

Scottish Government: Collecting Equality Information Series

Guidance note on asking questions on: religion/belief

Introduction: why is it necessary to collect information about religion/belief?

The Equality Act 2010 protects people from discrimination because of religion or belief. The legislation covers areas including education, employment, the provision of goods and services to the public and the exercise of public functions. The Act also introduces a public sector equality duty which came into force on 5 April 2011. The duty requires Government and public authorities to have due regard to the need to eliminate unlawful discrimination, advance equality of opportunity and foster good relations. The duty covers nine protected characteristics, including religion or belief. It is recommended that Government and public authorities follow good practice in gathering and using relevant evidence and information. Religion and belief statistics are important for monitoring discrimination and inequality. The information may also be used to inform 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”.

In order to promote more consistency the Scottish Government has developed harmonised questions for use in surveys in Scotland. This guidance note provides a recommended question for collecting information on **religion/belief**.

There are several different concepts of religion that can be measured on social surveys including **affiliation, belonging, belief and practice**¹. It is important to be clear about what concept is being measured:

- **Religious affiliation** is the connection or identification with a religion irrespective of actual practice or belief.
- **Religious belonging** can be interpreted as both loose self-identification and active or formal belonging to a religious group.
- **Religious belief** includes beliefs typically expected to be held by followers of a religion and how important those beliefs are to a person’s life.

¹ For more information about the different concepts of religion that can be measured, see ONS (2009) [Final Recommended Questions for the 2011 Census in England and Wales: Religion](#)

- **Practice** includes specific religious activities expected of believers. Religious practice is a difficult concept to quantify as there are no specific measures that will be easily applied across all religions.

The way people respond to questions on religion is sensitive to what question is being asked and how it is asked.

Recommended Question to measure religious belonging

The Scottish Government recommends the following question on religion is used in order to harmonise with other data sources in Scotland, including the Census:

What religion, religious denomination or body do you belong to?

None

Church of Scotland

Roman Catholic

Other Christian

Muslim

Buddhist

Sikh

Jewish

Hindu

Pagan

Another religion please write in

The wording of the question is the same as that used in the 2011 and 2001 Census. The categories from the 2001 question were reviewed and amended slightly. It is strongly recommended that you do not change the wording of the question as it could have implications on the data you receive. The wording of this question affects the way in which people answer, especially if they only have a loose affiliation with religion. Any changes to the wording of the question may result in people either not answering or providing a less suitable response and you will not be able to make comparisons to results from the 2011 Census.

The categories for the recommended question are the same as the 2011 Census, with the addition of Pagan as a separate category. The categories have been carefully selected to best represent the Scottish population and to ensure the highest response rates by making it relevant and acceptable to respondents. This list of categories is not definitive and a write in box has been provided so that respondents can answer as they wish. Making changes to the categories could affect response rates if people feel that they are unable to record their religion accurately. It is very important to the completeness and acceptability of the question that the 'Other' write in box is retained. If you need to make changes to the categories, for example you require information on a specific religious group not listed, **please contact us directly for advice**. It is recommended the breakdown of the Christian category is used when asking this question in Scotland in order to facilitate more detailed analysis of this group.

Multiple ticks

The recommended religion question is a single tick response question. In order to obtain a complete count if a respondent has provided multiple responses then the rule should be that the response is recorded as 'don't know'. The exception to this rule would be if a respondent has ticked one of the categories and also the 'Other' box. In which case:

- If the respondent has ticked a category and written in a response in the 'Other' write in box then the write in answer should be used.
- If the respondent has ticked one category and then ticked the other box without writing in a response then the first category they ticked should be used.

Proxy responses

This question is designed to collect information on a persons own religion and should be addressed directly to the respondent. Where the respondent is unable to provide an answer then another member of the household, or the person's carer, can be asked to give a response on their behalf. This should be a last resort and the interviewers should record that a proxy response was given. It is very important that interviewers, administrative staff or anyone other than the individual's family member or carer does not provide an answer on behalf of the respondent.

Analysis and presentation of results

Because there are several dimensions to religion, talking and reading about religion or specific religions without qualification can be confusing and lead to misinterpretation by data users. Therefore, if presenting data from the harmonised religion question it is important to be explicit and refer to the specific 'concept' being measured i.e. **religious belonging**. It is also recommended that when presenting data on religious belonging it should be accompanied by a short note, such as:

- Respondents were asked the question '**what religion, religious denomination or body do you belong to?**' which measures belonging – that is both loose self-identification and active or formal belonging to a religious group

Data should be analysed and presented in a way that is most useful to users of the data, with consideration of what kind of analysis would be most likely to reveal any inequalities that require action.

Small numbers can cause problems with statistical reliability when analysing data and hinder publication of figures because of the need to avoid identification of individuals. It is important that the results should be presented in as much detail as possible. It is better to list all of the categories and where possible the figures. If the numbers are too small to publish then the figures for that category should be suppressed and an explanation provided of why this has been done. Care should be taken to ensure that if only one figure is suppressed, that the figure can then not be calculated by simple subtraction from the totals displayed. Alternatively,

consideration should be given to increase sample size by aggregating several years of data where appropriate.

Another way to overcome the problem of small numbers is to aggregate data together under the headings 'Christian' and 'All Other religions' but this may not be an ideal solution as it can hide inequalities that are occurring between the groups under each heading. For example the 2001 Census showed that there were differences in the unemployment rates between Roman Catholics and members of the Church of Scotland and the latest figures from the Annual Population Survey (APS 2010) shows differences in employment rates between Buddhists, Hindus and Muslims. However such aggregations may sometimes be necessary in order to present any data. It is recommended that the term 'non-Christian' is not be used as it is offensive to some people.

Comparing the 2001 Census with the 2011 Census

It is possible to compare data from the new question with data from the 2001 and, once published, the 2011 Censuses, but it must be noted that Pagans will have recorded their religion in the 'Other' write in box for the Census) When comparing data from the new question with data from the 2001 and 2011 Census questions this should be noted as numbers under the 'Other' heading may be reduced as a result.

Alternative questions on religion

A religion question on affiliation was asked in the 2011 and 2001 Censuses of England and Wales. If information on religious affiliation is required, the following question should be asked:

'What is your religion?'

None
Church of Scotland
Roman Catholic
Other Christian
Muslim
Buddhist
Sikh
Jewish
Hindu
Pagan
Another religion please write in

This is the recommended religion question and layout for use on a survey in Scotland when wanting to harmonise with the rest of GB and the UK. The recommended breakdown for Christian denominations for Scotland (like Northern Ireland) is different to that of England and Wales. This is in order to provide data on which to examine the differences between the main Christian groups.

If further information on religious practice is required a follow on question about practice can be used, such as:

‘Do you consider that you are actively practising your religion?’

Consultation by the General Register Office for Scotland revealed limited user demand for the religion of upbringing question for the 2011 Census.

Contact us

This document has been provide to help people collect information on religion in Scotland. We welcome any comments you have on this guidance note. It will be revised and updated when necessary.

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Useful Links

Equalities Review:

<http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20100807034701/http://archive.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/equalitiesreview/>

UK Statistics Authority - Code of Practice:

<http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/assessment/code-of-practice/index.html>

ONS Report from the review of equality data:

<http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/guide-method/measuring-equality/equality/equality-data-review/review-of-equality-data--final-report.pdf>

Office for National Statistics (2009) [Final Recommended Questions for the 2011 Census in England and Wales: Religion](#)