



Proposed Evaluation Criteria for the 2031 Census Topic Consultation Methodological Assurance Review Panel

1 July 2025

A: Introduction

- 1) This paper sets out an overview of the proposed evaluation criteria to be used in the analysis of responses to the 2031 topic consultation which will from Autumn 2025.
- 2) Board members are invited to:
 - a) Review the evaluation criteria for the topic consultation (Table 1 and Annexes A,B and C)
 - b) Review and comment on the proposed new framework, which looks to gather wider evidence than that for the 2031 Census (section G)
 - c) Review our proposal that we continue with the relative weights used for topic inclusion decisions on the 2021 Census (Annex A)
 - d) Review whether recent additions to Scotland's evaluation (added to Table 1) should also be considered as additions to the England and Wales evaluation.

B: The importance of the evaluation criteria for the census

- 3) Census 2031 will be a key component of the current and future population and migration statistics system. It will be designed to provide both high quality statistics that meet user needs in 2031 and as a key component of meeting ongoing future population statistics needs. For each person in the UK to see how their contribution makes up a picture of our countries, we will deliver a set of census specific outputs to meet user needs where the census is the best vehicle for meeting them.
- 4) The census will also provide a high value data asset that can be used across the wider statistical system as part of the development and assessment of ways to deliver population and migration statistics in the future. The Census 2031 taskforce and business case will focus on delivering the census and census specific outputs whilst ensuring a high value data asset that can be used across the wider statistical system is created.

- 5) As preparations advance for the 2031 Census, the consultation process plays a critical role in shaping its scope, ensuring it reflects both enduring and emerging user needs. The evaluation criteria is a mechanism to support transparent, robust evidence-based decision-making on the future shape of the census.

C: Evaluation criteria overview

- 6) The topic consultation and associated engagement will be the main source of evidence which will support recommendations for which topics should be included on the 2031 Census. The evaluation framework for Census 2031 is specifically designed to ensure topics are included which optimise the value of census.
- 7) The evaluation framework, along with detailed descriptions of each criterion, will be included in the Consultation Document when it's published in Autumn2025. The relative weighting will be published within the consultation outputs, which we plan to publish in Summer 2026.
- 8) This paper sets out the proposed 2031 Census evaluation criteria, these have evolved from and are very similar to the criteria successfully used to prioritise topics for the 2021 Census ('Assessment of initial user requirements on content in England and Wales') and Census 2011.
- 9) A similar approach is also being used to prioritise 2031 Census topics by NISRA for Northern Ireland, and NRS for Scotland's censuses. NRS published consultation document uses the same framework with the addition of "Improvements to linkage rates with administrative data" and 'Length of paper questionnaire'
- 10)To assess the inclusion of topics. All census topics will be evaluated against the framework of evaluation criterion which are divided into three areas, detailed in **Table 1**; (1) user requirement, (2) other considerations and (3) operational requirements.
- 11)A structured approach to evaluate the need for additional response options will be provided in a future detailed paper. In overview, the criteria proposed will be: (1) strength of user need, 2) lack of alternative sources, and (3) acceptability, clarity, and data quality

Table 1 Proposed evaluation criteria for 2031

User Requirement	Other considerations	Operational requirement
Purpose Small geographies or populations Alternative sources Multivariate analysis Comparability between England and Wales Continuity with previous censuses	Impact on: Data quality Public acceptability Respondent burden Financial concerns Questionnaire mode *Improvements to linkage rates with administrative data *Length of paper questionnaire	Maintaining coverage or population base Coding of derived variables and adjustment for non-response Routing and validation

*added for consideration for 2031

D: User Requirement

12) The user requirement criteria are essential for determining which topics should be included in the 2031 Census and ensures that topics included in the census have a strong and clearly defined need. It is proposed that each criterion will be scored on a scale of 1 to 10, with higher scores indicating greater benefit to data users when they are included within the 2031 Census context. **Annex A** details the description of each criterion, and the relative weights of each criterion. We would welcome your consideration on whether the weights for 2031 should remain the same as 2021.

E: Other considerations

13) The other considerations criteria will also be considered when designing census content and used in conjunction with the user requirements to score and steer the development of the census questionnaire and the production of administrative data outputs. In addition, issues related to these other considerations may mean a topic is not included in the 2031 Census, despite a known requirement, for instance if we cannot develop a questionnaire that respondents can accurately answer. It is proposed that each of the identified criterion are ranked according to low, medium or high impact, see **Annex B** details the proposed description for the 2031 Census.

F: Operational requirements

14) The operational requirements criteria consider the extent to which ONS uses the data collected operationally in the process of conducting the census. It is proposed that for each sub-topic ONS will identify whether any of the associated questions were used in this way in the 2021 Census, and rank these criteria as being of maximum, moderate or minimum importance in relation to operational requirements. The most important of these is maximising coverage of the Census, as the primary aim of the census is to provide a robust estimate of the

usually resident population of England and Wales. Other operational criteria include coding derived variables, routing respondents and validation. **Annex C** proposes the description for the 2031 Census.

G: Wider considerations for the topic consultation

- 15) While the primary focus will be on the requirements of the 2031 Census, we will also address other considerations related to administrative needs and harmonisation standards where it is possible to do so without diverting from the primary objective (which will be established through testing). This will include:
- a) Collecting information and informing future priorities related to wider needs for data, such as greater harmonisation of some topics.
 - b) Informing whether census topics can be replaced by admin data or could create additional value through linkage.
- 16) **Table 2** sets out areas for which we will evaluate these wider considerations; alongside the census evaluation framework. This aims to support prioritisation and direction of ONS's activities in related to admin data and of harmonisation.

Table 2: Additional wider considerations

Strengthening future administrative system	The inclusion of some topics may support longer-term ambitions towards an administrative based system. This will be explored throughout the prioritisation of topics and further census development.
Additional value through administrative data	Exploring where the addition of topics could bring additional value to census, though linking administrative data to census outputs.
Harmonisation	Assess information that can help to inform the prioritisation of cross government GSS harmonised standards

H: Consultation response publications

17)ONS is planning a staged reply to the consultation responses. Initially a “You said” report will be published in Q1 2025. The objectives of this report will be:

- a) to reflect the comments we have received from users in the consultation, and
- b) to help provide transparency at all stages of 2031 Census content development and administrative data prioritisation.

18)We will publish further individual reports which thoroughly review each topic, informing our revised perspective and determining if further work is necessary. Each report will summarise the evaluation process and discuss the final scores. These will be published alongside a ‘You said, we did’ overarching report which provides a fuller description of the overall evaluation process. Examples of 2021 topic reports are available here: [2021 Census topic consultation](#).

I: Summary

The 2031 Census aims to provide high-quality statistics that meet user needs and serve as a key component of future population and migration statistics.

The consultation process is crucial in shaping the census to reflect both enduring and emerging needs. The evaluation criteria support transparent, evidence-based decision-making, ensuring the census delivers valuable data assets for the wider statistical system.

We welcome your input into the evaluation criteria to support topic inclusion, the weighting and the proposal for a new framework which aims to gather wider insights for the 2031.

Michelle Waters and Cath Hollyhead
Topic Consultation
July 2025

Annex A : User requirements criteria

The criteria relating to user requirements remains the key criteria for evaluation. These were used successfully for 2021. The descriptions have been reviewed and slightly updated since the [2016 topic consultation publication](#). We propose the that relative weights from 2021 remain unchanged.

Criterion	Proposed Evidence description 2031	Relative weight 2021
Purpose	The purpose to which the data will be put if collected is central to the evaluation process. Purposes include, but are not restricted to, resource allocation, service planning, policy evaluation, and diversity monitoring. Conversely the implications if the data are not collected, for example increased financial costs or reduced quality of data used in planning, are also important. Additionally, requirements arising from legislation strengthen the case for inclusion.	30%
Small geographies or populations	Census provides the benefits of information for small population groups and/or at detailed geographic levels. Information that is only required for broad geographic areas or large population groups might be better obtained from other statistical sources.	20%
Alternative sources	The 2031 Census will only seek to collect information where the user need has not yet been fully met or met the quality requirements by other means. Consideration will be made as to whether suitable information is available from other sources.	15%
Multivariate analysis	A key benefit of census data is the ability to analyse census variables against one another. A requirement to undertake multivariate statistics will affect whether suitable alternative sources for the information exist and may strengthen the case for inclusion in the census	15%

Continuity with previous censuses	Comparison with previous censuses is an important aspect of census analysis and, wherever appropriate, the 2021 Census questionnaire will collect the same information as the 2011 Census questionnaire.	10%
Comparability beyond England and Wales	Data collected from the census should be required on a coherent basis across a large geographical area. Where possible, if there is a user need, the three UK Census Offices will release census outputs that are coherent across the UK.	10%

Annex B : Other considerations criteria

The other considerations criteria, with a brief description are detailed below. Each criterion are categorised as :

- Low – The inclusion of questions relating to this sub-topic have been assessed to have a low impact. For example, where data quality from the 2021 Census was good the impact on the data quality consideration would be low.
- Medium – The inclusion of questions relating to this sub-topic have been assessed to have a medium impact. For example, where respondents are presented with several ‘tick-boxes’ to choose from with a set of short instructions to assist them, the impact on the respondent burden consideration would be medium.
- High – The inclusion of questions relating to this sub-topic have been assessed to have a high impact. For example, where respondents may not find questions acceptable for reasons related to privacy, the impact on the public acceptability criterion would be high

Criterion	Proposed description for 2031
Impact on data quality	The data collected in the 2031 Census should be expected to be of sufficient quality for outputs to be useful. Hence information collected should not seek information that is not readily known or remembered accurately. ONS has used information about imputation rates from the 2021 Census and agreement rates based on the 2021 Census Quality Survey to inform this assessment.
Impact on public acceptability	The census should not ask sensitive or potentially intrusive questions that have a negative impact on response or may lead to respondents giving socially acceptable rather than accurate answers. It should also not enquire about opinions or attitudes. Additionally, the census is carried out for statistical purposes. It should not collect data that would deliberately promote political or sectarian groups, or sponsor particular causes.
Impact on respondent burden	The inclusion of questions on a topic should not impose an excessive burden on respondents. Burden could, for example, result from lengthy instructions or explanations, large numbers of response categories, or large numbers of questions on a single topic.
Impact on financial concerns	Questions should not present major coding problems, require extensive processing, or significantly add to the overall cost of the census.

Impact on questionnaire mode	The modes of collection of data will be considered throughout the design of the questionnaire, with the aim that respondents interpret the questions and answer consistently across all modes allowing consistent information to be collected.
*Improvements to linkage rates with administrative data	Questions asked in the census should have no negative impact on future work linking to administrative data sources.
*Length of questionnaire	Individual questions must be considered in the context of the census, where effective digital and paper design must be considered.

To provide a comparison to devolved governments plans two additional Considerations added for feedback and discussion

Annex C : Operational requirements criteria

The assessment of the operational requirements categorisation is described below. These are unchanged from 2021.

Category	Use	Description proposed for 2031
Maximum	Maximising coverage or population bases	Where data collected on a topic were used to maximise coverage or to define a population base they were given high importance. The 2031 Census questionnaire may include some questions that, for instance, aid respondents in identifying who should be included in the questionnaire or are used to produce different output bases.
Moderate	Coding of derived variables and adjustment for non-response	It is expected that some key outputs will be based on derived variables. Topics may be included in the 2031 Census questionnaire if a user need is identified for data that are derived from a variable even if there is no user need for outputs relating directly to the topic, for example, supervisory status is required primarily for deriving the National Statistics Socio-economic Classification (NS-SEC). In addition, some core topics are used to enable a better assessment and adjustment for the characteristics of non-responders. For example, respondents' economic activity last week is used to assist in estimating economic activity characteristics of non-responders.
Minimum	Routing and validation	In an online census respondents can be automatically routed around questions that they are not required to answer. However there will still be a paper version of the form which is likely to need some routing questions. Some questions were also used for validation, eg cross-checking between age and marital status.

