

Summary – Welsh Assembly Committee appearance – 18 April 2018

This morning (18 April), Iain Bell and Garnett Compton gave evidence to the Culture, Welsh Language and Communications Committee at the National Assembly for Wales. The Committee questioned the witnesses on the 2021 Census, particularly in relation to the Welsh language, but also broader topics around engagement in Wales, ethnicity and the use of administrative data. A question was also raised on data security, following the recent coverage around Cambridge Analytica. The session can be viewed again [here on Senedd.tv](#).

Siân Gwenllïan AM opened by asking about the **census engagement and consultation** undertaken in Wales. In response, Iain discussed the close working relationship ONS have with Glyn Jones, National Statistician for Wales, and the many census engagement groups across communities and users in Wales. He and Garnett spoke about the importance of testing the cognitive understanding of questions, rather than simply translating English questions into Welsh. They also stressed the importance of engaging with communities and users, not just with Government to ensure that the needs of all users are met.

On potential challenges, the Committee asked about **moving the census online**, and any challenges relating to running a bilingual census. On online, Iain said that the target was 75% online completion, and that this should be achievable following the likes of New Zealand. He noted successful testing of online completion in the Isle of Wight and Powys, and assured that support would be on hand to help those less comfortable with online such as the elderly, and that paper copies would still be available on request. On **conducting the Census in Welsh**, the panel assured the Committee that investment in this was being made, with sufficient numbers of Welsh-speaking contact centre staff and field staff to be made available. Garnett also noted that the website would have a facility to toggle between English and Welsh languages during completion.

Mick Antoniw AM asked about **provisions for respondents with impairments and special needs**. Iain assured the Committee that this was being fully considered as part of the wider engagement programme, and that accessibility testing and work with community groups would ensure that completion would be made as inclusive as possible.

The Committee were particularly interested in the **‘main language’ question**, especially in relation to bilingual respondents who speak both English and Welsh regularly. Garnett spoke about international engagement with Canada, New Zealand and Australia to understand their collection and testing in this area, and sharing knowledge more widely. He also spoke about the process of testing and evaluating the language question. Iain spoke about the benefits of using a similar question as in 2011 to ensure consistency of data, particularly in a policy context.

The Committee asked why there isn't the same Welsh option on the census in England. Iain explained that testing had shown it confused respondents to whom it was not relevant so was not a viable option, but that administrative data, enabled by the Digital Economy Act may help collect this sort of information, and that ONS would be exploring options with Welsh Government.

On what the **‘main language’ question** was for, the panel explained that the main purpose was to help understand the number of people who can/cannot speak the national language, and to aid local service provision where additional linguistic services may be required, but that a suite of questions is used to suit all user needs. Testing has shown that the wording of the question seems to be the best way to capture this data, but online collection means **‘help bubbles’** will be able to assist respondents who are unsure.

On the **greater use of administrative data**, Iain explained the different strands of census development, including ways in which admin data can be used to supplement 2021 data for income and housing. While acknowledging the strengths and limitations of admin data, Iain explained that in the long term, the plan is to conduct an admin data census. On whether admin data would be sufficient for language data, Iain noted that the census is not the only source of Welsh language data, but further testing would be undertaken to establish whether additional methods would be required.

Rhianon Passmore AM asked a series of questions relating to **data security**, noting the recent Cambridge Analytica scandal. She asked whether the next census would be conducted in the same way as 2011. Iain assured the Committee that data security was at the heart of the whole process, and talked about the Approved Researchers Scheme, and how data is anonymised before any analysis is undertaken. He spoke about how the majority of census operations for 2021 would be conducted in-house using ONS systems, with subcontracting minimised. He promised to follow this up with the Committee after the session, to explain more fully ONS' data access policies and controls.

Finally, the Committee asked questions **on census topics** – ethnicity, sexual orientation and gender identity. On ethnicity, Iain spoke about the 4 options currently being assessed, with final recommendations to be made later in the year in the White Paper. On sexual orientation and gender identity, testing has shown high levels of public acceptability and user need, but research on a “prefer not to say” option is being collated currently. On gender, this will be collected as well as sex, and only for respondents aged 16+. Given the rapidly changing definitions, it is important that the census gets this question right and that the impact of household completion is considered. For those who may want to provide this data separately aside from the household submission, this would also be accepted.



The session ended there, with the Chair noting that they would be writing with some further questions that time did not allow for.