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General for Population & Public Policy

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

07 August 2018

Dear Mrs Miller,

I am writing to offer the Office for National Statistics (ONS) response to the Women and Equalities Committee report on the *Race Disparity Audit*.¹

The Committee made one recommendation to ONS:

“The Equality and Human Rights Commission and the Office for National Statistics should work together to provide updated guidance for public bodies, service providers and employers on how to collect consistent ethnicity data and how public sector bodies should use that data to assess their compliance with the Public Sector Equality Duty. (Paragraph 26).”

ONS welcomes this report and its recommendations. We look forward to building on our existing relationship with the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) and working closely with them to improve the coherence of official statistics on ethnic group. We are committed to developing improved guidance to accompany the harmonised principle for ethnic group and encouraging its use across the Government Statistical Service (GSS).

We are currently developing plans for a programme of work to review the harmonisation guidance², and work to embed this across the GSS. The timing of this will take into account the development of questions for the 2021 Census, and will include an impact analysis of updating the harmonised principle in line with any changes made to the 2021 Census question.

To assist, ONS have recently recruited a topic lead for Ethnicity, Identity, Language and Religion who will create a knowledge base, build expertise and maintain a network of stakeholders and partners, including the GSS, EHRC and Race Disparity Unit (RDU).

ONS also noted recommendations 2, 3 and 6 within this report.

“Significant effort has gone into collecting and publishing the data on the Ethnicity Facts and Figures website. We welcome the commitment from the Cabinet Office to continuing to expand

¹ [Report: Race Disparity Audit: June 2018](#)

² [GSS Guidance: Harmonised Ethnicity Principle: June 2017](#)

the published data sets. The Cabinet Office should publish a schedule for the addition of new data sets to the website and planned updates to the data already held on the site. We recommend that particular efforts are put into ensuring that data sets are robust enough to be comparable, including over time, and that regional variations can be seen. In future, the Government should consider including non-governmental sources of data in this resource. (Paragraph 17)."

"The Government, led by the Cabinet Office, should adopt the same categories as are used in the Census as the minimum standard for data collection on ethnicity across Government departments, and work with individual departments to ensure that this happens in all official data sets and administrative data in the public services for which they are responsible. At present this means using the '18+1' categories, but should the categories change for the 2021 Census, the Cabinet Office should take advice on how best to ensure comparability of data sets over time. (Paragraph 25)."

"We recommend that the Government publish an action plan to improve the consistency and robustness of the data it collects on the basis of ethnicity, to be implemented within 12 months. In the longer term, the Government should ensure that key data can be disaggregated to allow factors such as gender, age, region, socioeconomic status and religion and belief to be taken into account alongside race and ethnicity. (Paragraph 33)."

We welcome these recommendations, and wanted to make the Committee aware of complementary work currently underway at ONS. We continue to work closely with the RDU to improve understanding and communication of disparities. Alongside the review of harmonisation guidance, we are developing plans to identify and engage with departments who are not using the current harmonised ethnic group question and encourage its adoption.

We are currently finalising our recommendations for the 2021 Census, which will inform a Government White Paper later in the year. Our recommendations for the 2021 Census questions will be reviewed by the Ethnic Group Assurance Panel, which consists of data users and experts from across government and academia to ensure user needs are met. Once the content of the Census has been finalised, ONS will consult with key stakeholders across the GSS to understand the impact of updating the harmonised principles and guidance and also, how best to use data from across Government for ongoing monitoring of equalities issues without increasing burdens on citizens and public services.

This also links to data development work underway within our Inequalities Centre of Expertise, where we are working across government, academia and the third sector to make better use of all existing data sources and to develop new ones. From this, we will enable consideration of the intersectionality of different protected characteristics with one another, of socioeconomic status, at different levels of geography and for people who are at higher risk of harm, abuse, discrimination or disadvantage, e.g. carers, the homeless, refugees and asylum seekers.

Linked to the Inequalities Centre of Expertise is the audit of inequality data, also mentioned within your report. As part of the audit, ONS is aiming to capture all relevant sources of data on the protected characteristics, including non-governmental sources. A working group, which will include representatives from across government and the RDU, is being established to consider the outcome of the audit and to assess the extent of the current evidence base from the range of sources available.

Finally, we noted recommendation 11:

“The inter-ministerial group has the potential to provide the kind of high-level oversight that is needed, but its work needs to be informed by subject-specialist input on data collection and analysis and on race equality. We recommend that the Office for National Statistics be invited to attend the inter-ministerial group as observers to provide advice to the group. (Paragraph 44).”

ONS would be happy to observe and provide advice on the collection and analysis of data to the inter-ministerial group on racial disparity.

We will be sure to keep the Committee updated on our progress.

Yours sincerely,



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Office for National Statistics