why we ask this question**

Your answers help your local community by allowing charities, organisations, and local and central government to understand what services people might need.

This information is used to monitor equality between groups of people of different sexual orientations. Equality monitoring helps make sure that everyone is treated fairly.

This is the first time this question has been asked on the England and Wales census.

##### **Don't want to share a form with your household?**

If you, or someone you live with, would prefer to keep your answers private from other people in your household, you can ask for a personal form, which is called an individual questionnaire.

Don't worry if you're already included on the household form. You can still submit a personal form and we'll take care of the rest.

##### **Answering on behalf of someone else**

If you're answering for someone else, where possible you should ask them how they want to

answer. If they're away, select the answer you think they would choose. This question is voluntary, so it can be left blank if they would prefer.

**Confidentiality**

The personal information you submit to us is protected by law. We do not share it with anyone. You cannot be identified in the statistics that we publish. Your answers to the census questions are kept confidential for 100 years.

The guidance that was tested is shown in Annex C.



## 5. How we developed the guidance for questions on Sex, Gender Identity and Sexual Orientation for the 2019 Rehearsal

The questions on the topics of gender identity and sexual orientation have undergone rigorous testing. This has included cognitive testing which is used to provide insight into how people understand these topics. In researching how people might answer questions on gender, the ONS has also looked into how people answer the question about sex. The knowledge gathered from this testing was then used when writing the initial guidance.

For the sex question, guidance for the 2011 Census informed the 2021 guidance. Guidance on gender identity and sexual orientation will be new for 2021.

An initial draft of the guidance for these three questions was shared with stakeholders in May 2019. A wide range of stakeholders representing LGB people, trans people, women and those with variations of sex characteristics, sometimes also known as intersex, and data users such as local and central government were invited to provide their expert view on the guidance. Those that responded provided a good representation of the relevant communities and data users. As a result of this feedback, some elements of the guidance were updated.

The updated guidance was cognitively tested with 23 respondents who were purposively recruited (i.e. based on their characteristics). The following characteristics were represented in the sample: Transgender male and transgender female, intersex, people with variations in sex characteristics, non-binary, genderqueer, queer, bisexual, pansexual, gay, lesbian, heterosexual, cisgender male and cisgender female and participants who were categorised as 'Potential Objectors' (those who may object to the inclusion of questions on gender).

During interviews, respondents were presented with the updated guidance for the three questions, which is shown in the Annexes A,B,C. Some other options were also discussed with respondents. These other options were taken from both stakeholder feedback and from earlier drafts of guidance. By including these other options in the testing, we have ensured that the guidance being recommended for the rehearsal is the most universally understood option.

During the testing period, the ONS also finished developing the standard guidance on privacy and confidentiality. This was developed separately and is not reported here but went through a similarly rigorous process. However, for completeness, it is included in the rehearsal guidance presented here.

## 6. Next steps

The guidance described in this report will be used in the 2019 Rehearsal. Guidance is provided to make it clear to respondents how to answer questions.

Following the rehearsal we will analyse the results, and this will include seeking feedback from the contact centre staff who will be using this guidance when handling calls from the public. We will continue to engage with stakeholders if a need for further development is identified.

## Annex A – testing guidance for the sex question

The guidance that was used in the testing of the sex question, and the evidence from this testing, is presented below.

### Initial Guidance tested for the sex question

#### **What is your sex?**

Select either “Female” or “Male”.

If you are non-binary, transgender or have variations of sex characteristics, also known as intersex, the answer you give can be different from what is on your birth certificate. If you're not sure how to answer, use the sex registered on your official documents, such as passport or driving licence, or whichever sex you consider yourself to be.

#### **Why we ask this question**

The sex question provides vital information for organisations on national and local population statistics, and for long-term analysis, as it has been asked since 1801. This question is also used for equality monitoring.

#### **Answering on behalf of someone else**

If you're answering for someone else, where possible you should ask them how they want to answer. If they're away, select the answer you think they would choose. You don't need to know whether they have a Gender Recognition Certificate.

### Findings from guidance testing for the sex question

In general, the guidance tested was understood as intended. It was thought to be informative, because of the inclusion of specific terms, which made the question easier to answer.

Respondents understood ‘non-binary, transgender or...’ to suggest that the terms are mutually exclusive. It was felt they should be separated with a ‘and/or’. As this is not possible for a screen reader to deal with, ONS is using ‘If you are one or more of...’

The term ‘Variations of sex characteristics’ was welcomed.

It was highlighted that variations of sex characteristics are not the same as intersex. We have modified the sentence to read ‘variations of sex characteristics, sometimes also known as intersex’.

References to ‘consider’ (and ‘believe’ which was used in a previous version of guidance shown to respondents) were strongly disliked and considered inaccurate. We are using ‘whichever answer best describes your sex’.

Another option presented to respondents added a line ‘You do not need to have a Gender Recognition Certificate’. Not all respondents knew what a Gender Recognition Certificate was and referring only to a birth certificate was found to be much clearer.

Among non-binary respondents, the guidance was considered acceptable and useful for answering the question. However, the binary response options meant they could not answer

how they would have liked. ONS is adding a note (similar to the note in the question) 'A later question gives the option to tell us if your gender is different from your sex registered at birth, and, if different, to record your gender'.

There were mixed views towards the '*long-term analysis, as it has been asked since 1801*' statement. For some it was seen as irrelevant – the inclusion of the wording about the use of the data was seen as more important than the inclusion of the wording regarding long-term analysis, and it was interpreted as being useful for ONS and analysis, rather than for individual people. For others it was considered useful to highlight the importance of the data and there were respondents that felt more inclined to answer because data from this question was collected long-term. We are keeping the line, as including it might increase the likelihood to answer.

'Why we ask' has been changed to address respondent feedback , in the light of the above finding that this is motivating.

Some respondents liked that their data would be specifically useful for equality monitoring. However, the term was not universally understood. We have added a definition of equality monitoring.

*These findings informed the guidance set out in Chapter 2.*

## Annex B – testing guidance for the gender identity question

The guidance that was used in the testing of the gender identity question, and the evidence from this testing, is presented below.

### Initial Guidance tested for the gender identity question

#### **Is your gender the same as the sex you were registered at birth?**

We ask this question of people who are aged 16 years old and over.

This question is voluntary, so you can leave it blank if you prefer.

Select only one response.

If your gender is the same as the sex recorded on your birth certificate when you were born, tick “Yes”.

If your gender is not the same as the sex recorded on your birth certificate when you were born (for example, if you are non-binary or transgender, or both), tick “No”.

If you would like to record that you have variations of sex characteristics, also known as intersex, you can use this write-in box. If you would like to, you can also write-in your gender identity.

If you answered no, please enter the term you use to describe your gender. This is also voluntary, so you can leave it blank if you prefer.

#### **Answering on behalf of someone else**

If you're answering for someone else, where possible you should ask them how they want to answer. If they're away, select the answer you think they would choose. You do not need to know if they have a Gender Recognition Certificate. This question is voluntary, so it can be left blank if they would prefer.

#### **Why we ask this question**

How a person's gender compares to their sex registered at birth affects the specific services they require, for example, healthcare. This question is also used for equality monitoring.

### Findings from guidance testing for the gender identity question

The guidance was interpreted as intended. It was considered comprehensive and contained information that was useful to answer the question. The guidance improved the acceptability of the question as it made it clear that someone could specify more detail about their gender in the write-in option.

The guidance to tick 'yes' was not considered useful because it repeated information in the question. As the aim of guidance is to elaborate on what is in the question, we have removed this line.

As in the response to the sex question, it was highlighted that variations of sex characteristics are not the same as intersex. We have modified the sentence to read 'variations of sex characteristics, sometimes also known as intersex'.

'Why we ask this question' was well received because participants understood their data would be useful, however, other testing has shown that specific focus on healthcare is not especially motivating. Guidance was therefore updated to address respondent feedback. Some respondents liked that their data would be specifically useful for equality monitoring.

However, the term was not universally understood. We have added a definition of equality monitoring.

As the Gender Recognition Certificate was not a well understood term, and to align with the standard wording for 'Answering on behalf of someone else', we have removed the line 'You do not need to know if they have a Gender Recognition Certificate'.

*These findings informed the guidance set out in Chapter 3.*

## Annex C – testing guidance for the sexual orientation question

The guidance that was used in the testing of the sexual orientation question, and the evidence from this testing, is presented below.

### Initial Guidance tested for the sexual orientation question

#### **Which of the following best describes your sexual orientation?**

We ask this question of people who are aged 16 years old and over.

This question is voluntary, so you can leave it blank if you prefer.

Select only one response.

You can choose from the following options:

“Heterosexual or Straight” – means that a person is attracted to people of the opposite sex

“Gay or Lesbian” – means that a person is attracted to people of the same sex

“Bisexual” – means that a person is attracted to more than one sex

“Other sexual orientation” – enter your answer, for example, pansexual or asexual

Attraction could be emotional, romantic or sexual.

#### **Do not record your gender identity here**

The next question is about gender identity.

#### **Answering on behalf of someone else**

If you're answering for someone else, where possible you should ask them how they want to answer. If they're away, select the answer you think they would choose. This question is voluntary, so it can be left blank if they would prefer.

#### **Why we ask this question**

A person's sexual orientation affects the services they require, for example, their healthcare. This question is also used for equality monitoring.

### Findings from guidance testing for the sexual orientation question

The definitions were not always considered necessary among cis-gender, heterosexual respondents.

The inclusion of pansexual was thought to be inclusive and modern.

Dashes (-) have been removed for accessibility.

As with guidance for the questions on the topics of sex and gender, the 'Why we ask' help has been changed to emphasise the value of each person's answer.

The sentence 'attraction could be emotional, romantic or sexual' cause respondents some issues - participants (often heterosexual) felt it was an “odd” and “unnecessary” statement to have. It was “confusing” because it introduces three elements to choose from. It was not found to help respondents answer the question. We have removed this sentence.

*These findings informed the guidance set out in Chapter 4.*