Preliminary results from testing a question on sexual identity, and some challenges around collecting gender identity

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UK Context

- Three Census taking authorities in UK:
  - ONS (England and Wales)
  - National Records of Scotland
  - Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency
- All work closely together
- Presentation focuses on England and Wales
What do we mean by sexual identity

• Subjective view of oneself, up to the individual how they define themselves, may change over time

• Sexual orientation
  - Sexual identity
  - Sexual attraction
  - Sexual behaviour
User need

- All three UK offices identified a user need for information about sexual identity and gender identity through topic consultations related to the Equality Act 2010
Sexual identity – previous research

- ONS – 2006
  - Concerns regarding privacy, accuracy, acceptability and conceptual definitions

- ONS – sexual identity project 2009
  - Developed a harmonised question used on the Annual Population Survey
  - Also developed harmonised self-completion question

- NRS – Scottish census small scale test
  - Question the “accuracy” and “utility” of the data
Sexual identity – a self-completion question

• ONS has undertaken initial testing of a self-completion question
  - Spring 2016 – focus groups
  - Summer 2016 – cognitive interviews

ASK ALL AGED 16 OR OVER
Which of the following options best describes how you think of yourself?
      This question is voluntary
1. Heterosexual or Straight,
2. Gay or Lesbian,
3. Bisexual,
4. Other
Sexual identity – research findings

• Question wording
  - Question stem does not refer to the topic – need to look at response categories for guidance
  - Cognitive testing – answered in accordance with meaning
  - Recommend question wording remain the same

• Response categories
  - Response categories should be used unchanged
  - Consider inclusion of additional category of “asexual” however this is untested
  - Review responses to “Other, write in”
Sexual identity – research findings

• Acceptability and scope
  - Support and objection
  - Ask of those aged 16 and over

• Voluntary status and prefer not to say
  - Voluntary status would allow refusal
  - However this could impact on data quality and utility
  - “Prefer not to say” – complex, no firm conclusion

• Answering within a household
  - Answer accurately, socially acceptable answer, not answer
Sexual identity – research findings

• Proxy responses
  - Challenging!
  - Inaccuracy and discomfort in some circumstances
  - Difficult to explain and enforce a “no proxy” approach, especially as not done for other questions

• Private response

• Question location
  - No consensus from research
  - Could place with demographic or identity questions, or at end of questionnaire
Sexual identity – next steps

- Decision on approach to inclusion of question in 2017 test
  - Where to locate the question
  - Whether to include “prefer not to say”

- Public acceptability testing, 2016/17
  - Reactions to providing response
  - Reasons for non-response
  - Impact on completing the Census
Sexual identity – evaluation of 2017 test

- Overall response
- Overall response by population group
- Questionnaire drop-off
- Item non-response
- Quality of responses
- Quality for other questions
- Public reaction
Gender Identity – What do we mean?

• Gender identity – “the way in which an individual identifies with a gender category”

• Trans – an overarching term used to describe those whose gender identities do not match the sex assigned at birth

• Gender reassignment – people who are proposing to undergo, are undergoing, or have undergone a process (or part of a process) for the purpose of reassigning their sex – Equality Act 2010
Gender Identity – Challenges

• 2009 – ONS – Household surveys not appropriate for collecting gender identity
  - Sensitivity of topic and terminology
  - Respondent burden – no of questions needed
  - Whether data collected would be fit for purpose

• Concerns regarding public acceptability and privacy
  - Those who have legally changed their gender are not obliged to reveal their gender history
  - Data collection should not adversely impact on collection of other variables e.g. sex
Gender identity – research plan

• Review the ONS ‘Trans data position paper’ published in 2009
• Seeking to learn from other NSI’s
• Working with stakeholders to understand the data required, and concepts to be measured
• Exploring options to meet the user need

• Public acceptability research alongside sexual identity
Legislation

- ONS expect that including a question on sexual identity or gender identity would require an amendment to the Census Act 1920.
Conclusion

• Clear user need for these topics in relation to the Equality Act 2010 across the UK
• People who identify with minority categories within these concepts are hard to count populations due to the private nature of the attribute being measured.
• ONS conducting further research into the most appropriate way to meet the user need, taking into account data quality, public acceptability and Census legislation.
• Research will inform a decision on whether to recommend inclusion in the 2021 Census.