

## Collecting equality data: Harmonised standards and best practice

**This document provides guidance on collecting data on protected characteristics. It is not designed to be a monitoring form but rather provides guidance on using established questions.**

The document lists the best practice questions for each of the protected characteristics; age, disability, ethnicity, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, religion, sex and sexual identity, and also for the additional equality related category of national identity.

Where available, harmonised questions are presented. However, harmonised questions have not been developed for gender reassignment and for pregnancy and maternity (in English nor in Welsh). For gender reassignment, questions developed by the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) have been included, and for pregnancy and maternity, questions developed by the Equality Challenge Unit (ECU) have been included. It should also be noted that Welsh language versions of two of the English harmonised questions have not been tested, and therefore cannot be considered as 'harmonised questions', namely, the Welsh language versions of the two questions on disability and the sexual identity question.

Harmonised questions are used in large scale surveys such as the Annual Population Survey, the Labour Force Survey, the National Survey for Wales and the 2011 Census of Population.

### Background

The 2007 Cabinet Office-commissioned Equalities Review (ER) highlighted inconsistencies in the collection of equality data and recommended that harmonised concepts and questions be applied across the field of equality. Further information on the Equalities Review is available from: [Equalities data review](#)

The Office for National Statistics (ONS) harmonisation programme sought to meet this recommendation by standardising inputs and outputs for use in National Statistics with the aim of making it easier for users to draw clearer and more robust comparisons between data sources. Further information on the ONS Harmonisation Programme is available from: [ONS Harmonisation Programme](#)

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## Data Collection

The first consideration should always be whether you have a clear use for the information. If there is no clear plan in place to make use of the information then collecting it is unlikely to be a good use of resources, and may be unethical. The second consideration should be whether it is sensible to attempt to collect the information via a survey or monitoring form (rather than another approach such as qualitative research) given the nature of the group and the particular issues you are interested in.

When considering whether to collect equalities information through a survey, remember that:

- large-scale, high-quality sample surveys are costly, and the population subgroup is often so small that the sample would have to be very large indeed to collect robust information;
- it can be difficult to identify well-tested questions, or formulate new questions that produce accurate results: for example, respondents may not understand what is being asked or may not wish to provide the information asked for;
- asking about some sensitive topics can offend respondents. This could lead to complaints, negative media coverage, and even to reduced response rates.

## Why use harmonised questions?

The harmonisation programme undertaken by ONS highlights the advantages of using harmonised questions in terms of both data quality and data comparability.

Harmonisation is used to establish a common knowledge base of standard definitions and methods. The harmonised questions presented in this document have been widely tested, both cognitively and in large scale surveys, to ensure that they collect the correct data for their intended purpose and that the data quality is not affected by the phrasing of the question, the order of response categories or by the order in which the questions are asked. For example, research shows that there is an order effect that is best managed by asking national identity before ethnic group, and that people were happier when asked about their national identity first.

The use of standardised questions allows for data to be comparable both across organisations and the wider context. Data collected by organisations may be benchmarked against data from large scale surveys if the same question is used.

A related issue involves reducing the burden on respondents, for example, placing the 'no religion' response category first ensures the removal of those who are not religious and therefore do not need to progress through the list of religions presented in order to answer the question. Similarly, the placing of 'White' as the first response category for ethnicity means that the majority of respondents (in most cases) do not need to read all the response categories. Only those people assigning themselves to a non-majority group need to proceed through the category list.

The harmonised questions have been developed by the ONS to meet international standards and to comply with UK and EU legislation. A link to the ONS Harmonisation Programme is provided in the useful links section at the end of the document.

## Mode of delivery

The questions presented in this document are intended to be used in paper based forms and questionnaires.

It is important to note that questions may differ slightly in relation to the mode of presentation, for example, questions asked on a face-to-face basis will differ from those asked via telephone or on a paper form. Details of presentation for different modes of delivery can be found on the ONS Harmonisation Programme web pages.

## Prefer not to say responses

Most of the questions do not contain a 'prefer not to say' option as the main vehicle for delivery is currently via face-to-face or telephone surveys.

'Prefer not to say' may be added to the end of the answer categories however it is important to consider the reasons why people may prefer not to answer a particular question, namely issues around privacy, in response to sensitive questions or as a result of the perception that a particular answer may be socially undesirable.

The inclusion of a 'Prefer not to say' option is likely to lead to an increase in non-response/missing data and this will affect overall comparability with other benchmark data collected by telephone or through face-to-face interviews.

However, it is recognised that individuals may leave questions unanswered for various reasons, including not reading or not understanding a particular question, therefore genuine non-response could be gauged by the inclusion of a 'prefer not to say' option.

## Harmonised and Best Practice Questions

### Age

It is recommended that data on age is collected using the following question:

*What is your date of birth?*

Date of birth input data can be translated into age at time of survey and allows for data on age to be aggregated to different age groups, for example, ages 0-15 or, if a more detailed breakdown is needed, ages 0-4, 5-9, 10-14.

The level of aggregation used will depend on the purpose of the analysis and the quality of the data, including the sample size in the different age groups.

Table 1 details the recommended categories, though a full breakdown may not be required.

**Table 1: Harmonised outputs for age group**

0-24 years	0-15 years	0-4 years
		5-10 years
		11-15 years
	16-24 years	16-19 years
		20-24 years
25-44 years	25-34 years	25-29 years
		30-34 years
	35-44 years	35-39 years
		40-44 years
45-64 years	45-54 years	45-49 years
		50-54 years
	55-64 years	55-59 years
		60-64 years
65-74 years		65-69 years
		70-74 years
75+ years		75-84 years
		85+

Table 1 details the standardised output categories used in many surveys.

## Sex

It is recommended that data on sex is collected using the following question:

*What is your sex?*

- Male
- Female

An answer option of 'other' is recommended by the Equality Challenge Unit (ECU). The use of 'other' is deemed appropriate for people who associate with the terms/labels intersex, androgyne, intergender, ambigender, gender fluid, polygender and genderqueer.

## Disability

### Social model of disability

In 2002, the Welsh Government adopted the Social Model of Disability as the foundation for its work on disability. The model aims to encourage society to consider the concept of disability in a different way. The basis for this model is that people with impairments are disabled by physical, attitudinal and organisational barriers created by society.

A harmonised question on social model disability was not available in time for the publication of this document however work is ongoing across UK government and devolved administrations to develop harmonised question(s) to collect social model disability data.

### Medical model of disability

The harmonised questions on disability are designed to collect data in line with the medical model of disability. In the medical model disabled people are defined by their impairment or health condition, which is perceived as causing dependence and a need for treatment or care. Statutory reporting requirements on disability are also largely driven by the medical model of disability.

Information on disability can be collected using the following questions:

- Do you have any physical or mental health conditions or illnesses lasting or expected to last for 12 months or more?
  1. Yes
  2. No
- Does your condition or illness/do any of your conditions or illnesses reduce your ability to carry-out day-to-day activities?
  1. Yes, a lot
  2. Yes, a little
  3. Not at all

Respondents who answer 'Yes' to question 1 and 'Yes, a lot' or 'Yes, a little' to question 2 are classified as disabled according to the Equality Act 2010.
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The harmonised questions on disability collect data on the core disabled population but exclude the non-core disabled population who are covered by the Equality Act 2010. This is due to problems with capturing specified progressive conditions and with implementing additional data capture elements on surveys. Those excluded include:

- a) Those with a progressive condition specified in the Act (namely HIV/AIDS, Cancer or Multiple Sclerosis) whether or not the condition has a substantial adverse effect on carrying-out day-to-day activities,
- b) Those who would be restricted without medication or treatment, and,
- c) Those that have been restricted in the past but are no longer restricted.

Guidance on using a suite of questions to capture impairment type (of those who are disabled or of all respondents) is available: <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/guide-method/harmonisation/primary-set-of-harmonised-concepts-and-questions/index.html>

To capture disability data using a single question the 2011 Census asks 'Are your day-to-day activities limited because of a health problem or disability which has lasted, or is expected to last, at least 12 months?' The corresponding answer categories are:

1. Yes, limited a lot.
2. Yes, limited a little.
3. No

It is suggested that where space is restricted this question may be incorporated.

## National Identity

Information on national identity in Wales can be collected using the following question:

*How would you describe your national identity?*

*Please choose all that apply.*

1. Welsh
2. English
3. Scottish
4. Northern Irish
5. British
6. Other, please describe.

It is recommended that the national identity question is presented immediately before the ethnic group question.
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## Ethnicity

Information on ethnicity in Wales can be collected using the following question:

*What is your ethnic group?*

*Choose one option that best describes your ethnic group or background.*

### White

1. Welsh / English / Scottish / Northern Irish / British
2. Irish
3. Gypsy or Irish Traveller
4. Any other White background, please describe

### Mixed / multiple ethnic groups

5. White and Black Caribbean
6. White and Black African
7. White and Asian
8. Any other Mixed / multiple ethnic background, please describe

### Asian / Asian British

9. Indian
10. Pakistani
11. Bangladeshi
12. Chinese
13. Any other Asian background, please describe

### Black / African / Caribbean / Black British

14. African
15. Caribbean
16. Any other Black / African / Caribbean background, please describe

### Other ethnic group

17. Arab
18. Any other ethnic group, please describe

Data may be presented as broad groups or, if disclosure is not an issue, the full detailed breakdown.

## **Religion**

Information on religion in Wales can be collected using the concept of religious affiliation and employing the following question:

*What is your religion?*

1. No religion
2. Christian (all denominations)
3. Buddhist
4. Hindu
5. Jewish
6. Muslim
7. Sikh
8. Any other religion, please describe

## **Gender Reassignment / Gender Identity**

A harmonised question on gender reassignment has not been developed by ONS due to (1) problems with defining the different trans-groups and, (2) issues around the inclusion of such a question on the household surveys carried out by ONS. Further information about these issues can be found in the ONS 'Trans Data Position Paper': <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/guide-method/measuring-equality/equality/equality-data-review/index.html>

The Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) recommends the following questions for capturing data on transgender groups. Question 1 asks for sex at birth, while Question 2 asks gender identity:

1. At birth, were you described as....  
Please tick one option
  - a. Male
  - b. Female
  - c. Intersex
  - d. I prefer not to say
  
2. Which of the following describes how you think of yourself?  
Please tick one option
  - a. Male
  - b. Female
  - c. In another way: \_\_\_\_\_

Question 1, when used in combination with question 2, allows for a transgender identity and/or history to be collected. It is recommended that this question is only asked of those people aged 16 and over.

The EHRC have published some notes of caution with regards to monitoring gender identity. Please see the following webpage if you are planning to collect this data:

<http://www.equalityhumanrights.com/advice-and-guidance/before-the-equality-act/guidance-for-employers-pre-october-10/guidance-on-recruiting-and-supporting-trans-people/trans-monitoring/>

Further information is available in EHRC Research report 75: Monitoring equality - Developing a gender identity question' and the associated paper 'summary document on how to collect information on gender identity'. Both documents are available from:

<http://www.equalityhumanrights.com/publications/our-research/research-reports/research-reports-71-80/>

## **Marriage and Civil Partnership**

Information on marriage and civil partnership was collected in the 2011 Census using the question:

What is your legal marital or same-sex civil partnership status?

1. Never married and never registered in a same sex civil partnership.
2. Married
3. Separated, but still legally married
4. Divorced
5. Widowed
6. In a registered same-sex civil partnership
7. Separated, but still legally in a same-sex civil partnership
8. Formerly in a same-sex civil partnership which is now legally dissolved
9. Surviving partner from a same-sex civil partnership

## **Pregnancy and Maternity**

There is no harmonised question on pregnancy and maternity however the Equality Challenge Unit (ECU) recommends the questions detailed below.

Are you currently pregnant or have you been pregnant in the last year?

1. Yes
2. No
3. Prefer not to say

In the past year, have you taken

1. Maternity leave
2. Additional paternity leave (e.g. more than 2 weeks)
3. Adoption leave

## **Sexual Identity**

Sexual Orientation, as defined by the Equalities Act 2010, refers to 'an individual's sexual orientation towards - (a) persons of the same sex as him or her (b) persons of the opposite sex, or (c) both'. Research shows that the concept of sexual orientation encompasses different dimensions, including attraction, behaviour, fantasy, emotion and identity making it difficult to measure. The harmonised question is intended to ask about sexual identity, which is the dimension most related to certain groups' experience of disadvantage and discrimination.

Information on sexual identity can be collected using the following question:

*Which of the following options best describes how you think of yourself?*

1. Heterosexual or Straight,
2. Gay or Lesbian,
3. Bisexual,
4. Other,
5. Prefer not to say.

Gay and lesbian form a single category, rather than separate categories, on the assumption that sex is asked as a separate question. Thus an analysis of sexual identity by gender would provide the tools to disaggregate the gay and lesbian populations.

Research has demonstrated potential order effects when the sexual orientation question is placed after the religion question. It is recommended that the sexual identity question should be placed before the question on religion.

It is recommended that this question is only asked of those people aged 16 and over.



## Useful Links

The Office for National Statistics Harmonisation Programme categorises harmonised questions into primary and secondary standards.

Primary standards include demographic information and relationships, ethnic group and disability.

Secondary standards include national identity, religious identity and sexual identity.

<http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/guide-method/harmonisation/harmonisation-programme/index.html>

The Equality Challenge Unit (ECU) works to further and support equality and diversity for staff and students in higher education across all four nations of the UK, and in further education in Scotland. The ECU is funded by the higher education sector's representative bodies and the UK higher education funding bodies including, amongst others, Universities UK, Higher Education Funding Council for Wales and the Department for Employment and Learning: <http://www.ecu.ac.uk/>

2011 Census questions: <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/guide-method/census/2011/index.html>

Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC): <http://www.equalityhumanrights.com/>