

DCM: Gender identity phase 2C cognitive testing findings and question design recommendations

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1.0 Executive Summary

This report presents findings and recommendations of gender identity phase 2C cognitive testing that was carried out by DCM. This phase tested the 'what is your sex' question, in addition to three versions of a gender follow-up question.

DCM recommend the following two questions to capture information on sex and a person's gender status:

- 1) 'What is your sex'
- 2) 'Is your gender the same as the sex you were registered at birth?'

What is your sex? A question relating to gender will follow Female Male
--

Is your gender the same as the sex you were registered at birth? Yes No, please specify your gender _____ Prefer not to say
--

In terms of the 'sex' question, guidance should be clear to assist respondents to answer consistently

either with their legal sex, or sex registered at birth. If census want to collect information on legal or natal sex only, consider future testing including the phrasing "what is your sex at birth or legal sex?" in the guidance. This could avoid respondents answering with their gender identity, where their gender identity is not the same as their sex registered at birth or legal sex.

DCM recommend the questions should be located consecutively at the start of the demographic set of questions. A caveat should be worded 'A question relating to gender will follow' to advise on the location of these questions. Some respondents found the inclusion of two concepts 'gender' and 'sex registered at birth' within the same question 'Is your gender the same as the sex you were registered at birth?' confusing. Future development to improve this question should be explored.

DCM found the remaining two questions 'Do you consider yourself trans, or have a trans history?' and 'what do you consider your gender to be?' unsuitable. The term 'trans' was not considered appropriate to include on a government survey, there were comprehension issues with the terms 'trans' and 'trans history' and there were respondents who felt excluded by the 'trans question'. Participants did not like the word 'consider' in the question 'what do you consider your gender to be?' as it was thought 'consider' was not a strong enough term when asking about gender identity as it seemed 'frivolous'.

Further cognitive and quantitative testing should be carried out to assess the impact of DCMs question design recommendations on respondent acceptability and data quality.

2.0 Brief background

2.1 Objectives of this paper

- The objective of this report is to provide Census with question design recommendations based on the results from DCM cognitive testing of the phase 2C gender/sex question designs.
- The sample included cisgender, transgender, non-binary respondents and respondents within intersex characteristics. Respondents with intersex characteristics will herein be referred to as intersex. There were respondents sampled because they potentially held gender critical views. These respondents were recruited via various women's organisations or online forums. Within this report they are referred to as potential objectors.
- Phase 2C was carried out concurrently with phase 2B. Phase 2B tested a gender question (female, male and 'any other gender' categories) plus two of the same alternative designs as tested in 2C. 2B will be reported on separately.

2.2 Objectives of phase 2C cognitive testing

- Phase 2C tested a question on sex and a second question that aimed to capture a person's gender status. The follow-up gender question had three alternative designs. See Appendix A for the designs of the questions tested during phase 2C.

3.0 DCM final design recommendations from 2C

- Recommendations within this report are based on evidence collected from phase 2C testing only. DCM recommend the following two questions to capture information on sex and a person's gender status:
 - 1) 'What is your sex'
 - 2) 'Is your gender the same as the sex you were registered at birth?'

<p>What is your sex? A question relating to gender will follow Female Male</p>

<p>Is your gender the same as the sex you were registered at birth? Yes No, please specify your gender _____ Prefer not to say</p>

3.1 Main question recommendations

- Ask a question what is your sex with binary 'male'/'female' response options.
- Ask a question 'Is your gender the same as the sex you were registered at birth?' with 'yes'/'no' (please specify)/'prefer not to say' response options.
- Locate these questions consecutively. Locate these question at the start of the demographic set of questions (ie straight after name and 'Date of Birth' and before 'marital status' questions).
- Filter children under 16 away from answering the 'is your gender the same as your sex' question.
- Reword the caveat to show the follow-up gender question will be asked straight after the sex question.
- There are further design recommendations and future testing recommendations regarding these two designs in sections 4.2 and 5.2 of this report.

4.0 What is your sex?

4.1 Key findings

4.1.1 Comprehension and answer process

- There were several different ways in which this question was answered:
 - Cisgender respondents and potential objectors answered as expected. They did not have any difficulty answering the question and understood it as intended.
 - There were respondents including non-binary, transgender male and transgender females who answered with their sex registered at birth. There were respondents within this group who felt 'forced' into providing an answer based on their biological sex.
 - Other transgender male and transgender female respondents answered with the binary response options to align with their gender status (eg if transgender female, the answer they gave was female).
 - There were non-responses from transgender male, non-binary and intersex respondents who felt they were unable to give the answer they wanted to (eg transgender male or non-binary).
- Reasons for the answers provided varied across participants and included: biology/anatomy, official documentation (but not always legal status eg Gender Recognition Certificate; which could cause difficulty where sex information across different documents does not match), legal status, and current gender identity (rather than sex at birth).
- In terms of the distinction between 'sex' and 'gender', cisgender respondents appeared to be less clear about the difference and often conflated the two terms. In general, potential objectors, intersex, transgender females and transgender males understood 'sex' and 'gender' to be two different constructs.
- There were differences in how respondents understood the terms 'female' and 'male'. Definitions were based on gender roles, anatomy/biology, experiences and 'how you identify yourself'.
 - Transgender females referred to how you identify/feel, and recordings on official documentation rather than biology. Transgender males referred to labels 'man' and 'woman'. It was not always possible for non-binary participants to provide a definition.

4.1.2 Census acceptability and administration

- Views as to the sex question's acceptability were mixed.
- There were respondents who deemed this question acceptable for inclusion in the mandatory 2021 Census. Opinions included that the question was standard, non-offensive and essential for collecting official statistics (eg to measure discrimination against women and to target services to address any such discrimination).
 - The inclusion of a caveat detailing that respondents would be asked about their gender later contributed to some respondents feeling the question was acceptable.
 - Other respondents reported they would find the question acceptable if there were additional response options included such as 'PNTS', 'non-binary', or 'intersex' to raise awareness of these groups.
 - There mixed opinions about including a third response option such as 'intersex'.
 - There were suggestions from transgender male, transgender female, intersex and cisgender respondents to include additional response options to the binary 'female'/'male' response options. These included: 'Other', 'intersex' (or 'variation of sex characteristics'), 'non-binary', 'transgender male', 'transgender female', 'Mx' or 'Prefer not to say'.
 - In contrast there were reports that an additional response option such as 'intersex' could result in respondents feeling confused.
 - Not all intersex respondents identified as intersex; they were happy to answer female or male. As a result, they would not know whether they should respond with the sex they were assigned at birth or whether they should respond, for example, with intersex. Respondents suggested there should be an additional question for intersex respondents to answer to avoid any confusion. The different ways in which intersex people identified and wanted to answer the question makes it difficult to devise a solution that would meet their varying needs whilst also potentially causing complications for cisgender and other transgender people.
 - PNTS was considered inappropriate because the census is a mandatory survey.
 - An 'other' response option was not considered specific enough.
 - Transgender male, Transgender female and non-binary respondents found this question unacceptable because they considered it intrusive and non-inclusive.
- Ordering the female response option first was considered acceptable. There were respondents that did not express strong views on the order of the response options. Potential objectors appreciated 'female' first. It was also noted that the order was alphabetical.
- It was considered acceptable for children to be asked the sex question. However, there were reports that it was unacceptable for children to be asked answer a question on gender identity or to be asked a question on sex where alternative response options to the binary female/ male options were available.
- Proxy responses were considered appropriate where the household knew each other well but respondents were uncomfortable when the household did not know each other well.
- Intersex respondents did not want anyone else completing the question on their behalf.

- The caveat, that a gender question would follow, was considered useful in some instances because it clarified that question three was asking for sex and that separate information would be collected on gender.
 - The caveat did not always stop transgender males and transgender females answering with their gender identity rather than sex registered at birth or legal sex. There was ambiguity about the location of the question the caveat referred to. Respondents felt the sex question and follow-up 'gender' question should be consecutive.
 - The wording of the caveat meant that respondents wrongly expected a gender identity question (eg what is your gender, with multiple response options and a 'write-in' response option) rather than the question asking whether your gender was different from sex registered at birth.
- Potential objectors felt there was a clear need for separate questions on sex and gender.

4.2 Recommendations - What is your sex?

4.2.1 DCM recommended question design:

What is your sex?
 A question relating to gender will follow
 Female
 Male

- DCM recommend asking a question on sex. DCM recommend further testing to the question:
- **Question stem:** Ask 'what is your sex'.
- **Response options:**
 - DCM recommend including binary 'male'/'female' response options. This is on the basis that respondents might not understand additional response options as intended, intersex is more complicated than just adding this as a category (as discussed earlier) and PNTS is inappropriate given this is a key census output.
 - DCM recommend ordering response options as 'female' first – respondents considered this acceptable.
- **Guidance:** Inclusion of guidance in the following way is recommended to ensure maximum understanding of the question.
 - Provide clear guidance on the information required (eg sex registered at birth, legal sex). This could avoid respondents answering with their gender identity, where their gender identity is not the same as their sex registered at birth or legal sex. This could increase question comprehension and potential reliability of answers provided.
 - Include guidance on how respondents should answer if they have not legally changed their sex but, for example, have had medical procedures towards changing their sex/gender.
 - Indicate which official documentation they should refer to if respondents are unsure how to answer.
 - Explain how the census would like intersex respondents to answer: with how they were assigned at birth or with how they now identify (if this is different).
 - Define 'male' and 'female' and explain why it is important to capture information on sex and gender separately.

- The guidance could explain how answers on sex are used in official statistics (eg on health and health service provision). It could also outline that answers to the follow-up gender question will be used in official statistics never previously produced.
- Guidance could be provided to parents who have children whose gender is different from their sex registered at birth.
- **Location:** Locate the sex and the follow-up 'gender' question consecutively.
- **Caveat:** The caveat could be more noticeable. Consider testing where the caveat could be situated in the question to be more noticeable. The wording of the caveat should be less ambiguous, with respect to the word 'a gender question' and 'later': potential wording could include 'A question relating to gender will follow'. The caveat should only be visible to respondents aged 16 years and older. On paper the caveat should incorporate some reference to whom the follow-up 'gender' question applies to. Consider including a 'hover-over' or 'look-up' function in the caveat of the follow-up gender question to help respondents understand how they should answer the sex question.
- **Routing:** None. Everyone (including children) should answer this question.
- **Privacy:** It should be made clear to respondents that they are able to request private forms.

4.2.2 DCM recommended future testing and actions:

- Carry out testing to explore the impact of locating the sex and the follow-up gender question consecutively.
- Further research could explore perceptions of proxy responses where households are less familiar, such as large student households.
- If any further changes are made to the question wording, note and guidance, further qualitative or quantitative research would be advisable to assess the impact of such changes.

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

5.1 Key findings

- In general, respondents answered as expected. They did not have any difficulty understanding the question and provided the correct information.
- Cisgender, transgender male, non-binary and some potential objectors reported the question as acceptable. They found the question inclusive of all respondents on the gender spectrum.
- There were potential objectors who answered with PNTS because they did not agree with the concept of gender. There were reports they felt the question forced them to identify with gender, however, they do not identify with gender. Their view was that gender is socially constructed to oppress women and something you have to perform (ie putting on make- up to leave the house). They identified only with biological sex as a fact of what they are.
- The write-in box was not always completed when respondents answered 'no'.
- Intersex respondents reported this question as unacceptable because they felt excluded. Intersex respondents recognised the term 'assigned at birth' and did not think the term 'registered at birth' represented them. The length of the description box was considered too short for them to provide information on their intersex characteristics.

- Overall, it was thought acceptable to collect information on sex and gender separately in a 'two-step' question (eg a question on 'sex', and a question asking 'is your gender the same as the sex you were registered at birth'). There were, however, respondents who wanted gender/sex information to be collected in one question that asked about gender.
- Respondents were unsure how ONS defined gender. As a result, there were respondents who were unsure whether this question applied to people who had medically changed, legally changed, or identified with another gender.
- Respondents were also confused by the inclusion of two concepts within the same question: 'gender' and 'sex registered at birth'. These respondents thought it was excessive to use both terms in the same question. It was suggested by respondents that one of the two concepts should be removed and respondents should be asked 'how do you identify?'.
- Sex registered at birth was understood to mean what was on a birth certificate.
- 'Please specify your gender' caused some confusion among transgender respondents. On seeing this instruction they felt that they had answered the 'sex' question incorrectly.
 - Non-binary respondents felt reassured by this instruction because they knew they could expand on their answer.
- There were respondents who thought it should be voluntary with a PNTS response option included and clearly signposted as voluntary. Among transgender and intersex respondents there was the view that including the question as voluntary was a 'cop-out' from collecting official statistics and ONS would not get the accurate statistics that are needed on transgender and non-binary populations.
- Respondent views of the appropriate age to ask this question varied. The overall agreement was aged 16 and above.
 - Cisgender participants thought the question should be asked to children aged: 15, 16, 18, or 21 years; or the legal age that children can change their sex.
 - Transgender females thought that the question could be asked of all people, or people aged over 16.
 - Non-binary participants considered appropriate age of children to be asked this question ranged from the age five or from the age of 16.
 - Potential objectors thought that the question was appropriate for people over 16.
- Perceptions of proxy responses also varied. Whilst some respondents thought it was acceptable, others felt it was too personal.

5.2 Recommendations – Is your gender the same as the sex you were registered at birth?

5.2.1 DCM recommended question design:

<p>Is your gender the same as the sex you were registered at birth?</p> <p>Yes</p> <p>No, please specify your gender _____</p> <p>Prefer not to say</p>

- DCM recommended ‘is your gender the same as the sex you were registered at birth’ as the follow-up gender question to the ‘sex’ question. DCM recommend adaptations and further testing to this question:
- **Question stem:** Consider conducting further cognitive testing of the wording ‘Is your gender the same as the sex you were assigned at birth’, rather than ‘registered at birth’, to enable intersex respondents to answer this question. Intersex respondents referred to ‘assigned at birth’ rather than ‘registered at birth’. As result, some of these intersex respondents reported feeling excluded or unsure about how to answer this question.
 - If it is not possible to include ‘assigned’ within the question stem, guidance or instructions should include information on how ONS want intersex respondents to answer.
- **Response options:**
 - Include a larger description box to enable intersex respondents to describe their intersex characteristics.
 - If it was a priority to improve acceptability for potential objectors then consider including an ‘agnostic’ or ‘no gender option’. However, there would need to be testing conducted on this to explore the impact on cisgender and non-binary respondents as they may be unsure how to answer.
- **Instruction:**
 - Provide clear instruction for paper respondents who answer ‘no’ to this question to write-in their gender and explain how their write-in response would contribute towards official statistics.
 - Ensure the voluntary nature of the question is clearly sign-posted within the question and in the guidance.
- **Guidance:**
 - The guidance should explain how the information captured from this question will feed into official statistics.
 - The guidance should indicate that this question is voluntary.
- **Location:** The ‘sex’ question and ‘is your gender the same as the sex you were registered at birth’ should be located consecutively.
- **Routing:** Children under 16 years of age should be routed away from this question.
- **Privacy:** It should be made clear to respondents that they are able to request private forms.

5.1.2 DCM recommended future testing:

- Carry out cognitive interviewing to test whether guidance explaining how to answer increases question comprehension, reliability of answers provided and therefore the quality of information collected.
- As the findings revealed that respondents are confused by the inclusion of the two terms 'gender' and 'sex registered at birth', options to improve this question should be explored. Future testing should be conducted to assess the impact of any improvements.
- Carry out cognitive interviews exploring the acceptability of the wording 'Is your gender the same as the sex you were registered (or assigned) at birth?' if applicable to census requirements.
- Explore including a caveat or note in the guidance detailing why there are two questions one on sex and one on gender.

6.0 What do you consider your gender to be?

6.1 Key findings

- Respondents answered as expected and understood this question to ask the same information as the 'is your gender the same as the sex you were registered at birth' question.
- Cisgender, transgender male and potential objectors thought this question asked whether your sex or gender was different from that assigned at birth. Cisgender and transgender female respondents stated the question was how you identify yourself. There were reports the question was asking about two different concepts in one question.
- Participants held different perceptions of the acceptability of this question.
 - Participants generally thought this question was acceptable to ask in the mandatory 2021 Census and preferred this version to the 'is your gender the same as the sex you were registered at birth'. There were respondents who considered this question politer and thought it worked better with the sex question.
 - In contrast, there were strong views expressed that this question was unacceptable, too complicated and ambiguous. Transgender male, cisgender, non-binary and intersex participants preferred 'is your gender the same as the sex you were registered at birth'. These respondents did not think the answer options matched the question stem, preferred to see the detail in the question stem than the answer options and did not like the word 'consider'. It was thought 'consider' was not a strong enough term when asking about gender identity. There were reports from respondents that gender was so 'ingrained' they considered the use of the word 'consider' in this context, 'frivolous'.
- In general respondents did not like the inclusion of two concepts 'sex' and 'gender' in one question and recommended removing 'sex'.
- Among intersex respondents, there were those who felt excluded by this question because it included the term 'sex registered at birth'.
- A potential objector felt forced to answer, 'same as sex registered as birth'. They suggested including an agnostic or no gender response option (like the religion question). They felt PNTS did not represent their agnostic views.

- Respondents considered the appropriate age to ask this question was approximately age 15-16 years and above.

6.2 Recommendations – What do you consider your gender to be?

6.2.1 DCM recommended question design:

What is your gender?

- Same as sex registered at birth
- Different from sex registered at birth, please specify your gender _____
- No gender
- Prefer not to say

- To ensure data quality and acceptability of collecting information on gender, DCM do not think this question is suitable to include within the 2021 Census. This is on the basis that there were mixed feelings about this question, where: respondents did not like the term consider, and better comprehension of the question was reported if the wording was included within the question stem rather than response options.
- If there is a need to pursue this question design there are recommendations below concerning how to adapt the question based on feedback given during the cognitive interviewing and DCM question design principles.
- **Question stem and answer options:**
 - Remove the word ‘consider’ from the question and ask, ‘what is your gender?’.
 - If it was a priority to improve acceptability for potential objectors then consider including an ‘agnostic’ or ‘no gender option’. However, there would need to be testing conducted on this to explore the impact on cisgender and non-binary responses.
 - Keep the write-in option.
- **Guidance:** Ensure the voluntary nature of the question is clearly sign-posted within the question and / or in the guidance.
- **Routing:** This question should be asked for respondents aged 16 and above. Children should be routed away as from this question.

6.2.2 DCM recommended future testing:

- Testing could explore further the impact of reading comprehension on the ability to understand the question.
- Future testing should assess respondents’ understanding of this question once controlled for potential order effects ie with ‘what do you consider...’ presented first.
- As the findings revealed that respondents are confused by the inclusion of the two terms ‘gender’ and ‘sex registered at birth’ improvements to this question could be explored. Future testing should be conducted to assess the impact of any improvements.

7.0 Do you consider yourself to be trans, or have a trans history?

7.1 Key findings

- Cisgender respondents did not always understand the term 'trans' and did not like the abbreviation. It was considered inappropriate because of connotations with the term 'transvestite'. On an official government survey, respondents expected the term 'transgender'.
- There were differences between groups in what they understood the term 'trans' to encompass, ranging from: transgender male and transgender female only; to the full spectrum of terms associated with gender.
- 'Trans-history' was rarely understood across the range of respondents. There were references to transitioning back to sex registered at birth. ONS' intended use of 'trans history' was to capture those respondents who have transitioned and no longer consider themselves as transgender.
- This design was considered unacceptable by most groups. Reasons included:
 - the question was considered 'ridiculous', not applicable to most, and respondents thought it was likely to spark a media campaign (eg through asking over 65s if they had a trans history).
 - the terms 'trans' and 'trans history' were considered complicated.
 - the question was thought to exclude respondents whose gender is different from their sex registered at birth but do not feel they are transgender or did not identify with the term trans (eg non-binary or those in 'stealth mode').
- In general, respondents preferred the 'what do you consider your gender to be?' or 'is your gender the same as the sex you were registered at birth?' questions due to the terminology used. However, among transgender males and transgender females there were participants who considered the 'trans' question the most acceptable design to raise awareness and collect official statistics on their population.
- The appropriate age to ask this question was considered to be 16 years and above. This was on the basis that information on younger children cannot be retracted if they are experimenting with their gender during the 2021 Census but later decide they do not want to be recorded as transgender.

7.2 Recommendation – Do you consider yourself to be trans, or have a trans history

7.2.1 DCM recommended question design:

Do you consider yourself to be transgender?
 Yes, please specify your gender _____,
 No,
 Prefer not to say

- DCM does not recommend including this question. It does not capture respondents who feel their gender is different from the sex they were registered at birth, but that do not consider themselves to be transgender. If there is a need to pursue this question design there are recommendations below concerning how to adapt the question based on feedback given during cognitive interviewing and based on DCM question design principles.
- **Question stem:**
 - Remove the term 'trans history' or include a note that explains what 'trans history' means.

- Use 'transgender' instead of 'trans'.
- Test alternative question wording, such as 'Do you identify yourself as part of the transgender spectrum' or 'do you consider yourself to be transgender' or 'Are you transgender' or 'is your gender different from the sex you were registered at birth'.
- Make it clear to respondents that this question is voluntary.
- **Response options:** Consider including a write-in box within the 'yes' response option (this should be tested).
- **Guidance:**
 - Provide guidance about how different identities should respond.
 - Define transgender and transgender history, if transgender history is included within the question stem.
 - Provide guidance on how intersex respondents should answer.
- **Routing:** Ask this question to respondents aged 16 years and older.

7.2.2 DCM recommended future testing:

- Consider exploring the acceptability of different variations of the question wording (see question stem recommendations).
- Consider exploring whether a write-in box to this question increases its acceptability.

8.0 Preference out of the follow up to sex question designs

- In general, respondents thought 'what do you consider your gender to be?' and the 'is your gender the same as your sex' questions were acceptable to an extent. Respondents felt these questions were clearer and easier to understand than the 'trans' / 'trans history' question.
- In general, respondents felt the 'trans' / 'trans history' question was the least acceptable out of the three designs. However, transgender males and transgender females that found this question the most suitable design and felt this this question was an acknowledgment of them.

"Yes, bang, you've asked the question, congratulations. /.../ Hoorah, recognition, we exist, it's official." (Transgender female)

9.0 Perceptions of question location

- Overall, participants felt the sex and follow-up 'gender' question (and in some cases the sexual orientation question) were on the same or similar topic and therefore should be located next to each other. For online use they thought sex and gender questions should be consecutive but on separate pages. Respondents thought this would also help to reduce any anxiety the respondent could feel when anticipating what the gender question would be (after they read the information in the caveat).

"...it says it will come later, but they might be thinking when's it going to come. They might be carrying a little bit of anxiety: when is it going to come; how is it going to come; what's it going to be like...if someone said to me there's a question about intersex, I'd probably try and scan through it to try and find it because I'd be so curious...For me it should come a lot earlier on.

Yeah, a lot earlier: maybe after the sex question, before marital status. Yeah, I think it should follow on soon after the sex one. I hadn't realised it was so far down.” (Intersex participant)

- There were cisgender, non-binary participants and potential objectors who wanted the gender question located first to help inform respondents how they should complete the sex question and reduce their potential anxiety.
- There were participants who voiced a desire to see question 17 dropped altogether and for all response options from Q17 to be incorporated into the sex question.

11.0 Appendix A: Phase 2C Questions DCM tested

What is your sex?

Paper design

3 What is your sex?

➔ NOTE: a gender question will follow later

Female

Male

Online design

What is your sex?

A gender question will follow later

Female

Male

[Save and continue](#)

[Save and complete later](#)

[Previous](#)

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

Paper design

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

Yes

No, please specify your gender

Prefer not to say

Online design

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

Yes

No

Prefer not to say

[Save and continue](#)

[Save and complete later](#)

[Previous](#)

What do you consider your gender to be?

Paper design

2 What do you consider your gender to be?

Same as sex registered at birth

Different from sex registered at birth, please specify your gender

Prefer not to say

Online design

What do you consider your gender to be?

Same as sex registered at birth

Different from sex registered at birth

Prefer not to say

[Save and continue](#)

[Save and complete later](#)

[Previous](#)

Do you consider yourself to be trans, or have a trans history

Paper design

2 Do you consider yourself to be trans, or have a trans history?

Yes

No

Online design

Do you consider yourself to be trans, or have a trans history?

Yes

No

Prefer not to say

[Save and continue](#)