

Information paper

The ethnic group prioritisation tool: 2021 Census in England and Wales

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The Office for National Statistics

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1. Summary

An ethnic group question was first included in a UK Census in 1991. Amendments were made to this question for the 2001 and 2011 Censuses. In preparation for the 2021 Census, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) held a consultation on census content¹, and conducted a follow up survey² between November 2016 and January 2017, specifically on the topic of ethnic group. The consultation and the survey identified a continued need for data on ethnic group in England and Wales to understand inequality, inform and monitor policy development, allocate resources and plan services.

Ahead of the 2011 Census, the ONS commissioned an independent Equality Impact Assessment (EIA)³ considering the development of the ethnic group question. This assessment recommended that the ONS should agree a policy on how to evaluate whether ethnic groups would be covered by tick-boxes, or the 'Other' write in options. The ONS therefore developed a tool – hereafter referred to as the evaluation tool - to evaluate new ethnic group tick-box requests. This was successfully used to design the 2011 ethnic group question (and which resulted in Gypsy and Irish Traveller and Arab tick-boxes being added to the question).

In the 2021 Census Assessment of initial user requirements on content for England and Wales, Ethnicity and National Identity topic report⁴, the ONS committed to a review for 2021. This would follow a similar format to that undertaken prior to the 2011 Census whereby potential new response options were evaluated. The 2011 methodology is described in the Information Paper “Deciding which tick-boxes to add to the ethnic group question in the 2011 England and Wales Census⁵”. The ONS said the methodology would be reviewed and updated to reflect current legislation, and that this would involve engagement with key stakeholders to ensure data needs to support the Public Sector Equality Duty under the Equality Act 2010 are well understood.

1

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/census/censustransformationprogramme/consultations/the2021censusinitialviewoncontentforenglandandwales>

2

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/census/censustransformationprogramme/questiondevelopment/ethnicgroupnationalidentityreligionandlanguage/2021censusethnicgroupstakeholderfollowupsurveysummaryofresponses>

³ 'Equality Impact Assessment: Ethnicity, National Identity, Language and Religion Question Development, 2011 Census in England and Wales'. Available at:

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/census/2011census/howourcensusworks/howweplannedthe2011census/questionnairedevelopment/equalityimpactassessmentsforthe2011census>

4

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/file?uri=/census/censustransformationprogramme/consultations/the2021censusinitialviewoncontentforenglandandwales/topicreport04ethnicityandnationalidentitypostreleaseversion....pdf>

5

https://www.ons.gov.uk/file?uri=/census/2011census/howourcensusworks/howweplannedthe2011census/questionnairedevelopment/finalisingthe2011questionnaire/ethnicgroupprioritisationtool_tcm77-183986.pdf

Between September 2016 and February 2017, the ONS reviewed the 2011 evaluation tool. The tool was updated in collaboration with the ONS Topic Group (including Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA), National Records Scotland (NRS) and Welsh Government) and the Ethnic Group Assurance Panel (a group of academics and data users from across government, which was set up to assure the ethnic group question development).

The intent of this review was to ensure that the methodology used in the evaluation of tick-box requests would result in an ethnic group question that would meet data needs to support the Public Sector Equality Duty under the Equality Act 2010. The Equality Act 2010 became law after the publication of the White Paper for the 2011 Census.

The review concluded that the principles remained fit-for-purpose and so they were retained for 2021. There were some minor wording changes to improve clarity, and the weighting was adjusted to put more weight on the principle of strength of user need.

The evaluation tool works by assessing requested tick-box categories against seven principles grouped into five criteria:

1 Strength of user need for information on the ethnic group

- 1.1 Group is of particular interest for equality monitoring and/or for policy development (for example group is particularly vulnerable to disadvantage)
- 1.2 Group is of particular interest for service delivery and/or resource allocation

2 Lack of alternative sources of information

- 2.1 Write in answers are not adequate for measuring this group
- 2.2 Other census information is inadequate as a suitable proxy (for example country of birth, religion, national identity, citizenship, and main language)

3 Data quality of information collected

- 3.1 Without this tick-box respondents would be unduly confused or burdened and so the quality of information would be reduced (for example if a large, well known, or highly distinct group was left out, and respondents from this group ticked a variety of options instead)

4 Comparability with 2011 data

- 4.1 There will be no adverse impact on comparability

5 Acceptability, clarity and quality

- 5.1 The addition of the tick-box and/or revised terminology is acceptable to respondents, clear (both in wording and in the context of the question, for example mutually exclusive categories), and provides the required information to an acceptable level of quality.

The requests for tick-boxes, that the ONS received, were evaluated using these criteria.

2. Context

An ethnic group question was first included in the Census in 1991 and amended for the 2001 and 2011 Censuses in England and Wales. There are a wide range of potential uses of ethnic group data, including⁶:

- resource allocation by central and local government
- to inform policy development
- to help organisations meet and monitor their statutory obligations under the Equality Act 2010⁷

To prepare for the 2021 Census, the ONS carried out a formal three-month topic consultation in 2015 on census content (referred to as the 2015 Topic Consultation⁸). Between November 2016 and January 2017, the ONS conducted a follow-up survey on the topic of ethnic group (referred to as the Ethnic Group Stakeholder Follow-Up Survey⁹). This engagement confirmed a strong need to continue to collect ethnic group information on the England and Wales Census.

The UK's ethnic profile and the acceptability of terminology changes over time, and therefore the classifications are reviewed between censuses to ensure that the ethnic group question reflects these changes in society. This involves extensive research, consultation and question testing.

The ethnic group question is part of a suite of other identity questions (such as national identity, language and religious affiliation), which are asked together to improve understanding of different communities.

The census ethnic group question is designed to allow the majority of the population to identify themselves easily. The list of response options is lengthy, but not a complete record of all ethnic groups present in England and Wales. No ethnic group is intentionally excluded from the list, but the list must be limited in length to avoid the question becoming overly complex and confusing to answer. Anyone can self-identify as they wish through the ethnic group write-in option.

⁶ As highlighted in ONS's Ethnicity and National Identity topic report (May 2016). Available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/census/censustransformationprogramme/consultations/the2021censusinitialviewoncontentforenglandandwales>

⁷ This superseded the Race Relations Act 1976 and the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000

⁸

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/census/censustransformationprogramme/consultations/the2021censusinitialviewoncontentforenglandandwales>

⁹

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/census/censustransformationprogramme/questiondevelopment/ethnicgroupnationalidentityreligionandlanguage/2021censusethnicgroupstakeholderfollowupsurveysummaryofresponses>

It is sometimes thought that tick-boxes are introduced if write in responses for a group reach a particular number in the previous census. This is not the case. In the 2021 evaluation tool (and for 2011), population size itself is not a factor; although the size of a population may be taken into account when scoring some principles (for example comparability).

The content of this paper outlines the criteria and specific principles that have been used to evaluate the 55 new ethnic group tick-boxes requested for the 2021 Census. Details of the assessment of these requests will be published as part of a suite of detailed reports planned for later in 2019. Summarised findings were published in the 2021 Census topic research reports (2017¹⁰ and 2018¹¹), and the White Paper setting out the UK Statistics Authority's recommendations on the content and conduct of the 2021 Census for England and Wales¹².

¹⁰

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/census/censustransformationprogramme/questiondevelopment/2021censustopicresearchdecember2017>

¹¹

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/census/censustransformationprogramme/questiondevelopment/2021censustopicresearchupdatedecember2018>

¹² <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-2021-census-of-population-and-housing-in-england-and-wales>

3. Development of the evaluation tool

Prior to the 2011 Census, the ONS developed a tool to evaluate requests for additional ethnic group tick-boxes. This involved work with the Welsh Assembly Government (WAG), the Scottish Government (SG), General Register Office for Scotland (GROS), the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) and the Commission for Racial Equality (CRE) between March 2007 and October 2008¹³.

Between September 2016 and February 2017, the ONS reviewed the 2011 evaluation tool for the 2021 Census. This involved work with Government agencies:

- Welsh Government (WG)
- The Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA)
- National Records for Scotland (NRS)
- The Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC)
- Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG)

The intent of this review was to ensure that the methodology used in the evaluation of tick-box requests would result in an ethnic group question that would meet data needs to support the Public Sector Equality Duty under the Equality Act 2010.

The five criteria and seven principles against which requests for new tick-boxes were evaluated were the same as those used in 2011 and these are shown in Table 1.

Working with the Topic Group¹⁴ and the Assurance Panel¹⁵ on how to use the principles, a decision was taken to place greater emphasis on strength of user need relative to the other principles. The focus on strength of user need is also in line with weightings used in ONS's 2015 Topic Consultation, where topics had to demonstrate a strong and clearly defined user need. The three other criteria that were assigned weights were weighted the same – that is they were seen as being of equal importance to each other.

¹³ Details of this tool and its application can be found in [Ethnic group prioritisation tool v1.1](#) 'Deciding which tick-boxes to add to the ethnic group question in the 2011 England and Wales Census' (March 2009).

¹⁴ The topic group includes representative from across ONS, NRS, NISRA and the Welsh Government.

¹⁵ The Ethnic Group Assurance Panel included invited academics specialising in ethnic group and collectors and users of ethnic group data from government department and local government bodies including EHRC, MCHLG, MoJ, DfE, DWP, GLA, LGA, NHS Digital.

Table 1: Principles used for assessing requests and their weights, 2011 and 2021

Criteria / principles	2011 Weights	2021 Weights
1 Strength of user need for information on the ethnic group		
1.1 Group is of particular interest for equality monitoring and/or for policy development (for example group is particularly vulnerable to disadvantage)	1.0	2.0
1.2 Group is of particular interest for service delivery and/or resource allocation	1.0	2.0
2 Lack of alternative sources of information		
2.1 Write in answers are not adequate for measuring this group	2.5	1.5
2.2 Other census information is inadequate as a suitable proxy (for example country of birth, religion, national identity, citizenship, and main language)	2.5	1.5
3 Data quality of information collected		
3.1 Without this tick-box respondents would be unduly confused or burdened and so the quality of information would be reduced (for example if a large, well known, or highly distinct group was left out, and respondents from this group ticked a variety of options instead)	1.0	1.5
4. Comparability with 2011 data		
4.1 There will be no adverse impact on comparability	1.0	1.5
5 Acceptability, clarity and quality		
5.1 The addition of the tick-box and/or revised terminology is acceptable to respondents, clear (both in wording and in the context of the question, for example mutually exclusive categories), and provides the required information to an acceptable level of quality.	1.0	RAG status evaluation

Source: Office for National Statistics

4. The evaluation tool and process

The evaluation tool works by assessing potential tick-boxes against seven principles grouped into five criteria. A description of each of the criteria/principles is provided in Table 2.

The process of evaluating the evidence provided to support requests for new ethnic group categories was conducted in a staged approach.

Evidence was first evaluated in relation to the first of the five criteria: strength of user need for information on the ethnic group. Each request was given a score of 2, 1 or 0 for each of the strength of user need principles, based on the strength of supporting evidence provided (high, medium or low). If a request had little or no user need, then it was not scored further.

The second stage was limited to requests that scored at least one on either of the strength of user need principles, and these were then taken through to the next evaluation stage. This stage evaluated requests against criteria two, three and four: the availability of alternative data sources; data quality; and comparability. Each request was given a score of 2, 1 or 0 for each principle, based on the supporting evidence.

The highest scoring requests were then assessed against the final criterion: acceptability, clarity and quality including making sure that any conclusions made were compliant with legal obligations. This last criterion was RAG (Red-Amber-Green) assessed based on a broad range of evidence. While the final decision on whether to include a tick-box was made according to the assessment of the acceptability, clarity and quality criterion, consideration was also given to the assessed scores from the other four criteria..

All scoring was quality assured by the Topic Group and the Ethnic Group Assurance Panel.

Table 2: 2021 Evaluation Tool for tick-boxes (Criteria and Principles)

Criterion / Principle	Description
<p>1 Strength of user need for information on the ethnic group</p> <p>1.1 Group is of particular interest for equality monitoring and/or for policy development (for example group is particularly vulnerable to disadvantage)</p> <p>1.2 Group is of particular interest for service delivery and/or resource allocation</p>	<p>In general, there is a strong need for accurate information on ethnic groups (for example on their population size). These two principles are intended to pick up any need for information in addition to this.</p> <p>To reflect weightings used in the 2015 Topic Consultation, where topics had to demonstrate a strong and clearly defined user need (strength of user need), greater weight was given to strength of user need principles relative to the other principles.</p>
<p>2 Lack of alternative sources of information</p> <p>2.1 Write in answers are not adequate for measuring this group</p> <p>2.2 Other census information is inadequate as a suitable proxy (for example country of birth, religion, national identity, citizenship, and main language).</p>	<p>The census needs to be as clear and efficient as possible, therefore should avoid having two or more ways of capturing very similar information.</p> <p>Information captured by an ethnic group tick-box can sometimes be captured better with a write in field or another census question. If there is an alternative question on the census that can provide a reasonably good proxy, the ONS should still be able to satisfy user need by producing outputs based on these alternative questions or write in responses. Religious affiliation, national identity, language and to a lesser extent citizenship and county of birth are a suite of questions that capture different aspects of cultural identity. These questions on the census may act as a good proxy for certain ethnic groups, meaning that there is less need to include an ethnic group tick-box.</p>
<p>3 Data quality of information collected</p> <p>3.1 Without this tick-box respondents would be unduly confused or burdened and so the quality of information would be reduced (for example if a large, well known, or highly distinct group was left out, and respondents from this group ticked a variety of options instead).</p>	<p>The question needs to be as user friendly as possible and structured in a way that gathers the most useful information. If the question is easy to understand and answer, then better quality data will be collected.</p> <p>If some tick-boxes are expected but left out, respondents that would have ticked the omitted box may end up ticking inconsistently, as there may not be an obvious option available. The ONS needs to minimise confusion for respondents so that they respond consistently, and data quality is maximised.</p>

Criterion / Principle	Description
<p>4 Comparability with 2011 data</p> <p>4.1 There will be no adverse impact on comparability</p>	<p>Responses to the Ethnic Group Stakeholder Follow-Up Survey highlighted the need for comparability and stability of response options, to enable users to see changes over time.</p> <p>Population size will be relevant to this principle but is not in itself a deciding factor. For example, the impact on comparability may be greater if a tick-box is added for a large population compared to a small one. However, population size will only majorly affect comparability if this population wrote in inconsistently, under several combined categories (such as 'White' or 'Mixed').</p> <p>If a large population all wrote in under the 'White' combined category, then impact on comparability would be low and easy to estimate. Most of this population would shift from the 'Any other White background, write in' to the new tick-box. On the other hand, if a large population wrote across two combined categories (for example in 'Any other White background' under 'White', and in 'Any other Asian background' under 'Asian/Asian British'), then the impact would be larger. Adding the tick-box in one of these places could cause people to move away from one combined category to another (for example, from 'Asian/Asian British' to 'White'). This would have a major impact on comparability as several counts would be affected. For example, there could be an impact on the 'Any other White background', 'Any other Asian background' and both the combined 'White' and 'Asian/Asian British' counts.</p>
<p>5 Acceptability, clarity and quality</p> <p>5.1 The addition of the tick-box and/or revised terminology is acceptable to respondents, clear (both in wording and in the context of the question, for example mutually exclusive categories), and provides the required information to an acceptable level of quality.</p>	<p>Tick-boxes need to be acceptable and clear to the groups they are measuring, to elicit a high and consistent response and a data set that represents a distinct population.</p>