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Rt Hon Maria Miller MP  
Chair, Women and Equalities Committee  
House of Commons  
London  
SW1A 0AA

2 February 2018

Dear Mrs Miller,

I write in response to the Women and Equalities Committee's call for evidence to its inquiry on the Race Disparity Audit (the Audit).

As the Committee are aware, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) is the UK's National Statistical Institute, and largest producer of official statistics. We aim to provide a firm evidence base for sound decisions, and develop the role of official statistics in democratic debate.

We have therefore focused our evidence on the Committee's specific questions around the availability and quality of data on equalities and outcomes across ethnic groups.

The following short note explains what role ONS played in supporting the Race Disparity Unit, and summarises the broader programme of work underway across the Government Statistical Service (GSS) to improve official data on ethnicity.

It explains that – working closely with colleagues across Government – ONS has recently initiated an audit of UK inequalities data, focusing on the nine protected characteristics of *the Equality Act 2010*.

It also highlights recent developments with regards to the collection of ethnicity data. As the Committee are aware, as the body responsible for reporting on the UK's progress in implementing the Sustainable Development Goals, ONS is already beginning to explore new sources of data on equalities and outcomes across ethnic groups. In preparation for the 2021 Census, ONS has been consulting widely about topics for inclusion, to understand what data decision-makers require. We are still engaging with community groups on the acceptability of possible new 'tick-boxes' in the ethnic group question for the 2021 Census.

I hope this evidence is helpful to the Committee. Please do not hesitate to contact me if I can be of any further assistance, and I look forward to answering your questions on 7 February.

Yours sincerely,



**Iain Bell**

Deputy National Statistician and Director General for Population and Public Policy | Office for National Statistics

# Official statistics on ethnicity: Improving the evidence base

## Introduction

We launched our *Better Statistics, Better Decisions*<sup>1</sup> strategy in November 2014, and published an update '*...Three Years On*'<sup>2</sup> in October last year. To deliver this, ONS is undertaking an ambitious programme of transformation to improve our statistical outputs, enabling policymakers to make sound decisions and support public debate. In doing so, ONS is working to ensure that data and evidence have a greater impact on policy by providing a more coherent picture.

The Public Policy Analysis directorate has identified priority policy areas in which to focus their resource. These priorities include topics that are important to the public, such as migration, health and crime. Additionally, ONS has identified cross-cutting themes that require our attention, including inequalities which spans the protected characteristics and beyond, and seeks to strengthen the knowledge base across broader socio-economic issues.

Across the office, we are assessing how we can use multiple approaches to solve the issue of incomplete or unsuitable data.

The Census Transformation Programme is underway to enhance the provision of population statistics and prepare for an online census in 2021. The programme looks to ensure that the 2021 census reflects our society today and collects the key information that policymakers require, which includes the development of questions that capture this information adequately.

Collecting this data is not without its challenges; across ONS and internationally, there are increasing difficulties in maintaining survey response rates. In support of this, the Data Collection Transformation Programme seeks to rebalance ONS's data collection activity significantly toward wider, more integrated use of administrative and other non-survey data sources, thereby reducing our reliance on large population and business surveys. The Digital Economy Act 2017 has been fundamental in unlocking that data, meaning we are able to continue to produce high quality statistics and reduce the burden on survey respondents. In collaboration with other government departments, we continue to make progress in this space, and are exploring the ways in which the Census and administrative data programmes work together to provide the statistics that our users need to make key decisions on behalf of the United Kingdom.

ONS continue to take responsibility for reporting the UK's progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals, and work closely with the Race Disparity Unit and other stakeholders to assess the availability and quality of data on ethnicity, and associated inequalities.

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<sup>1</sup> *Better Statistics, Better Decisions: Strategy for UK statistics, 2015 to 2020*  
[https://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/images-betterstatisticsbetterdecisionsstrategyfor2015to2020\\_tcm97-44175-5.pdf](https://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/images-betterstatisticsbetterdecisionsstrategyfor2015to2020_tcm97-44175-5.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> *Better Statistics, Better Decisions: Three Years On, October 2017*  
<https://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/better-statistics-three-years-on/>

## ONS's role in the Race Disparity Audit

In January 2017, ONS was asked by the Cabinet Office to provide support to the Race Disparity Unit (RDU) in the run up to the publication of their first Audit of outcomes of ethnic groups from key public services. In the period since, we have:

- provided technical advice and support to RDU about methodology and quality assurance;
- worked with the RDU to promote consistency and harmonisation with 'Government Statistical Service Best Practice' covering statistical work and digital publishing standards;
- supplied ONS data to departments who lead on the analysis of these data; and
- loaned several ONS analysts to the RDU, to boost their capacity and capabilities.

ONS was asked to provide data to the RDU on estimates of population denominators; estimates of personal well-being; and internet users and non-internet users. Other ONS data used by the Audit were produced by the relevant policy department, using anonymised data from a pre-established government licence. These datasets were published on our website.

ONS continues to have senior level engagement with the RDU, offering ongoing support to new and emerging methodological challenges. This work with central government supports ONS' mission to provide independent advice to inform policy makers and the public.

## Audit of Inequality Data

Alongside its work with the RDU and other relevant activity such as the Sustainable Development Goals, ONS has recently initiated a wider audit of UK inequalities data, focusing on the 9 protected characteristics of *the Equality Act 2010*. We are working to provide a more coherent picture on inequalities data and evidence, and as part of this work we are considering:

- whether we have the right data, from the right people, collected in the right ways;
- how inclusive current statistics are: who is left out and who is 'invisible'; and
- what new opportunities data science and data linkage might offer.

We intend to highlight gaps, including: characteristics and groups, granularity of data coverage (topics, geography, etc), and timeliness.

This is not something that ONS can hope to achieve alone. We currently work with a number of policy leads across a range of key areas and intend to build further collaboration across government, academia, the third sector and the private sector. In the context of equalities data, we will continue to work closely with colleagues in the RDU with whom we have an ongoing relationship, and will continue to also work with colleagues in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) and the Government Equalities Office(GEO).

In the initial phase of the audit we engaged with stakeholders from across government, but as part of the second phase, we will be going out to a wider range of groups including academia and the third sector.

We expect to publish a report of our collated findings by the end of March, working with the Sustainable Development Goals team to take into account the findings of their gap analysis. After this, we will convene a group from across government, academia and the third sector to consider the results and identify the priorities. This will allow us to develop an action plan to take forward the most urgent recommendations, whilst understanding their relevance and broader policy context.

While we are already seeing better data and insight through the work of the RDU and recent ONS analysis, for example on understanding of the gender pay gap, the audit will allow us to take a fresh look at the data to ensure we are fully exploiting it, and enable us to have an even greater impact on policy-making from this calendar year onwards.

To assist ONS in its work on the collection of ethnicity data, we will recruit a new topic lead with responsibility for leading ONS' policy on measuring ethnicity and identity. Their responsibilities will include:

- Providing topic expertise and knowledge base of all sources that could contribute data or analysis to the topic;
- Building and maintaining a network of stakeholders and partners who have an interest in the topic; being aware of sensitivities and political aspects; engaging with stakeholders through appropriate means;
- Establishing Census requirements within the topic; determining required outputs (across the wider GSS) for the topic;
- Considering other data collection needs, including both survey and admin data sources;
- Driving harmonisation in the topic across the GSS; advising on the design of outputs and analyses relating to the topic;
- Understanding and advising on any related legislation (e.g. Equality Act); and
- Coordination and prioritisation of work; consideration of resourcing.

We will also continue to engage with other government departments to identify those not using the current ethnicity harmonised principle and encourage its adoption. Furthermore, ONS will update the current ethnicity harmonised guidance to make it clearer how this data should be collected to ensure statistical quality and comparability across other sources.

### **Recent developments: Exploring new data sources**

As part of our work measuring progress against the Government's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), ONS has already begun to identify gaps in ethnicity data, and opportunities to fill those gaps.

A central principle of the SDGs is that 'no-one is left behind' and that 'no goal is considered met, unless met for all'. Ethnicity (and race) is specifically mentioned in targets that sit under Goal 10<sup>3</sup> and Goal 17,<sup>4</sup> and – additionally – all reported indicator data must be disaggregated by both ethnicity and race where applicable (as well as sex, age, geography, disability, migratory status, income and other characteristics relevant in the national context).

ONS are currently identifying data to report on all required disaggregation characteristics. In some cases, we are looking at existing data sources to see what can be produced. For example, we are looking at combining data across a number of waves of the *Labour Force Survey* to allow the publication of data on young people not in education, employment and training (NEET) broken

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<sup>3</sup> Goal 10 – Reduce inequality within and among countries, Target 10.2 - By 2030, empower and promote the social, economic and political inclusion of all, irrespective of age, sex, disability, race, ethnicity, origin, religion or economic or other status

<sup>4</sup> Goal 17 – Revitalise the global partnership for sustainable development, Target 17.18 - By 2020, enhance capacity-building support to developing countries, including for least developed countries and small island developing States, to increase significantly the availability of high-quality, timely and reliable data disaggregated by income, gender, age, race, ethnicity, migratory status, disability, geographic location and other characteristics relevant in national contexts

down by ethnic group (against *Goal 8 – Decent Work and Economic Growth, Target 8.6 - substantially reduce the proportion of youth not in employment, education or training*).

In many cases data currently held by ONS simply does not allow the level of disaggregation we need, whilst maintaining the necessary quality and reliability. Here, ONS are identifying new data sources, linking existing sources, or modelling. For example, we are currently trying to link death registration data to 2011 Census or Hospital Episode Statistics data, so that we can report on deaths from suicide by ethnic group (against *Goal 3 – Good Health, Target 3.4 – ending premature mortality and promoting mental health and well-being*).

The Committee may be interested to note that first SDG release specifically related to ethnicity and race will be an explainer piece entitled ‘*What is the difference between ethnicity and race?*’ This will part of a series of articles looking at the concepts behind the required disaggregation characteristics. In addition, through the SDG website we are making the related statistics more accessible to a wider community of interested parties.

### **Recent developments: identifying user requirements**

As some witnesses to the Committee have noted, the decennial Census is a valuable source of information about the ethnicity of the UK’s resident population.

The ethnic group question was first included in the England and Wales Census in 1991, and amended for the 2001 and 2011 Censuses. Within the 2011 Census<sup>5</sup>, the questions on national identity, ethnic group, language and religious affiliation are all linked and therefore presented together as a suite of questions. The census data provide information to enable public bodies to meet their statutory obligations under the Equality Act. Data users, including central government and devolved administrators, noted that the data is used for resource allocation, service planning, policy development and equality monitoring<sup>6</sup>.

In the run up to each Census, ONS determines the needs of the data users to establish what changes in the Census questions are required to maintain its usefulness.

To prepare for the 2021 Census, ONS carried out a formal three-month topic consultation in 2015 on census content. ONS received 1,095 responses to the consultation; 460 of which addressed the *Ethnicity and national identity* topic. A follow-up survey also took place between November 2016 and January 2017, specifically on the topic of ethnicity.

This engagement confirmed a strong need to continue to collect ethnic group information, and ONS has since set up an evidence-based work programme, to:

- Explore whether an alternative question design could better meet the user needs for information, for example a two-stage 2011-style question design for online.

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<sup>5</sup> *Final recommended questions for the 2011 Census in England and Wales – Ethnic Group (2009)*  
[https://www.ons.gov.uk/file?uri=/census/2011census/howourcensusworks/howweplannedthe2011census/questionnairedevelopment/finalisingthe2011questionnaire/final-recommended-questions-2011-ethnic-group\\_tcm77-183998.pdf](https://www.ons.gov.uk/file?uri=/census/2011census/howourcensusworks/howweplannedthe2011census/questionnairedevelopment/finalisingthe2011questionnaire/final-recommended-questions-2011-ethnic-group_tcm77-183998.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> *2021 Census topic research: December 2017*  
<https://www.ons.gov.uk/census/censustransformationprogramme/questiondevelopment/2021censustopicresearchdecember2017>

- Evaluate what additional response options (if any) are required, using a tool to prioritise requests for additional response options<sup>7</sup>.

This engagement has identified:

- A need for granular data, with requests for 55 additional ethnicity ‘tick boxes’ received;
- A desire among some groups to be recognised as ethnicities for the purposes of data collection
- Differing views around the acceptability of some terminology

We conducted a prioritisation evaluation to consider the strength of need of these additional requests for tick boxes. We then evaluated those with a strong user need further against additional criteria including: the availability of alternative data sources, data quality, and comparability. After this evaluation we have identified the following four groups where we need to undertake further work before we can decide whether to recommend any new additional categories: Jewish, Roma, Sikh, and Somali.

In order to finalise our views on the ethnic group categories, we need to engage further with stakeholders to assess commonality of views within different communities, undertake further research to assess whether the inclusion of new categories will collect sufficient quality information to meet the user need and that our conclusions are compliant with our legal obligations.

Most recently, ONS held a Population and Public Policy Forum in London on 13 December.<sup>8</sup> At the Forum, we discussed the needs and research on the topics of gender identity, sexual orientation and ethnicity. For each, the circumstances and considerations are different in understanding user need and acceptability of the proposed changes. No decisions have been made on these as yet.

On gender identity – where we are considering how to ask this as well as sex – we heard the needs of the community for the basic information of how people identify themselves and the size of the Communities. We heard the challenges of how such a question could be developed, and the difference in public acceptability of asking this for the population aged 16 and over and those aged 15 and under. Our work and engagement shows we need to continue engagement and research in this area.

On sexual orientation, ONS presented the information on the widespread public acceptability and heard stakeholder views on the needs for this information. There is still work to be done on how to ensure we make this question voluntary and well-completed before making our recommendations.

On ethnicity, we listened to views about whether the White-Other category might be too broad. We also heard from a number of people speaking in favour of including a Sikh tick-box in the ethnicity question and also one in the other direction – but all united by wanting to understand the Sikh community. We also listened to the Jewish community explain their mixed views on the

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<sup>7</sup> 2021 Census topic research: December 2017

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

<sup>8</sup> Reflecting views on the 2021 Census, Iain Bell, National Statistical blog

<https://blog.ons.gov.uk/2017/12/14/reflecting-views-on-the-2021-census/>

issue, and heard from the Cornish community and their desire to be included as an ethnicity, and improve their understanding of the Cornish.

Across all these areas the move to a predominantly online Census may give us new and innovative ways of meeting needs. This could provide a way forward without continually expanding the questionnaire. We, at ONS, need to consider this fully.

ONS will continue to work with communities and research whether and how to ask questions in these areas before making our recommendations to Government. It is important we take time to get it right as we need to ensure that we have the information needed to make decisions.

Our recommendation for the 2021 Census will be reviewed by the Ethnic Group Assurance Panel, which we have established to support our process. This group consists of data users and data collectors from across government and ethnic group experts. Our ongoing research is reviewed by this group to provide external assurance that research meets the user need.

**Office for National Statistics, February 2018**