

2031 Census question testing framework

Introduction

- 1) This paper sets out the proposed 2031 Census question testing framework
- 2) This paper outlines the rationale for developing the framework, its development and next steps
- 3) We ask for members of MARP to comment and advise on the use of the framework for testing questions for the 2031 Census.

Please note this work and the work in appendices are in draft and are examples - there is still more work to be done to edit and develop the framework and associated materials

Background and purpose

This paper proposes a standardised framework, alongside an accompanying risk register, to guide the development and testing of questions for the 2031 England and Wales Census. Together, these products support a rigorous, consistent, and transparent approach to Census question design, with a strong emphasis on risk management and data quality assurance throughout. Their application aims to strengthen both the development process and the overall quality of Census outputs.

This represents the first time such a framework has been systematically developed and applied to census question design in the UK. It is intended to enhance the defensibility and robustness of methodological choices, while addressing the key drivers:

- Increased scrutiny of data quality and questionnaire design decisions following the 2021 Census
- Growing expectations around accuracy, value for money, and the collection of sensitive information

There are four main purposes of the framework:

1. The framework supports accountability and defensibility for testing and agreeing questions for the 2031 Census. It provides a transparent clearly defined process to support methodological choices in question development.
2. It provides a risk management approach to question development and testing which has not been used in previous censuses.

3: It ensures consistency in adhering to good practice - users across ONS will apply a consistent good practice approach to developing and testing census questions.

4: The framework ensures quality through pre-established success criteria, evaluation criteria and quality assurance criteria for each phase and each method.

The Framework contains two core products -

1. The question testing and questionnaire design framework:

A structured, end-to-end five-phase process that guides researchers on selecting appropriate methods (qualitative and quantitative) for testing questions and developing the 2031 Census questionnaire. The five phases are:

1. Discovery
2. Development
3. Testing
4. Analysis
5. Write-up and dissemination

It sets out a structured approach to question development, requiring researchers to document and justify the methods they use at each of these five phases.

All questions included in the 2031 Census should be taken through this framework process and documented within the risk register.

For each method, researchers must record whether it was applied, partially completed, or not used, and assess the associated risk and impact on data quality, particularly where success criteria are not met. These assessments are captured in a risk register:

2. Risk register:

A tool used alongside the framework to record:

1. Which methods were used or not used
2. Whether success criteria were met
3. The risks and impacts on data quality

The risk register is reviewed and signed off after each phase. This ensures that issues with high risk or unmet criteria are identified early and addressed appropriately. Statisticians/Researchers provide assurance or recommendations, while senior

managers confirm whether they are content with the approach, risks taken, and potential data quality impacts.

For each question and phase, researchers must record in the risk register:

- Which methods were completed, not completed, or only partially met success criteria
- The justification for these decisions
- The risk and impact on data quality
- How well success criteria were met, and if not, why and what action will be taken
- Evidence that phase-level success criteria have been met (or reasons where not)
- An evaluation of each phase against research requirements
- Confirmation that appropriate quality assurance has been completed
- A summary of research limitations for sign-off

Development of framework

The framework is currently in development, with completion targeted for December 2026. To date, we have reviewed existing question design approaches across ONS, other National Statistical Institutes (e.g. Statistics New Zealand, Australian Bureau of Statistics), academia and government.

The next phase will involve working closely with the census business area to ensure the framework has practical applicability, rather than remaining a purely theoretical tool. This will be followed by testing to confirm it is fit for purpose.

In parallel, we will engage external academic partners, for example the University of Southampton, to provide further review and assurance.

Next steps

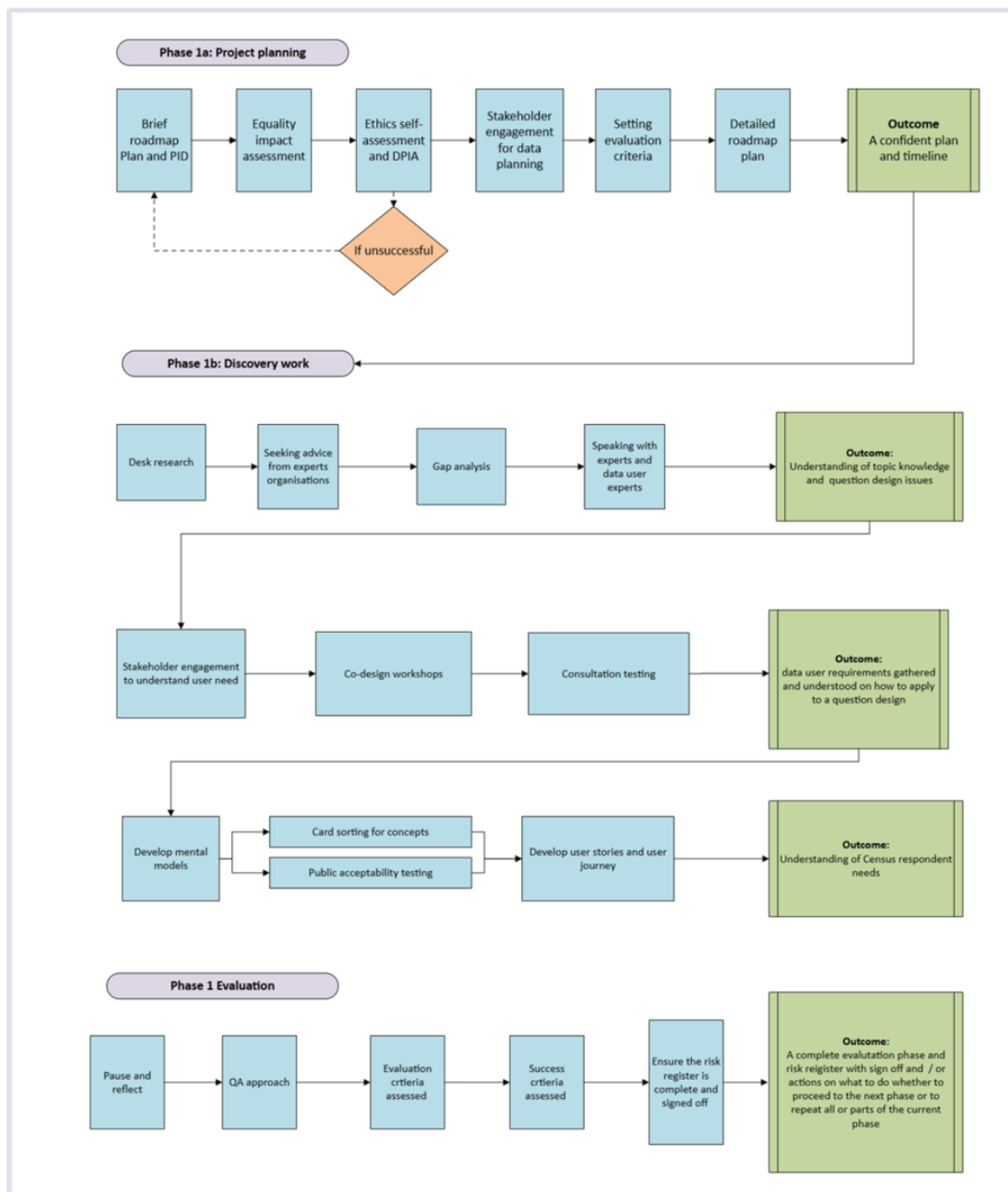
Continued development and review of the framework. The review will include external experts and other NSIs.

Testing of the framework to ensure it is fit for purpose. Testing will involve using previously agreed questions alongside new questions.

A high-level summary of the framework will be published alongside the census consultation report to give users confidence of the census testing process by the end of the year.

Annex A – Process diagram example of the discovery/ planning phase of the framework

Please note this work and the work in appendices are in draft and are examples - there is still more work to be done to edit and develop the framework and associated materials



Annex B – Example method from framework – draft

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Focus groups

Abstract

NOTE THIS IS A DRAFT EXAMPLE OF WHAT SOME OF THE CONTENT COULD LOOK LIKE. WE ARE STILL WORKING ON WHAT THE CONTENT SHOULD OR SHOULD NOT CONTAIN AND WHAT SPECIFICS NEED TO BE INCLUDED IN RELATION TO THE CENSUS

- Focus groups are where several respondents are brought together to discuss a research topic as a group under the direction of a moderator. These provide an opportunity for direct and explicit discussion
- They can be used for concept development and understanding user needs
- To run a focus group, it is important that you:
 - Assign a moderator to the focus group
 - Hold at least two focus groups, with 6 to 10 participants
- Success criteria: Clear recommendations can be made from the focus group findings on question concepts or how to design a question, depending at what stage of the process you conduct focus groups

Focus groups are where several respondents are brought together to discuss a research topic as a group under the direction of a moderator. Focus groups provide an opportunity for direct and explicit discussion. Focus groups are recommended early in the questionnaire design process, generating ideas and checking understanding of key topics and concepts that will be used in the questions. Focus groups can be used to test the comprehension of the question topic to be focused on. The researcher can learn about how terms are used, what common perspectives are taken by the population, getting ideas on concepts and terminology. Therefore, in this way, focus groups can be used early to pick up on potential areas of confusion for respondents so survey designers are aware of where comprehension issues may occur.

Why; The objectives/ purpose of this step for the census

- Evaluate respondent understanding and acceptability.
- Evaluate alternative question wording and formats and to understand respondent burden

How; The procedure of the step for the census

- Define objectives of the focus groups – what are the aims and purpose of this focus group? This may vary depending on what stage you are conducting your focus groups. For example, if conducting this in the discovery phase.
- Create a sampling frame based on aims of the focus group – we provide more guidance on how to create a sampling frame in our sampling guidance [\[LINK\]](#).
- Recruit participants – it is recommended to have ideally 6-10 participants per group, or absolute maximum of 12. This is so everyone has a chance to provide meaningful discussion. You should also look to hold at least two focus groups (depending on what you wish to explore).
- Develop a discussion / interview guide for the focus group.
- Allocate moderators and observers – you should have one moderator who is comfortable leading the discussions and asking questions to the group and one note-taker. You may wish to also have other observers such as subject matter experts or other survey stakeholders.
- Conduct the focus groups, either in person or online.
- Analyse results – the most often used form of analysis for focus groups in ONS is thematic analysis.
- Create your findings report.

How does the procedure vary if the question is a new question, a changed question or the same question as the previous census.

Focus groups may not be appropriate for certain aspects of testing for sensitive questions. The procedure would not change for a new, changed, or pre-existing census question.

When to use this step in the census

This is to be used in the question development stage, as a way to gather user or expert insights.

When to use this step in the census

This method should be used for testing certain aspects of the question design for sensitive questions. This method should also be used for testing in the initial stages of question development and so should not be used after cognitive interviewing unless cognitive interviewing has revealed that more testing on concepts is needed.

Iterations/Frequency:

For the Census focus groups should not be used in isolation so testing concepts or designs with focus groups should be followed up with other forms of qualitative interviewing including cognitive interviewing.

Resource recommendations (including time to complete the step, and who should be involved).

One senior researcher experienced in facilitating focus groups, and one experienced junior researcher to observe / take notes per focus group

Success criteria

- Successful focus groups can be measured by:
 - Obtaining rich data from a range of perspectives and views in the focus group, either providing insight into users' understanding of census topics, their approaches to thinking about different topics, or how they find the overall design of a proposed census question. Identify where any potential issues could be with the question design on either respondents or on the data and quality of the data that comes from the question design.

- Researchers having a better understanding of the topic area, and being able to make decisions and recommendations, based on user insights
- Understanding of how acceptable or unacceptable concepts are or how easily understood concept are.

If successful, you should:

- After analysis and recommendations are drawn these findings will then inform whether you need to redesign the question (if needed) and conduct other rounds of focus group testing with similar or different respondents. Then move on to the next phase of your testing which is qualitative interviews such as cognitive interviewing.

If unsuccessful, you should:

- Establish what your success criteria is for this research from the outset and then understand why the focus groups were unsuccessful against this criteria. These may be because the discussion points were not suitable or relevant to your research aims. If so, rework your discussion / interview guide and run another focus group (if time and resource allow).
- If the focus group layout did not work, consider another qualitative method such as individual qualitative interviews to test questions or unmoderated card-sorting to understand concepts.
- Record it as not meeting the success criteria on the risk register, along with the associated impact and risk and what the next steps are.

Impact of not doing/skipping this step.

Skipping this step may impact question design and quality as you may not have accurately captured or understood key terms, concepts and user needs. This is particularly relevant where questions are sensitive or where there are potential or known issues with groups of respondents in relation to a particular question.