COLLECTING EQUALITY INFORMATION
GUIDANCE ON ASKING QUESTIONS ON:

SEXUAL ORIENTATION

one
scotland
SCOTTISH GOVERNMENT

Introduction: why is it necessary to collect information about sexual orientation?

Discrimination on the basis of someone's sexual orientation in the provision of goods and services is prohibited by law under the Equality Act (Sexual Orientation Regulations) 2007. As part of the Equality Act (2010), a new public sector equality duty came into force on 6 April 2011. The duty requires Government and public authorities to tackle discrimination and promote equal opportunities. The duty covers nine protected characteristics, including sexual orientation. It is recommended that Government and public authorities follow good practice in gathering and using relevant evidence and information. Sexual orientation statistics are important for monitoring discrimination and inequality. The information is also used to inform resource allocation, policy formulation and service delivery.

"Poor measurement and a lack of transparency have contributed to society and governments being unable to tackle persistent inequalities and their causes. The data available on inequality are utterly inadequate in many ways, limiting people's ability to understand problems and their causes, set priorities and track progress. And even where data do exist, they are not consistently used well or published in a way that makes sense."

This was one of the conclusions of 'Fairness and Freedom, The Final Report of the Equalities Review' in 2007. This was followed by a report from the Office of National Statistics which identified 8 principles for collection and dissemination of equality data. Principle 4 states that:

"Consistency of methods, concepts and classifications is fundamental in the collection, analysis and presentation of equality statistics."

The equality review also highlighted the severe lack of data there is relating to sexual orientation. We have provided this guidance note to help you collect the best quality information you can on **sexual orientation**. The Office for National Statistics (ONS) started a project in 2006 to develop and test a question to collect information on sexual orientation, information on this project can be accessed at the following web address http://www.ons.gov.uk/about-statistics/measuring-equality/sexual-identity-project/index.html.

What is meant by sexual orientation?

Sexual orientation is a combination of emotional, romantic, sexual or affectionate attraction or feelings towards another person, it is important to acknowledge that sexual orientation is not just related to sex but is also about a person's identity (Stonewall 2008). How a person determines their sexual orientation can be based on any combination of the above attractions or feelings or behaviours, it can be fluid over time and in different contexts, an individual may not even know what their sexual orientation is.

Recommended questions

These are the recommended questions for collecting data on **self-identified sexual orientation**, they have been developed for a number of different modes of delivery with slight changes in each. We recommend that the questions be used as they appear here. These questions should be asked of respondents aged 16+.

Face-to-face interview

Which of the options on this card best describes how you think of yourself? Please just read out the number next to the description (NB – The numbers on each card are different for each person)

27. Heterosexual / Straight
21. Gay / Lesbian
24. Bisexual
29. Other

(Spontaneous DK/Refusal)

Telephone interview

I will now read out a list of terms people sometimes use to describe how they think of themselves.

(Interviewer read the list to end without pausing: Note that 'heterosexual or straight' is one option; 'gay or lesbian' is one option)

1. Heterosexual or straight
2. Gay or lesbian
3. Bisexual
4. Other

(Spontaneous DK/Refusal)

As I read the list again please say 'yes' when you hear the option that best describes how you think of yourself.

Self-completed questionnaire / postal

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

☐ Heterosexual / Straight
☐ Gay / Lesbian
☐ Bisexual
☐ Other

The Office for National Statistics Sexual Identity project

In 2006 the Office for National Statistics (ONS) initiated a project to develop and test a question to collect information on sexual orientation for use on social surveys. All the work conducted by the ONS relating to this project, including question development, testing and guidance on using the question, can be found at http://www.ons.gov.uk/about-statistics/measuring-equality/sexual-identity-project/index.html

After initial consultation the ONS decided to develop and test a question on self-perceived sexual identity. The ONS define sexual identity as being about what a person is, not what they do: "it is important to remember that it is not specifically about sexual behaviour or attraction, although these aspects might relate to the formation of identity" and "perhaps sharing a collective social identity with a group of other people" (ONS, 2009)[1].

The ONS "deemed sexual identity the most relevant dimension of sexual orientation to investigate given its relation to experiences of disadvantage and discrimination, also testing showed that respondents were not in favour of asking about sexual behaviour in a social survey context, nor would it be appropriate in general purpose government surveys" (ONS, 2009)[1].

The Scottish Government recommends using the title self-identified sexual orientation when using this question and when reporting the results. Gender identity is a widely used term in Scotland that is used to describe how a person defines their gender and can become confused with sexual identity.

Presentation of the question and terminology

The words used in the question stem have been carefully selected and tested to be as acceptable as possible to respondents, to aid understanding of what is being asked and to provide the most reliable data for users. If the wording is changed then people may not answer or may answer in a different way and comparisons will not be possible.

Like the wording of the question the categories have been carefully selected and tested. Research has highlighted that people are not always familiar with the terminology used to describe a person's sexual orientation. A lot of confusion centres around the use of the word 'heterosexual', being sexually and emotional attracted to someone of the opposite sex. To help increase the understanding of this term the word 'straight' is used alongside it, this is a colloquial term that is more widely understood. It is never acceptable to use the word 'normal' in place of or alongside 'heterosexual'.

The term 'gay' is used to describe someone who is sexually and emotionally attracted to someone of the same sex and is a widely understood term. It is not acceptable to use the term 'homosexual', this term is offensive to many people as it is the term that was used in law to make same sex sexual relationships illegal. The term 'gay' is mostly used by men to describe themselves, and by some women, whilst other women refer to themselves as 'lesbian' as a result both of these terms should be used together. If detailed information is required on the gender breakdown then this can be achieved by analysing the responses alongside those for the gender question.

---

1 ONS (2009), Measuring Sexual identity – A guide for researchers:
http://www.ons.gov.uk/about-statistics/measuring-equality/sexual-identity-project/guidance/measuring-sexual-identity--a-guide-for-researchers.pdf

The term 'bisexual' is used to describe someone who is sexually and emotionally attracted to both men and women, this term is in common usage.

Not all people define themselves in any of these ways and so it is important to have an 'other' category so that people do not feel that they are being made to choose a specific category.

The level of acceptability attached to any term is subject to change over time. With this in mind the terminology used with respect to sexual orientation will be continually monitored and when necessary categories will be revised.

Research shows that the order the categories appear in does not affect responses to the question, the categories have been ordered in population size to reduce response errors. Research has shown that people tend to read down the list only as far as the first suitable answer and for that reason the categories are generally listed by population size.

Additional instructions and 'prefer not to say'

An instructional note explaining why this question is being asked, or explaining that the respondent does not have to answer if they do not wish to and that data will be secure should never be given prior to this question. It acts to highlight this question from the rest and could increase non-response of this specific question, introducing bias to the results. Instruction should be given at the beginning of the interview/survey saying why all of the questions are being asked and that they are all voluntary and if a respondent does not wish to answer any of the questions they do not have to so that all questions are treated the same.

Adding a 'prefer not to say' box only to this question also highlights it from others, if you add a 'prefer not to say box' to this question then it should be added to all questions, otherwise again clear instruction at the beginning should advise people that they do not have to answer any question that they do not wish to.

Concealed randomised showcards[2]

The ONS have developed a system that uses concealed randomised showcards in order to be able to ask the question in households where more than one household member is being interviewed at once and still maintain each individual's privacy. This involves providing a showcard with a coversheet (to ensure no other member of the household sees the card) on which the response categories are written alongside a random number, in none sequential order, so that the respondent just reads out the number next to the relevant category. The interviewer then records which showcard was used and the response number. If more than one individual is being interviewed at a time then each individual will receive a different randomised card. It is very important that before the first showcard is handed over to the first respondent that the interviewer makes it clear to all members that each showcard is unique and that all numbers are different to ensure the privacy of each individual.

---

2 A showcard is a visual aid to help interviewers when a question has multiple response so they can show the respondents the response categories without having to read them out.

Positioning of the questioning in the questionnaire

This question should be placed along with all of the other socio-demographic questions. Placing this question anywhere else may result in increased non-response as it has been shown that some respondents may be less inclined to answer if they feel the question has been 'slipped into' the questionnaire (ONS, 2008a)[3].

There is some evidence that the position of the sexual orientation question in relation to the religion question may have an effect on the responses given. The results from the ONS (2009)[4] sample pilot on the General Lifestyle Survey showed an increase in the percentage of people reporting as 'heterosexual/straight' and a reduction in the 'refusal' and the 'gay/lesbian' and 'bisexual' categories. It is recommended that the sexual orientation question is placed before the religion question.

Proxy responses

These questions are designed to collect information on an individual's self-identified sexual orientation. Focus groups conducted by the ONS stipulated that the need to maintain an individual's privacy is very important, it is also extremely difficult to know what another person's sexual orientation is unless they have explicitly stated it openly making proxy response very unreliable (ONS, 2008b)[5]. In order to collect the most accurate data possible only answers given by the respondent themselves should be accepted and should not be sought through a proxy. It is also very important that the interviewer or administrator does not try to provide an answer on behalf of the respondent. Answers from family members or carers should not be accepted. Not accepting proxy responses from carers means that information on a specific group will not be possible and the bias this will introduce is not known. Further work is needed on the affects of this and how collecting information through a carer can be achieved if the carer is unaware of the respondents sexual orientation.

If an interpreter is required then it should be done using a professional interpreter who is not known to the respondent and not a family member, friend or member of the community, and only when there is no one else in the room that may over hear the response (ONS, 2009)[6].

If the respondent is blind or has difficulties with their sight and they are unable to read the option responses then the interviewer should read them out but only if they are interviewing one person and their privacy is assured (ONS, 2009)[6].

3 ONS (2008a), Developing survey questions on sexual identity: Rationale and design of sexual identity questioning on the Integrated Household Survey (HIS):
   http://www.ons.gov.uk/about-statistics/measuring-equality/sexual-identity-project/quest-test-and-implem/rationale-and-design-of-sexual-identity-questioning-on-the-integrated-household-survey--ihs-.pdf

4 ONS (2009), Developing survey questions on sexual identity: Report on the General Lifestyle (GLF) split – sample pilot:
   http://www.ons.gov.uk/about-statistics/measuring-equality/sexual-identity-project/quest-test-and-implem/rationale-and-design-of-sexual-identity-questioning-on-the-integrated-household-survey--ihs-.pdf

5 ONS (2008b), Developing survey questions on sexual identity: Exploring focus groups:
   http://www.ons.gov.uk/about-statistics/measuring-equality/sexual-identity-project/sexual-identity-focus-group-report.pdf

6 ONS (2009), Measuring Sexual identity – A guide for researchers:
   http://www.ons.gov.uk/about-statistics/measuring-equality/sexual-identity-project/guidance/measuring-sexual-identity--a-guide-for-researchers.pdf
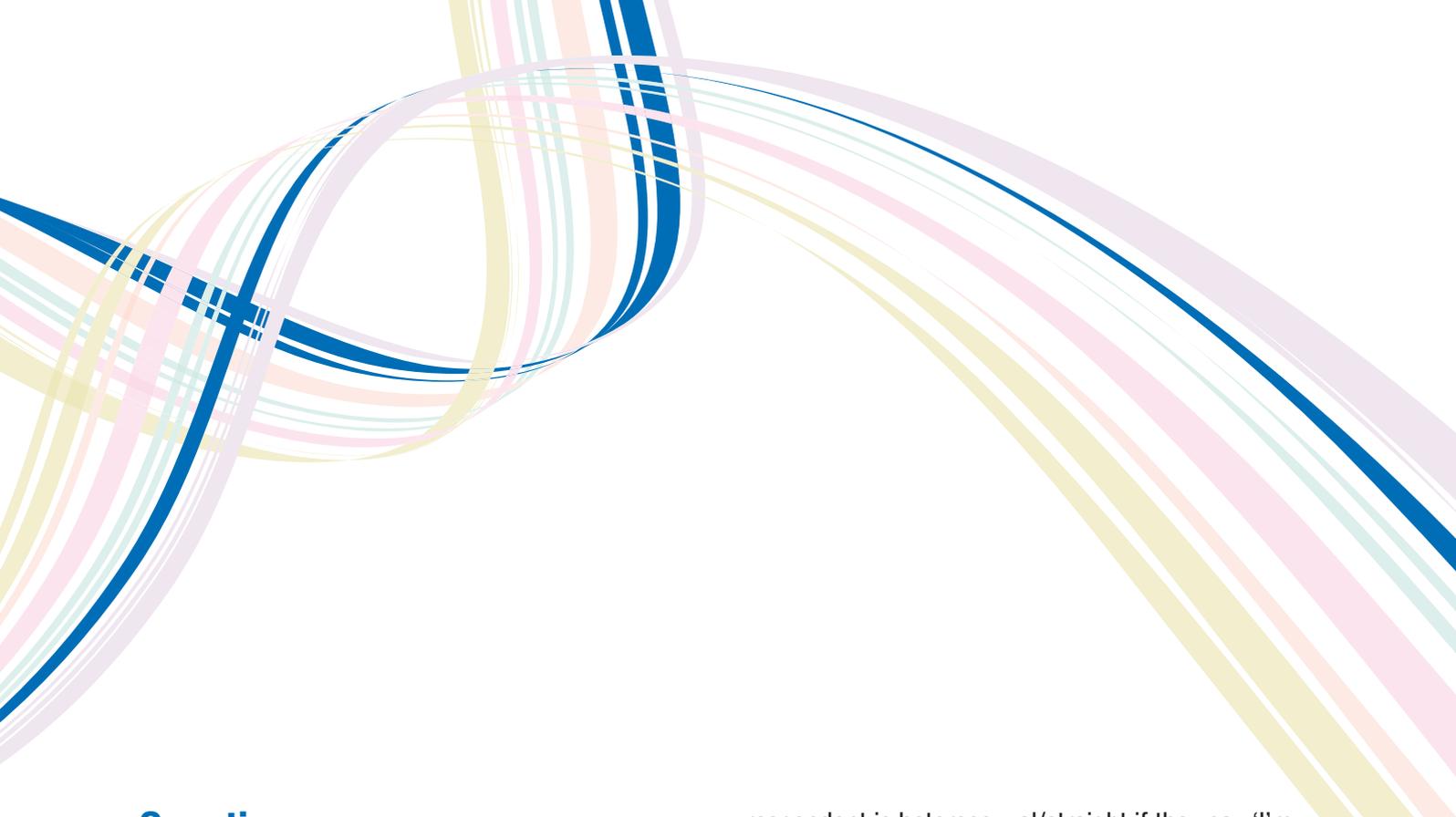
Question non-response

It is possible that initially this question could carry a high non-response rate, but this does not mean that it should not be asked. Asking the question will mean that over time non-response rates should decline as people become accustomed to seeing the question. People may not wish to answer the question if they do not fully understand why it is being asked or they do not feel assured of their privacy or of data security. Providing instruction at the beginning of the interview on why the data is being collected and that their personal privacy will be respected and that the data will be securely held will improve the response rate.

If a respondent asks what the question means then the interviewer should explain that it is whatever it means to them. If the respondent enquires what is meant by the categories then they should explain that for example heterosexual/straight might mean that a person is attracted to people of the opposite sex, for gay/lesbian this would be same sex and for bisexual both men and women (ONS, 2009)[6]. Interviewers should not just assume that a respondent is heterosexual/straight if they say 'I'm normal' or 'I'm ordinary', the interviewer should probe by asking 'so which of the categories would you choose' (ONS 2009)[6].

Research has shown that non-response rates to this question can be affected by age, especially those over 65 and by ethnic group (ONS 2009)[7]. Ensuring privacy and training interviewers to deliver this question confidently may help to reduce non-response.

Interviewer training/guidance

It is very important that interviewers are given adequate information and instruction on asking this question to help them deliver the question in a way that encourages respondents to answer it. This will also enable them to provide respondents with extra guidance and assurances if they require them. The interviewers should be able to inform the respondent on why it is important to gather this information and that privacy is assured if the respondent seeks extra clarification.

---

6 ONS (2009), Measuring Sexual identity – A guide for researchers: http://www.ons.gov.uk/about-statistics/measuring-equality/sexual-identity-project/guidance/measuring-sexual-identity--a-guide-for-researchers.pdf

7 ONS (2009), Developing survey questions on sexual identity: Report on the General Lifestyle (GLF) split – sample pilot: http://www.ons.gov.uk/about-statistics/measuring-equality/sexual-identity-project/quest-test-and-implem/rationale-and-design-of-sexual-identity-questioning-on-the-integrated-household-survey--ihs-.pdf