



A survey-based investigation of attitudes to equality questions for the 2011 Census

November 2009

Executive summary

ONS wished to evaluate the potential impact of including a new sexual identity question on the 2011 Census. The sexual identity question has been evaluated previously in the context of face-to-face interviews, and has been included in ONS' Integrated Household Survey since January 2009. This analysis reports on further research into its potential inclusion in the 2011 Census, a self-completion survey, where the question could also be completed proxy on behalf of other members of the household. It should be read in conjunction with previous work related to this issue as part of ONS' sexual identity project, details of which can be found in the link below:

<http://www.ons.gov.uk/about-statistics/measuring-equality/sexual-identity-project/index.html>

The issue of non-response is important to any social survey but is especially so for the census, where maintaining response may be challenging, given the general current trend of declining responses to social surveys. In the 2001 Census, it has been estimated that 94 per cent of people were included on a questionnaire.

The exploratory study carried out here, to evaluate the effect of the sexual identity question, utilised the ONS Opinions Survey to explore people's attitudes to the sexual identity question. The same respondents were also asked to complete a paper questionnaire emulating a shortened version of the census.

While completing the survey, the ONS interviewers also noted additional comments made by respondents and actively explored the reasons for their comments.

Part 1 of this report gives the quantitative analysis of the responses to the survey and Part 2 provides a qualitative description of the additional comments made by respondents in the course of completing the survey.

The results of the study suggest there is a strong risk that adding a mandatory sexual identity question to the 2011 Census would increase non-response, albeit by a small amount. The link between attitudes and behaviour is often tenuous, and the differences reported here have not been tested fully for statistical significance, so should be seen as indicative rather than definitive.

Respondents to the Opinions Survey were asked about their feelings towards revealing their sexual identity. The sexual identity questions were asked in the context of questions relating to three other equality strands - religion, ethnicity and disability. The majority of people stated they felt comfortable being asked questions about each equality strand. However, a minority were not comfortable with at least one equality strand and this was more apparent when respondents were asked about sexual identity. For example, between 1 and 2 per cent reported that they felt uncomfortable about being asked about their own religion, ethnicity or disability, compared with 5 per cent in respect of their sexual identity. A similar pattern of results emerged when people were asked about responding to each equality strand on behalf of other members of the household. Thus, around 6 per cent were uncomfortable with sexual identity, compared with around 3 per cent for other equality strands.

Respondents were also asked how sensitive they found the questions. Again, the majority stated they found none of the questions sensitive (89 per cent). However, 5 per cent stated that sexual identity was sensitive for them, compared with 2 per cent for ethnicity and 1 per cent each for religion and disability. Further, when asked if any question would discourage them from responding to the census, 3 per cent responded that sexual identity would, compared with 1 per cent each for the other three equality strands. It is notable that the 3 per cent who said they would be discouraged by sexual identity are in addition to the same 3 per cent who said they did not intend to return the census questionnaire anyway. Taken at face value, the sexual identity question potentially could double the non-response among this group of survey respondents. Perhaps not surprisingly, 81 per cent thought the question on sexual identity should be voluntary, compared with 69 per cent who thought the question on religion should be voluntary.

Non-response to particular questions on the paper questionnaire ('item non-response') was somewhat higher for the sexual identity question than for other questions relating to equality issues. In total, 5 per cent did not give an answer, 2.2 per cent chose the 'refuse to say' option and 2.8 per cent refused outright to answer the question at all. This compares with 1.8 per cent for both religion and disability and 3.6 per cent for ethnicity. When responding on behalf of others, item non-response increased, with the sexual identity question, again, being most affected. A primary reason for this increased non-response for others appears to be largely due to parents being unwilling or unable to answer on behalf of children.

In general, those people who stated that they would be uncomfortable with answering questions relating to equality issues were indeed less likely to respond to the question on the paper version of the questionnaire, than those who said they were comfortable with equality questions. For example, around 30 per cent of people who said they were uncomfortable with the sexual identity question refused, or preferred not to say, what their sexual identity was, when asked. This estimate is based on small numbers and should therefore be treated with caution. However, it does compare to an item non-response of around 3 per cent for those who were comfortable with the sexual identity question.

In summary, it appears that a small minority of people are sensitive about the equality-related questions and are uncomfortable with answering for themselves as well as on behalf of others. This is more noticeable for the sexual identity question than it is for other equality-related questions. A small proportion of people said that the sexual identity question could make them non-responders to the census.

Given that producing accurate estimates of the total population is the key aim of the census, ONS is not recommending the inclusion of a sexual identity question in the 2011 Census questionnaire. This finding does not affect household surveys, where trained interviewers will continue to ask the sexual identity question in ONS surveys in ways that respect the privacy of all members of the household.

Finally, it is worth noting that differences in responses between groups and between questions have not been formally tested for statistical significance, because repeated measures analysis under a complex sampling design would require specially written procedures. Unfortunately, we did not have the resource to undertake this during the study.

Part 1: Quantitative Analysis

1. Introduction

In order to further explore whether or not it would be appropriate to include a sexual identity question on the 2011 Census questionnaire, research into the attitudes of the public to a sexual identity question has been carried out. An initial tranche of data was collected using the ONS Opinions Survey over a one month period. This report details the results of the quantitative analysis carried out on this one-month dataset. However, it should be noted that the small sample size (approximately 1000 cases) limits the potential for meaningful analysis on differences of opinion between subgroups of the population. Consequently, such differences are not reported here.

A module of questions was included in the December 2008 Opinions Survey, which involved the participants filling in a paper-based questionnaire emulating a possible layout of the 2011 Census sexual identity question. The sexual identity question was asked in the context of three other equality strand questions, namely, religion, ethnicity and disability. A series of interviewer-based questions followed, with the aims of:

- i. Gauging how comfortable the participants were with answering the sexual identity question, both for themselves and for others in their household
- ii. Gauging their feelings towards someone else in their household answering the sexual identity question on their behalf
- iii. Determining the extent to which questions relating to each of the equality strands is sensitive for participants
- iv. Establishing whether participants felt the sexual identity and religion questions should be voluntary or compulsory
- v. Establishing whether the inclusion of any equality strand question might affect the likelihood of a participant actually filling in and returning the census questionnaire

2. Methodology

Participants were first requested to fill in a paper questionnaire which took the form of a shortened version of the census questionnaire and included questions on each of the four equality strands. This section was completed on paper to emulate the experience of filling in the census. It should be noted that while this was a self-completion exercise, an interviewer was present in the room during this time. Interviewers asked participants a series of interviewer-administered questions about their feelings towards equality strand questions appearing on the census questionnaire. It was important to present participants with the census emulation questionnaire first, as individuals often say they have a certain opinion and then act in an altogether different manner. By having responses from both the paper questionnaire and the opinion interviews, it was possible to compare how the participants said they felt about answering equality strand questions on the census with the way they actually acted when faced with a simulation of the scenario.

There were 1086 eligible respondents in the December 2008 Opinions Survey dataset. However, 32 of these refused to take part in the entire interview section (their only entries

being for the non-module specific classificatory variables). These 32 cases were excluded from the study and hence all analysis carried out on the interviewer-administered questions has been based on the remaining 1054 cases, as reported in Section 3. A comparison of the paper questionnaire data and the data from the following interviewer-administered section showed that, despite having not answered the face-to-face questions, two of the 32 refusals actually answered at least one question on the paper questionnaire. Analysis of the data from the paper questionnaires included these two cases.

The data were weighted to adjust for non-response and make the sample representative of the GB population, and all percentage estimates presented later are weighted estimates. Of the 1056 paper questionnaires completed, there were 132 questionnaires (approximately 12 per cent) that were unavailable for analysis. An additional weight was applied to the remaining 924 cases to combat the effect of any bias introduced due to the missing cases not occurring at random across Government Office Regions. The results from this analysis are presented in Section 4.

Both the interviewer and self administered questionnaires asked respondents about themselves and others in the household. It is highly likely that the status of other household members, such as child or adult, partner/spouse or other adult, will influence a respondent's level of comfort, perceived sensitivity or willingness to respond to particular questions. Ideally a relationship-based classification would have been used to break down the results presented in this paper. However, data on the relationship of each person in the household to the respondent was available from the self-administered census emulation questionnaire but was not available on the opinions dataset. As there was no direct link between the two questionnaires with reference to person ordering¹, it was considered too risky to assume the ordering was the same across both surveys.² Moreover, patterns of non-response to classificatory variables made it difficult reliably to use such a classification. Consequently, responses on 'others' in the household are based on the order in which they reported, although these are restricted to the second and third persons because sample sizes decline substantially with increased household size.

Standard errors have been calculated, taking into account the complex nature of the Opinions Survey sample design and the weighting scheme. These give a measure of precision for the percentage estimates and are the basis for the derivation of confidence intervals.

While completing the survey, the ONS interviewers also explored additional comments made by respondents, and a summary of these comments is described in Part 2 of this report.

¹ Forcing a link would have meant altering the census emulation questionnaire, which was presented second, in such a way that it was less like a possible emulation, i.e. the census will have no external survey reference.

² Initial explorations showed some discrepancies in counts of household members between the two sources.

3. Results of interviewer-administered questions

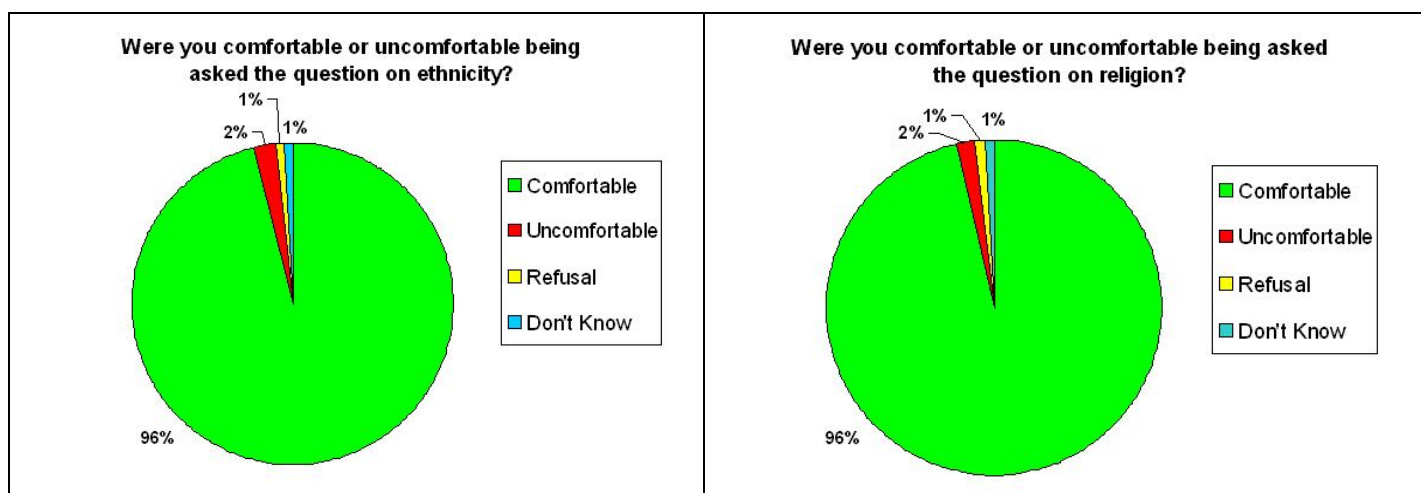
In general, participants were comfortable both with answering a question on sexual identity and having others answer on their behalf. However, a small but influential percentage stated that they felt uncomfortable with the sexual identity question. Indeed, out of those respondents who found at least one equality strand sensitive, sexual identity was most often stated as the source of sensitivity. Given the choice, the majority thought sexual identity should be a voluntary rather than a compulsory question. Perhaps most crucially, when asked if any of the four equality strands would discourage them from completing the census, 3 per cent of respondents gave sexual identity as a reason.

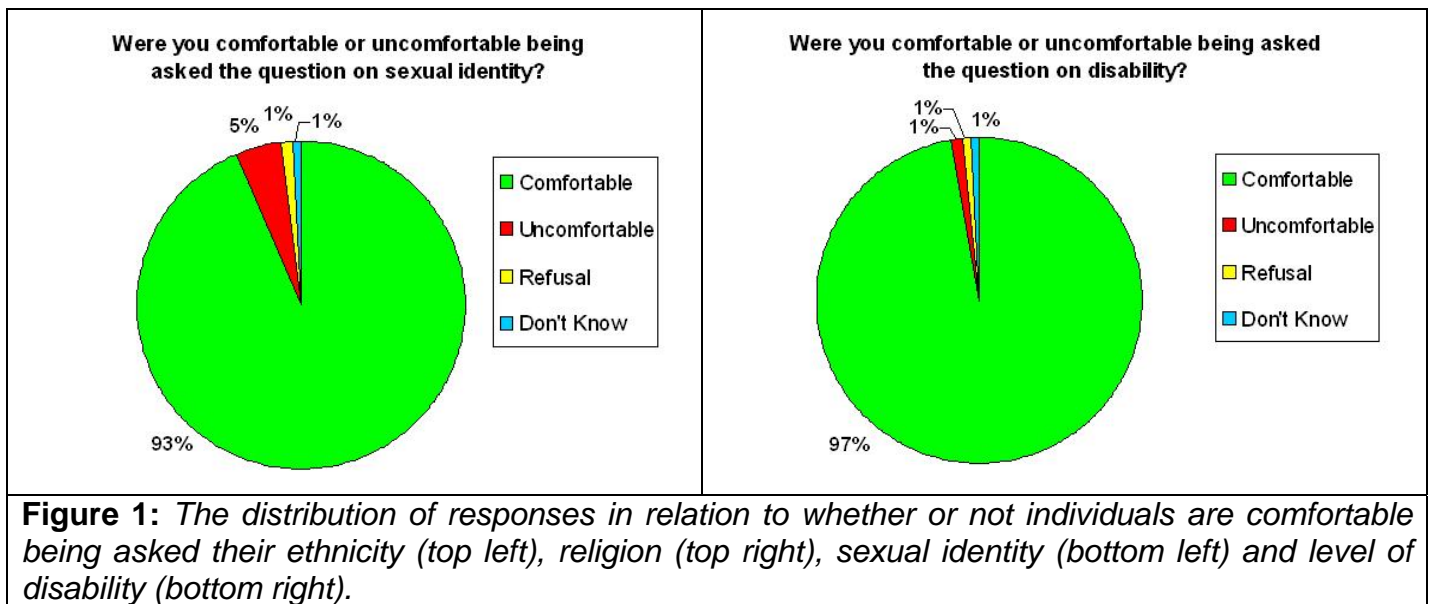
3.1 Level of comfort with equality strand questions

When respondents were asked if they felt comfortable answering a question regarding their own sexual identity, 5 per cent stated that they were not comfortable. A further 1 per cent stated they didn't know and 1 per cent refused to answer the question. The remaining 93 per cent were comfortable with the notion.

Respondents were also asked whether or not they were comfortable with answering a question on ethnicity, religion and disability. The ethnicity and religion questions both had 2 per cent of respondents expressing discomfort while only 1 per cent declared they were uncomfortable with answering a question on disability. Levels of discomfort were highest for the sexual identity question. Figure 1 shows the complete distribution of responses for each of the four equality strands.

Similar response patterns were revealed when participants were asked whether or not they would be comfortable with answering equality strand questions on behalf of other members of their household. Again, the highest levels of discomfort arose from answering a question on the sexual identity on behalf of others. This was most pronounced for sexual identity where 6 per cent stated they would be uncomfortable with answering a question on behalf of the second person in the household (which compares with 5 per cent answering for themselves).

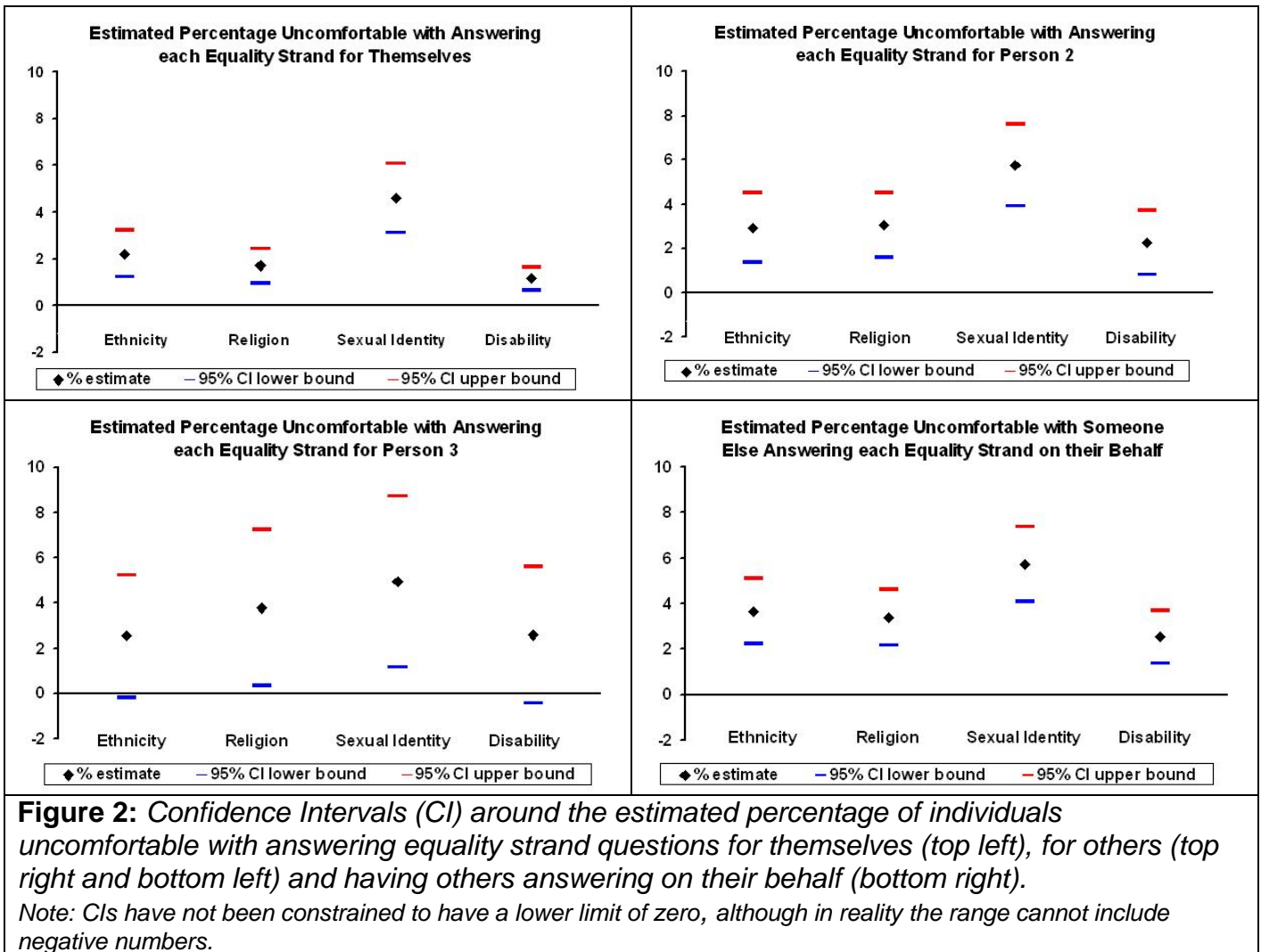




Participants were also asked (where applicable) whether they would be comfortable with someone else in their household answering the equality strand questions on their behalf. Results from this question indicate that, compared to answering the equality strand questions for themselves, a greater number of participants were uncomfortable with the thought of others answering on their behalf. This was the case for all four equality strands. However, as these differences are based on comparatively small percentages, a larger sample size would be required for a robust test of the statistical significance of these differences.

Sexual identity was again seen to be the equality strand for which the greatest proportion of participants (around 6 per cent) were uncomfortable with others answering on their behalf. It is informative that when people are asked about their level of discomfort answering questions relating to equality strands for themselves, sexual identity appears most likely to be a concern. Using the 95% confidence intervals (CIs) as a guide³, the upper right panel of Figure 2 shows no overlap between the CIs for the sexual identity question and disability or religion, and only a slight overlap with ethnicity. However, when answering on behalf of others, or someone else answering on the respondent's behalf, the tendency is for CIs to overlap. This seems to indicate that people have a more general unease about proxy responses to equality questions, which contrasts to their personal unease about sexual identity above other equality questions. However, it is important to emphasise that these figures still only relate to a minority of around 1 in 20 people, or less.

³ The use of CIs to infer statistical significance can be misleading, even when comparing between independent groups. In the present case we have correlated variance in the response to the four equality strands, which makes it more difficult to infer the potential non-significance of pairwise comparison.



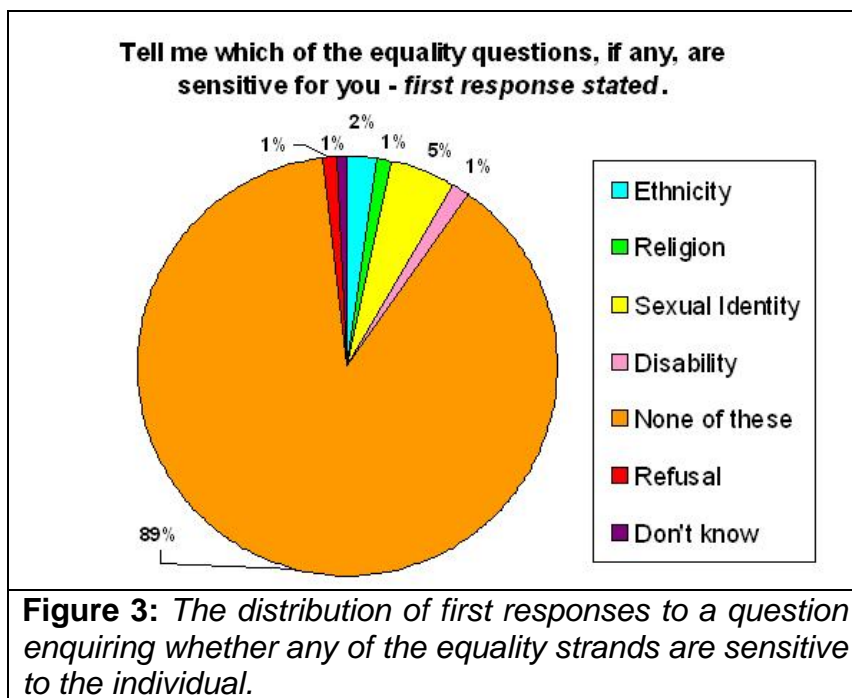
3.2 Sensitivity to equality strand questions

Participants were asked whether any of the equality strand questions were sensitive for them. If they gave more than one response, participants were then required to rank the equality strands they specified in order of how sensitive they felt about the questions. An estimated 9 per cent said at least one equality strand question was sensitive for them.

There were only 24 respondents who specified that more than one equality strand question was sensitive for them. For this reason, analysis here has been restricted to the first response given, on the assumption that the first response was the most important to the respondent.

While most people reported that they were not sensitive to any of the equality strands, it seems that sexual identity is a more sensitive subject than other equality strands. More respondents stated sexual identity as their first response to the sensitivity question than gave a response to ethnicity, religion and disability combined. Around 5 per cent specified that sexual identity was sensitive to them; and for the majority, sexual identity was the only

equality strand sensitive to them. A further 2 per cent stated ethnicity as their first response and 1 per cent each highlighted religion and disability as their first choice. Figure 3 shows the distribution of first responses given in relation to the question on sensitivity of equality strands.



3.3 Should equality strand questions be voluntary or compulsory?

Participants were asked whether they thought a question on the census about religion should be voluntary or compulsory. They were then asked the same question with regard to sexual identity. When given the choice, the majority of respondents answered in favour of both religion and sexual identity being voluntary. However the percentage of respondents who thought any potential sexual identity question should be made voluntary (81 per cent) was considerably larger than the percentage of respondents who thought the question on religion should be voluntary (69 per cent). Figure 4 shows the distribution of responses received when questions were asked on whether religion and sexual identity should be voluntary or compulsory.

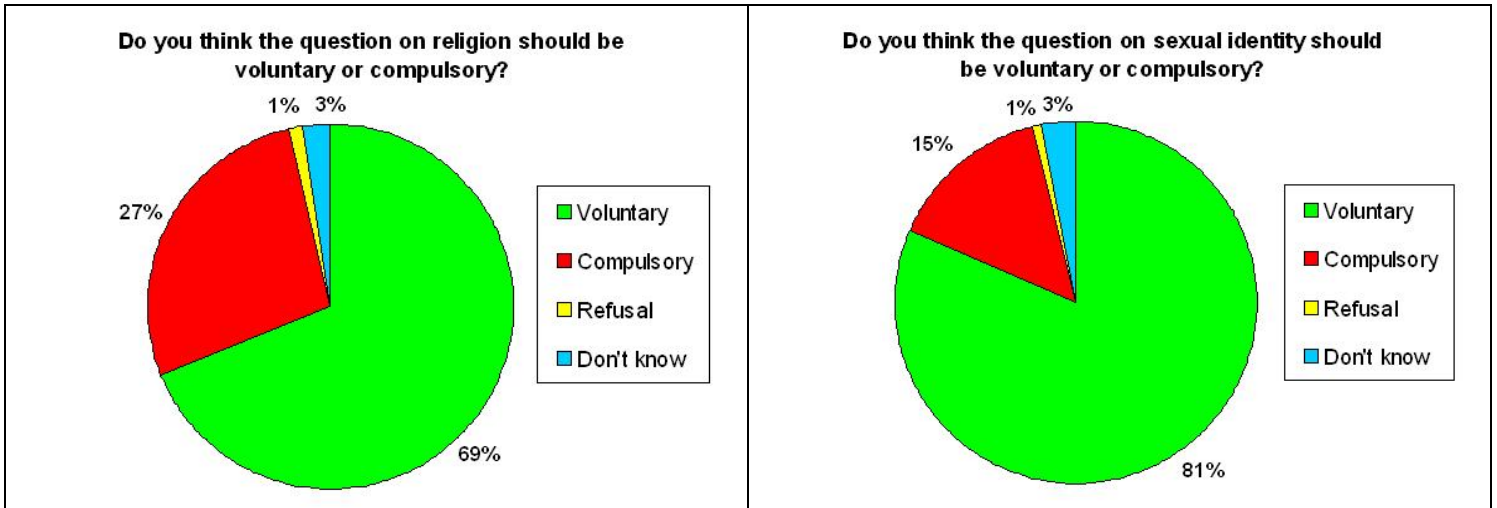


Figure 4: The distribution of responses when asked whether a question in the census requesting an individual's religion (left) and sexual identity (right) should be voluntary or compulsory.

3.4 Potential discouragement from completing the census

Participants were asked whether they thought that they, or someone else in their household, would complete and return the census questionnaire. Despite the fact that it is compulsory to do so, 3 per cent stated that they thought the census questionnaire for their household would not be returned (Figure 5). A further 5 per cent refused to answer the question and 1 per cent said they didn't know.

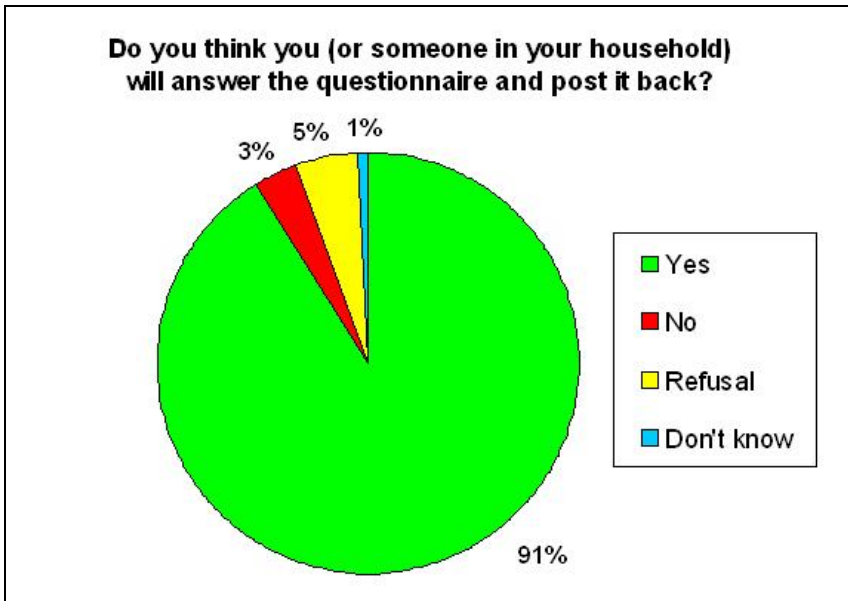


Figure 5: The distribution of responses when asked whether anyone in the household would complete and return the census

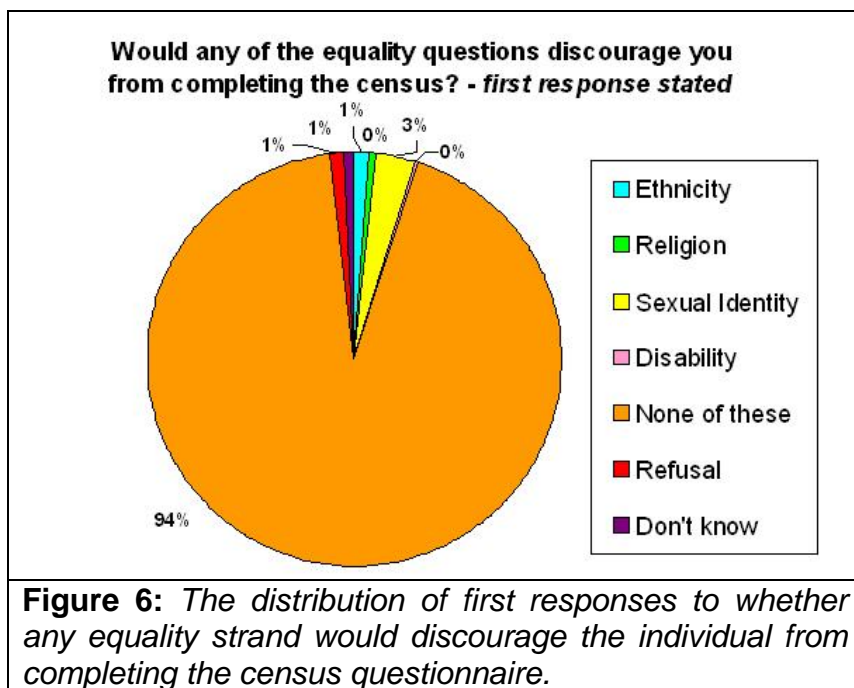
After being asked whether or not they thought someone in their household would complete and return the census questionnaire, participants were asked whether the inclusion of a

question about any of the equality strands in the census would discourage them from completing the census. Participants were allowed to stipulate as many equality strands as they wished but few (12 in total) specified more than one. Consequently, analysis has been restricted to the first response given.

Around 3 per cent of the participants stated that a question on sexual identity would discourage them from completing and returning the census questionnaire (Figure 6). The confidence interval for this estimate is between 1.5 per cent and 4.5 per cent. As it is desirable that the census has as high a response rate as possible, given its primary purpose is to count the entire population, the inclusion of an additional question which could potentially reduce the census response rate should be considered carefully.

It is important to recognise that the 3 per cent of participants who stated that a question on sexual identity would discourage them from completing and returning the census questionnaire are in addition to the 3 per cent who said that they thought the census questionnaire for their household would not be filled in and returned. Taking these figures at face value, the inclusion of a sexual identity question could therefore potentially double non-response to the census.

In comparison, approximately 1 per cent of respondents stated that the inclusion of a question on ethnicity would discourage them from completing the census questionnaire. In addition, less than 0.5 per cent stated religion and disability as reasons for discouragement. In summary, more participants thought sexual identity would discourage them from completing the census questionnaire than the other three equality strands combined.

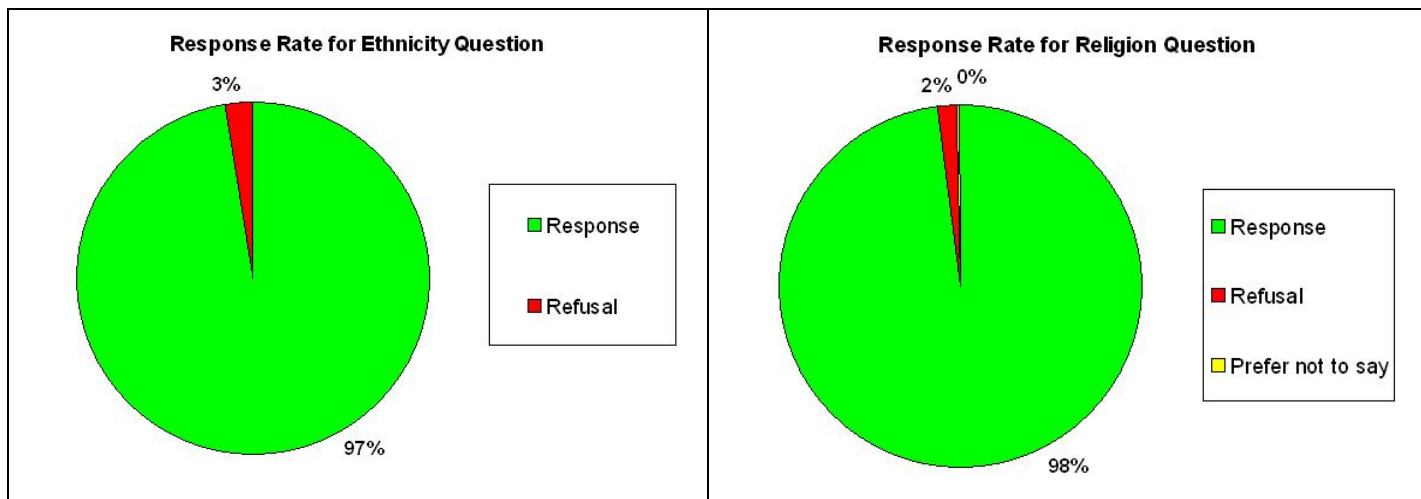


4. Results from census emulation questionnaire

The census emulation questionnaire was used to explore people’s propensity actually to respond to equality questions. Participants were asked to specify a response for each of the four equality strand questions, both for themselves and for others in their household. For the questions concerning ethnicity and disability, participants could either choose one of the preset options or refuse the question. The sexual identity and religion questions had a slightly different format to the other two equality strand questions in that they included a ‘prefer not to say’ option to the question as well as the option to refuse.

It has already been postulated (Section 2) that proxy responses for other household members may differ according to their relationship to the household person. For example, respondents may be more or less willing or able to answer on behalf of a spouse or partner, compared to a young child, an older child, parent or other adult. However, for reasons discussed earlier, we were unable reliably to achieve this classification. What we do know is that of those who responded to the age of the second person, 97 per cent of second persons were aged over 16, compared with 76 per cent of the third persons.

Non-response to the sexual identity question was greater than non-response to other equality strand questions. Overall, 5 per cent of respondents did not give a response to the sexual identity question, around 3 per cent of participants refused outright to answer the question on sexual identity, and another 2 per cent stated that they would prefer not to say (Figure 7). Refusals to the ethnicity question were at a similar level (3 per cent), but respondents did not here have the “prefer not to say” option, so overall non-response was lower. Refusal to answer the religion and disability questions, when participants were answering for themselves, was approximately equal at 2 per cent each. It is not clear, however, whether the 2 per cent who preferred not to say what their sexual identity was would have refused outright or responded, had they not had the extra option not to say.



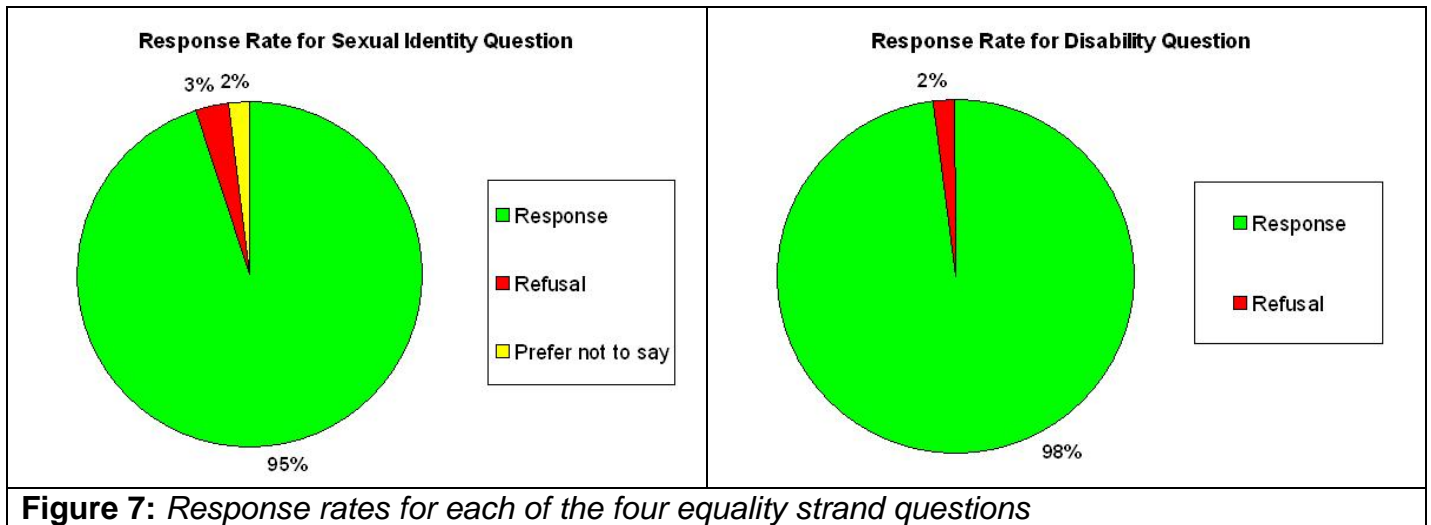
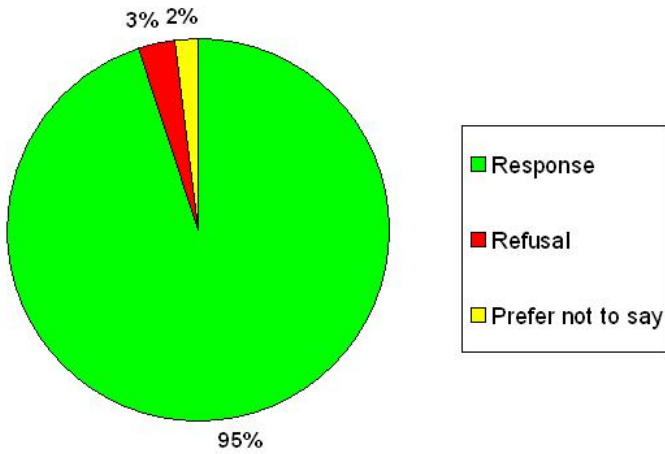


Figure 7: Response rates for each of the four equality strand questions

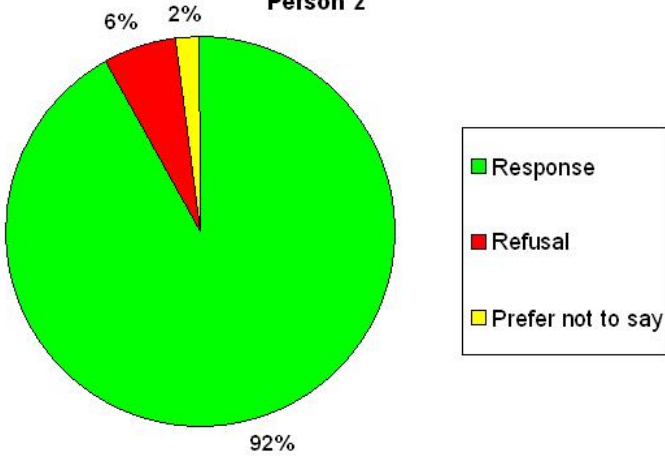
Refusal rates for equality strand questions pertaining to the designated second person in the household were, in general, slightly higher than for those questions requiring participants to answer for themselves. Moreover, more participants refused to answer the equality strand questions for the designated third person in the household and this was most apparent with the sexual identity and religion questions where refusal rates reached 20 per cent. This increase in non-response to the third person proxy largely reflects the increased presence of children in the third person position. It seems that parents of young children might consider sexual identity questions as inappropriate. For example, although there were only 40 children in the third person position, which requires that results should be treated with caution, all but 3 were refusals for the sexual identity question. When excluding children from second and third person analysis, the refusal rate for adults was around five per cent and six per cent, respectively. However, there was no increase in the use of the 'prefer not to say' option for sexual identity when moving to proxy responses for the second and third person, which remained at around 2 per cent.

Sexual identity was not the only equality strand parents were reluctant to answer. Third person refusals increased substantially also for religion (20 per cent) and, to a slightly lesser extent, disability and ethnicity (both 16 per cent), suggesting a general concern for parents about answering equality questions for children.

Response Rate for Sexual Identity Question



Response Rate for Sexual Identity Question for Person 2



Response Rate for Sexual Identity Question for Person 3

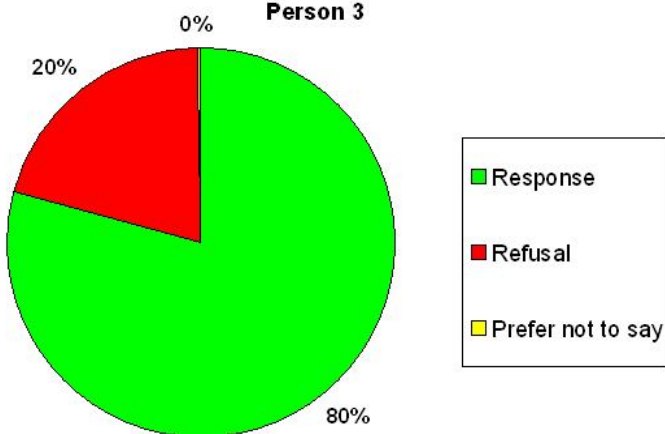


Figure 8: Response rates for the sexual identity question when answering on behalf of themselves (top), Person 2 (middle) and Person 3 (bottom).

As few people said they were uncomfortable about answering equality questions, it was not possible to undertake robust analysis of the comparative behaviour of those who were and were not comfortable with the equality questions. However, it is informative to note that around 30 per cent of people who said they were uncomfortable with the sexual identity question refused, or preferred not to say, what their sexual identity was, when asked. This compares to an item non-response of around 3 per cent for those who were comfortable with the sexual identity question.

Part 2 – Qualitative Analysis

5. Initial reaction to the questionnaire

The interviewers recorded respondents' initial reactions to their request to complete the paper questionnaire. Generally, no issues were reported. However some respondents specifically clarified that they would be required to answer on behalf of other household members before going on to complete the questionnaire. In other cases it is noted that the respondent could not complete the questionnaire and therefore needed help from the interviewer or a family member, thus compromising the confidentiality of the questionnaire. On a couple of occasions interviewers noted that the respondent refused to complete questions on behalf of other household members.

Respondents sometimes spontaneously commented on the questions relating to the four equality strands being tested, which gives an insight into how they felt about the questions before the interviewer went on to ask the module questions. For the ethnic group and national identity questions, respondents were sometimes confused about how to answer the questions, but were able to give an answer. One respondent, who identified as 'British' in the national identity questions, did not feel that he should have to answer this question, but did tick an appropriate response option. For the religion question, some respondents were unsure how to answer and spontaneously mentioned that they were thinking about the issue of practising a religion or not. Others commented that the question should specifically ask about practice. Those respondents who commented on the equality-related questions tended to comment on the sexual identity question. Some were shocked by the question, some were amused, and some commented that they were not comfortable with the question. Some did not understand the terms used in the question, and others asked household members to confirm that they had ticked the correct box. Few respondents commented on the disability question, and those who did were unsure how to answer so sought reassurance that they had answered correctly.

6. Level of comfort with equality strand questions

The quantitative analysis shows that 5 per cent of respondents felt uncomfortable being asked the sexual identity question, 2 per cent felt uncomfortable being asked the ethnic group and religion questions, and 1 per cent felt uncomfortable answering the disability question. Around 6 per cent of respondents were uncomfortable with being asked a sexual

identity question on behalf of other members of the household, compared with around 3 per cent for the other equality strands.

6.1 Those uncomfortable with being asked the equality strand questions about themselves

When asked why they felt uncomfortable with being asked the equality strand questions for themselves, respondents gave similar answers for each question. Respondents tended to say that these questions were private, or intrusive, that they were uncomfortable with the subject of the question, or that they couldn't see its purpose. For ethnic group some respondents felt uncomfortable because they didn't know what the question meant, or it was a difficult question for them to answer. For religion, some respondents raised the issue of whether the question referred to practising a religion or not, or felt uncomfortable because they were not religious. For sexual identity, some respondents were shocked or indignant about being asked this question. There were particular concerns about why the government needed to know this information. Some respondents felt uncomfortable being asked about their sexual identity because of their culture. For the disability question, some commented that they felt uncomfortable because they didn't like others knowing that they had a medical problem.

6.2 Those uncomfortable with being asked the equality strand questions for Person 2

When asked why they felt uncomfortable being asked the equality strand questions for Person 2, respondents again gave similar answers for each question. Respondents again mentioned privacy, and that they felt uncomfortable doing this. Respondents mentioned the importance of the person being able to answer for themselves. This was especially the case for sexual identity, as respondents commented that answering for someone else didn't feel right, and that they shouldn't have to do this. Respondents were also concerned about the accuracy of their answers, again especially for sexual identity.

6.3 Those uncomfortable for someone else in their household to be asked the equality strand questions on their behalf

Finally, when asked why they would feel uncomfortable for someone else in their household to answer the equality strand questions on their behalf, respondents again mentioned that this was because the questions were personal. Respondents strongly felt that they should answer these questions themselves, and some mentioned that they were uncomfortable with this idea as they didn't know the other members of the household. Respondents again raised the issue of accuracy for all the equality strand questions, but they were especially concerned about the accuracy of a sexual identity question answered on their behalf. Respondents felt that a sexual identity question was too personal to be answered by someone else, and also that they might not want them to know the answer.

7. Should equality strand questions be voluntary or compulsory?

7.1 Religion

As the quantitative analysis shows, the majority of respondents (69 per cent) thought that a religion question should be voluntary. These respondents usually mentioned that the question was private and personal, and that people should have the right to choose whether they want to answer or not. Some respondents recognised that some people may feel uneasy about disclosing this information, and one Jewish respondent was particularly concerned about the connotations of a compulsory religion question. In some cases respondents wanted the question to be voluntary because they couldn't see what the information would be used for, and others queried the validity of the data that would be collected. Respondents were particularly concerned about confidentiality and the effects of the disclosure of this information. Respondents of all religions (and also those who answered 'no religion') felt that the religion question should be voluntary.

Those who felt that the religion question should be compulsory tended to state that they were comfortable answering the question themselves, and that the question should fit in with the compulsory nature of the questionnaire. Respondents felt that it was important to collect this information to monitor how society is changing, and for the government to make decisions. Other respondents misinterpreted the purpose of the question, and linked it to controlling terrorism. Those who felt that the religion question should be compulsory tended to answer 'Christian' or 'no religion' for this question.

7.2 Sexual identity

As described in the quantitative analysis, the majority of respondents felt that a sexual identity question should be voluntary. Many respondents, including those who identified as 'Gay/lesbian' and 'Bisexual', strongly felt that this information was private and that respondents may not be open about their sexual identity. Sexual identity was seen as a sensitive topic, and many respondents were uncomfortable with the idea of forcing people to answer. Some respondents commented that people would not answer this question. Respondents could not see the purpose of the question, especially why it would be asked on a government questionnaire. Respondents were also concerned about the confidentiality of the information provided, and confidentiality within the household. One respondent specifically stated that the question should be voluntary if only one questionnaire is used for the entire household. There were strong concerns about disclosure of this information, and the potential repercussions of this. Some respondents also mentioned that the terminology used in the question may not be understood, or did not understand it themselves.

Those who felt that the sexual identity question should be compulsory tended to state that people should be open about their sexuality. One respondent who identified as 'Gay/lesbian' felt that sexual identity was "no secret". It was also mentioned that the question should be compulsory as the census itself is compulsory. Others mentioned that they felt a sexual identity question would be accepted by respondents. Some respondents felt that the question was important to monitor changes in society, and also aid government planning. In some cases, respondents linked the sexual identity question to health issues.

8. Will respondents complete the real census?

As shown in the quantitative analysis, 3 per cent of respondents stated that they would not answer the census questionnaire and post it back. These respondents often mentioned that they would not have time to complete the questionnaire, or that they didn't see the purpose of the questionnaire, or that they were concerned about how their data would be protected. Some respondents commented that whether they completed the questionnaire or not would depend on which questions were asked, and one respondent specifically mentioned that the ethnic group and sexual identity questions as reasons why he would not answer.

9. Potential discouragement from completing the census

As detailed in the quantitative report, approximately 3 per cent of respondents stated that a sexual identity question would discourage them from completing the census questionnaire, compared with approximately 1 per cent who identified ethnic group, and less than 0.5 per cent who identified religion and disability as the questions that would discourage them.

9.1 Sexual identity

Those who stated that a sexual identity question would discourage them often said that this was due to privacy reasons, and that they were not comfortable with the idea of answering this question. Others mentioned that they would be discouraged because they couldn't see the purpose of the question, and some felt that a sexual identity question was not appropriate for a government questionnaire. Respondents were also concerned about confidentiality and the release of this type of data. Some mentioned that they would be discouraged for cultural reasons, or because they found the question confusing.

9.2 Religion

Those who cited a religion question as the reason they would be discouraged from completing the census questionnaire tended to say that this was due to confidentiality and their concern about the impact of releasing the data.

9.3 Ethnic group

Respondents who stated that an ethnic group question would discourage them mentioned that this information was personal, made them feel uncomfortable, and was a sensitive subject.

9.4 Disability

Those who said that a disability question would discourage them felt that the question was personal, and more appropriate for other types of survey.

9.5 Multiple responses

Finally those who felt that more than one question would discourage them from completing the census questionnaire generally stated that this was due to privacy.

10. Conclusions

10.1 Quantitative analysis

In summary, the vast majority of participants in this study stated that they were comfortable, both with answering a question on sexual identity and having others answer on their behalf. However a small, but potentially influential, percentage cited they felt uncomfortable with the question, either answering on their own, or on another's, behalf. In general, participants were slightly less comfortable with the idea that another should answer on their behalf and this result appeared slightly more pronounced for the sexual identity question.

Out of those respondents who found at least one equality strand sensitive, sexual identity was the most likely source of sensitivity. When faced with the task of actually filling in a paper questionnaire, which emulated a possible layout for the 2011 Census questionnaire, the sexual identity question received a slightly worse response rate than did the other equality questions. About 5 per cent of participants did not respond to the question asking for their own sexual identity (3 per cent refused outright and 2 per cent selected 'prefer not to say'). About double the number refused the question for Person 2 and substantially more still failed to respond for Person 3. The increased non-response for Person 3 presumably reflects parents' lesser willingness, or perceived capacity, to answer on behalf of their children.

When given the choice, the majority thought both sexual identity and religion should be voluntary rather than compulsory questions. However the percentage of respondents who thought the potential sexual identity question should be made voluntary was considerably larger than the percentage of respondents who thought the question on religion should be voluntary.

Perhaps most importantly, when asked if any of the four equality strands would discourage them from completing the census, 3 per cent of respondents gave the sexual identity question as a reason. It is worth noting that these 3 per cent are over and above the 3 per cent who indicated that no one in their household intended to return the census questionnaire anyway. However, the sample size of this study was not sufficient to explore meaningfully any differential impact this potential non-response might have on the respondent profile.

10.2 Qualitative analysis

It is important again to note that much of the qualitative analysis focuses on respondents who have stated that they were uncomfortable being asked the equality strand questions, or those who have stated that these questions would discourage them from completing the census questionnaire. As the quantitative analysis shows, the vast majority of respondents stated that they were comfortable being asked these questions, or for someone else in the household to answer them on their behalf, or that they would complete the census. However, when looking at the responses of those who did not feel comfortable being asked these questions, it is clear that respondents have strong concerns about their privacy and confidentiality.

There were spontaneous reactions of shock or anger from some respondents that a sexual identity question had been asked. Respondents repeatedly raised concerns about the confidentiality of the equality strand data, in particular sexual identity. Of particular concern was the possibility of disclosure of this information, and the potential repercussions that this could have. Regardless of how they answered the sexual identity question, respondents felt that this question should be voluntary and answered by the person themselves – not by proxy. Some respondents also raised concerns about confidentiality within the household, with some specifically mentioning that the question should be voluntary if only one census questionnaire is provided per household.

10.3 Overall conclusions

Although the majority of respondents commented that they were comfortable with the equality strand questions, for others these questions are a serious concern, in particular sexual identity. Privacy and confidentiality appear to be extremely important to respondents, again especially for sexual identity.

The addition of the sexual identity question could potentially increase Census non-response by around 3 per cent (± 1.5 per cent). This likely detrimental effect needs to be weighed against any positive gains that would be made from knowing the sexual identity of a slightly smaller respondent base when deciding whether or not to add the sexual identity question to the 2011 Census.

Given that producing accurate estimates of the total population is the key aim of the census, ONS is not recommending the inclusion of a sexual identity question in the 2011 Census questionnaire. This finding does not affect household surveys, where trained interviewers will continue to ask the sexual identity question in ONS surveys in ways that respect the privacy of all members of the household.