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Jon Trickett MP
House of Commons
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7 October 2019

Dear Jon,

I am writing in respect of the Census (Return Particulars and Removal of Penalties) Bill, and your previous amendment on the important issue of homelessness, which asked for a statement on the steps the Office for National Statistics (ONS) will take to ensure people who are homeless have the opportunity to answer questions about gender identity and sexual orientation in the Census.

I would be happy to keep you updated on this work, and the wider cross-government work to improve statistics about homelessness, including homelessness among LGBT people, which I think may be more helpful than a one-off statement.

Everyone who is homeless will be able to complete the census. For some this will be in a questionnaire at an address where they are temporarily staying, for example, with a friend or in a hostel. Others will be able to use the address of an establishment they are in contact with, such as a night shelter.

The ONS is working with organisations that support and represent people who are homeless, so as many people as possible can take part in the next census in March 2021. These organisations include Shelter, Shelter Cymru, St Mungos, Homeless Link and Cymorth Cymru.

In the lead up to the census taking place across England and Wales in 2021, the ONS is testing its operational systems and engagement strategies. There is a large-scale rehearsal of the online systems taking place in four local authority areas on 13 October 2019 (Ceredigion, Carlisle, Hackney and Tower Hamlets). This will be followed by detailed work on particular aspects of the census plans, including the ONS's approach to engaging with people who are homeless to complete the census.

In this work the ONS will be working with charitable and other organisations who have practical experience of engaging with people who are homeless and the places homeless people come into contact with, for example, day centres and night shelters, food banks, and soup kitchens.

Current plans include making census forms available in these establishments for several days either side of the Census date itself, and providing practical help to complete the forms.

The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government is working with the Government Equalities Office to explore the prevalence and causes of homelessness and rough sleeping among LGBT people. A recent publication by the ONS, 'The emerging picture of UK homelessness and rough sleeping'¹, sets out progress on cross government work on homelessness statistics in more detail.

The Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency is similarly considering appropriate arrangements to include people who are homeless in the census in Northern Ireland. The ONS would be happy to meet with you and your colleagues to discuss this work in more detail, and share their plans for ensuring all homeless people are able to participate in the next census as these plans evolve.

I am copying this to your colleague Christian Matheson MP and I am placing a copy of this letter in the libraries of both Houses.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Kevin Foster', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Kevin Foster MP

¹ <https://blog.ons.gov.uk/2019/09/17/the-emerging-picture-of-uk-homelessness-and-rough-sleeping/>

The 2021 Census and homelessness: ONS proposals

The homeless population

While most people think of rough sleepers as synonymous with the homeless, they are simply a very visible – and particularly vulnerable – part of the wider homeless population. Other categories include the statutory homeless, for example people living in temporary accommodation or bed and breakfast, and those who are living in other households on a temporary basis. The ONS is working with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) and the Devolved Administrations to improve the coherence of homelessness statistics, including improving users' understanding of the differences between the statistical definitions used across the UK and the extent to which they can be compared.

The definition of **rough sleepers** covers those who are sleeping, bedded down or about to bed down in the open air (such as on the streets, in tents, doorways, parks, bus shelters or encampments) or buildings and other places not designed for habitation (such as stairwells, sheds, cars, derelict boats, or makeshift shelters. It does not include people in hostels or shelters, recreational sites (such as campsites), sites of organised protest, squatters or travellers. The **statutory homeless** are usually placed in temporary accommodation by their local authority including, Bed & Breakfasts, hostels, and households placed in nightly paid, self-contained accommodation. In addition, other homeless people may be living in other households on a temporary basis or have arranged their own temporary accommodation, including 'sofa surfers' and those who wish to rent or buy but cannot afford to do so.

It is important that we obtain high quality population estimates on the population across these different groups, who have difficulty reaching public services. While the ONS want to ensure that everyone is able to take part in the census, due to the nature of this population group, the ONS is unlikely to be able to produce high quality estimates for this population through census enumeration alone. The ONS experience from previous censuses is that the homeless count is not complete, and the methods used for adjusting for census under-coverage more generally (based on a follow-up survey 6 weeks after Census day) do not work for the transient homeless population. However, alongside other ONS and Government Statistical Service (GSS) data, this census data will be able to provide new insight into the homeless population. The ONS will continue to work on how census data can be used as part of the wider picture of the homeless population.

Enumerating the homeless population

ONS are continuing to develop their enumeration plans for the homeless and specifically rough sleepers. In developing plans for 2021, they have been working with a number of charities for the homeless including Shelter, Homeless Link, Cymorth Cymru, St Mungos, and Shelter Cymru.

Day centres/Night shelters

The ONS's planned approach for enumeration of the homeless includes making forms available to access at day centres and night shelters for people who are homeless and possibly sleeping rough, with practical help to fill them in. Homeless people may attend these on different days so ONS will work with these shelters and centres targeting several days around census day to ensure that the people using them, who are transient in nature, are able to fill in the census but do not complete the census in more than one location, causing duplication. ONS is planning to provide additional assistance with completing the forms if required. The ONS will be engaging with these shelters/centres beforehand so that communication can be shared with the homeless community in that area about the census to encourage completion.

Those respondents enumerated through temporary accommodation day centres will complete an individual form which only includes information about themselves rather than anyone else in completing at that centre. Those at night shelters will also complete individual forms, although some basic information will also be entered on a Communal Establishment form in these cases. The ONS testing of census questions has indicated being able to complete an individual form is particularly important for the LGBT community.

Homeless people living with others on a temporary basis (with no other UK address)

The householder will include all people resident on census day on the household questionnaire. Those resident without an alternative UK address are not classed as visitors and will either be included in the household form or fill in their own individual questionnaire for that address. The householder on the household section of the form will need to state their relationship with them. People in these forms of temporary accommodation would not be specifically identified as being homeless.

Plans to test the enumeration of the homeless

The ONS will undertake testing of the approach to enumeration of the homeless through a series of scenario-based exercises undertaken working with homelessness charities. Early in 2020, the ONS will host a session on the enumeration of the homeless in England and Wales using a range of scenarios. This will involve stakeholders who have practical experience of engaging with the homeless and working with other places homeless people come into contact with (e.g. food banks and soup kitchens). Following this work, the ONS will release more information about its approach to maximising response.

This testing will be separate from the census rehearsal, which will not specifically look at enumeration of the homeless. However, where individuals are staying with friends/family temporarily and do not have a permanent address, or are in other temporary accommodation, they will complete the census rehearsal where they are temporarily staying.

Homelessness and the LGBT population

MHCLG have started to collect some data on the sexual orientation of those experiencing homelessness for households who approach their council for help for housing through their Homeless Case Level Information Collection. This data is of variable quality. While MHCLG plan to publish this data in the future, it is too early in its development and collection to publish at present. MHCLG hope to use the data to better understand the nature and composition of homeless people who identify as having a minority sexual orientation.

MHCLG are also undertaking joint research with the Government Equalities Office (GEO) on LGBT homelessness, looking at the experiences, attitudes and needs of homeless LGBT people. This is due to be published later this autumn. MHCLG are also collecting detailed information on rough sleepers through a new questionnaire about their characteristics and homeless history and their use of services, this includes information on sexual orientation.

ONS recognise the huge opportunity to link MHCLG data with the Census and other data which will help inform the characteristics of the homeless population and will help inform the provision of services.

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