

Northern Ireland Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: [Census 2021: implications for Northern Ireland](#), HC 835

Wednesday 16 November 2022

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Members present: Simon Hoare (Chair); Stephen Farry; Sir Robert Goodwill; Claire Hanna; Carla Lockhart; Ian Paisley; Mr Robin Walker.

Questions 1 - 50

Witnesses

I: Geraldine McGahey OBE, Chief Commissioner, Equality Commission for Northern Ireland; Dr Ian Shuttleworth, Senior Lecturer, School of Natural and Built Environment, Queen's University Belfast; and Dr David Marshall, Director of Census and Population Statistics, Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Geraldine McGahey OBE, Dr Ian Shuttleworth and Dr David Marshall.

Q1 Chair: Good morning, colleagues, and good morning to our witnesses for this Committee session. We are going to be looking at the recent census and its impact and potential impact for policy and so on for Northern Ireland. Ms McGahey, as chief commissioner, do you want to give an opening statement? Or are you happy just to go straight into questions?

Geraldine McGahey: I am happy to go straight into questions.

Q2 Chair: Dr Marshall wishes to give an opening statement—I knew somebody wanted to, so forgive me. Dr Marshall, let us come to you as director of census and population statistics. The floor is yours, sir.

Dr Marshall: Thank you very much for the invitation to speak today. I have just a few words of introduction. The census is the largest statistical exercise that we undertake in Government here in Northern Ireland and across the United Kingdom. It provides an invaluable source of data on our population. Not only the Government in Northern Ireland but also businesses, charities and a host of other people use census data. It is important because it is used to allocate billions of pounds of public money. It also has a lot of other use cases in terms of planning services, policy development and so on. It is important that my organisation, the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, gets it right.

The planning for the census did not start in 2019 or 2020; it started all the way back in 2014. We had public consultations in 2015 and 2018, and a host of discussions both inside and outside Government. That led us to a proposals document and then on to legislation. The legislation for the census allows the First and Deputy First Minister here in Northern Ireland to order a census be taken. The plans for the census were endorsed by the Executive and indeed by the Assembly in an order in regulations passed in the summer of 2020. That prescribed census day to be 21 March 2021. That was not just census day here in Northern Ireland; it was also census day in England and Wales.

I am an inveterate census-taker. I have been taking censuses for over 20 years. This is my third census. It is a vast exercise.

Chair: When do you get the gold clock? That seems above and beyond the call of duty.

Dr Marshall: It feels like I have got there on this one, I have to say. It is a vast undertaking. This time around we had 160,000 local phone calls and 4 million pieces of mail were distributed and returned. There were a million visitors to our website and our field staff—the people who call at people's doors to make sure we get all the returns—made 375,000 field visits to help householders to fill out the form.



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I have to say, first and foremost, thank you to the public here in Northern Ireland. They responded very positively to the census. We had a phenomenal response. Thank you to the people here who worked on the census—the field staff, the office staff and indeed the supplier staff. Also thank you to our colleagues in the Office for National Statistics, because we worked in partnership with our colleagues in England and Wales. To be frank, we could not have run a census to the quality that we have without their support.

In terms of the outcome, we had a 97% response to the census. That is the best that I have ever seen in my time. It was 94% in 2011 and 95% in 2001. It gives you a sense of the quality. Some 80% of those returns were made online. We had only 16% of returns online in 2011 and no online option in 2001 at all. We have a host of clever statistical methods to ensure we count everybody. The field staff support that with administrative data and we have a coverage survey. We were able to present the results that covered the full 100% of our population. Indeed, the independent Office for Statistics Regulation, which regulates official statistics across the UK, saw fit to give us its national statistics kitemark. That is an independent rubber stamp.

On the results, because I know that is what the Committee want to discuss this morning, the first results were published in May and showed that our population stayed at just over 1.903 million, an increase of 5% from 2011, when it was just over 1.8 million. Within that population, the most important point to make is that the number of people aged 65 or more increased by not 5% but 25%. That is a fairly phenomenal increase over 10 years. The number of people over 65 now stands at just under a third of a million. That is set to increase even more in the coming years, with the baby boom generation of 1950s and 1960s reaching 65. The ageing population is probably the most important single message that we will take. We have not yet published all the results, but that is probably the most important single message. That has huge implications for public policy.

There are other figures as well. We published figures in September on the nature of our population and its diversity. Minority ethnic groups are increasing in size. The number of people living here born outside the UK and Ireland is the highest it has ever been. Although I go back three censuses, we actually have a history going all the way back to the 1840s and 1850s. That figure of one person in 15 born outside the UK and Ireland is the highest it has ever been. On religion, the statistics point to an increased secularisation of our population.

I could go on and on; I will not. Perhaps we will cover some of the other topics in questions. I would say that not all the data has been published yet. We are publishing more data in December on health and housing, and further data on labour market, demography, and indeed for the first time on sexual orientation, in the new year. That is my introduction, Chair. Thank you very much.



Q3 Chair: Dr Marshall, thank you. That sets the scene very well. I have a quick question on what you told us. First of all, congratulations on achieving the highest response to a census—97%, as you told us, with 3% who obviously did not respond. Is this a specific group of people who do not get involved with the census? Is it across the age groups? What is your way of working that out? Or is it a hunch or supposition?

Dr Marshall: It is more than a hunch or supposition. We have various methods we use. It is known across the world, by all census-taking organisation across the world. One group of people that people tend to leave off forms is very young babies—babies that are just born. They get a sense that they do not need to include them on their forms. What we have done this time around, for the first time, is taken data from the birth registration system, where babies are registered for birth, and compared that to the census and, where appropriate, included those records alongside the parents where they have been left off. That is the sort of thing that we do.

We have this large-scale coverage survey that we run alongside our colleagues in England and Wales, which essentially runs after the census to identify any houses that the field staff may have missed. We may get corrections or amendments for that. They are included in the final figures. The 1.9 million that I talked about, Chair, covers the whole 100%.

More generally, young adult men are challenging to count in a census. They tend to move around. There is this concept of usual residence. This time around, we endeavoured. For students specifically, we got parents to fill out for students who were living with them. We had various mechanisms we included, but we also had the coverage survey, the field staff support and evidence through data. I would commend the figures as being coverage of the whole population.

Q4 Chair: Thank you very much indeed for that. We have all found that useful as a scene setter. Let me ask the three of you what your key takeaways are about the findings of this 2021 census. How do you think that extrapolates to where attention should be either refocused or newly focused on the evolution and delivery of public policy? I guess quite a lot of that is going to be about the ageing of the population. What are your key findings?

Geraldine McGahey: The key finding for us is the fact that the census reinforces and confirms what our belief was, in that our society is becoming more diverse. It is very valuable and timely that the information is available, because a lot of our public sector organisations rely on the census data whenever they are carrying out their section 75 duties. Now more than ever, it reinforces the need to take account of the diversity of our population.

Also it gives direction for public authorities when they are designing their public policy response to society. On the fact that we have an ageing



population, in the past, health has taken account of the fact that certain areas within Northern Ireland have a higher level of older people than some other areas. When the cross-tabulation figures become available next year, it will give even more evidence on that. For me, the big issue is that it is timely, it will help organisations focus on the outcomes of their public policy as opposed to outputs, and the data is very relevant.

Dr Shuttleworth: Just to make an additional comment after what Dr Marshall said, one thing about online censuses is that they generally will have more accurate and better responses than something on paper. I just wanted to say that it has not only had a high coverage, but it is high quality.

The things that I would take away from the census and the results so far would be changing household structures. Obviously, there is ageing and, as part of that, more one-person households. That is people at the ageing end of the spectrum, as well as younger people, so there are changes in relationships and ageing.

The takeaway point as well is secularisation. Northern Ireland has traditionally been seen as a two-bloc situation of nationalists and unionists, Catholics and Protestants. That is still largely true, but there is growing secularisation too. Northern Ireland is still more religious than other parts of the UK, but it is actually getting more like other parts of the UK now and somewhat more like the Republic of Ireland in going down this route—down the path towards secularisation. That is what I would take from it.

Q5 Chair: Just on that, you are right to point out that there is an increasing secularisation of society. Do you detect a faster pace in Northern Ireland, or is it as per the norm of the rest of the United Kingdom?

Dr Shuttleworth: Northern Ireland is far behind in the level of people who say they have no religion. Self-reported religious affiliation is higher here than it would be in the Republic of Ireland and in other parts of the UK. As to the trends, the results in some ways are not that much of a surprise if you had looked at the results in 1991, 2001 and 2011. They are following the same path, but they are somewhat behind. This is just a gut feeling—I would have to check this more thoroughly—but I do not think the pace has massively increased.

Dr Marshall: One other point to reinforce what Dr Shuttleworth has said is that, while the population has increased by 5%, the number of occupied households has increased by 9% over the last decade. We now have well over three-quarters of a million occupied households in Northern Ireland—it is just under 770,000. Why has the number of households increased faster than the population? It is because we have had a significant increase in one-person households. That is in part due to ageing.



What is quite remarkable is that when I was born in the 1960s, five-or-more-person households were the largest group; today, one-person households is the largest group. You can imagine the implications that might have for public policy.

- Q6 **Chair:** Dr Marshall, I appreciate that you cannot necessarily write or direct the questions of a future census, but would it be helpful to focus on this ageing element? This is a question probably for the three of you. Occasionally we talk about the ageing timebomb, as if it is something destructive and bad and to be avoided. Of course, it is not. Is there scope, within the questions asked in a census, to help better planning for health and social care provision—primarily, to ask, “Are you on medication? Do you have a disability? Do you have a carer? Are you living in a self-sustaining way?” Just looking at the bold number—that there are x people who are 60 to 70 and x between 70 and 80—is useful, but it is not actually terribly granular to help the shaping of detailed policy.

Dr Shuttleworth: The census already has questions about, for example, caring and health. Those questions are already there and we have to wait for cross-tabulations. I would take the general point that age is not necessarily a problem. It is about having healthy older people and people who have a longer life expectancy while they are being healthy, rather than being dependent. Some of that material is already in the census.

- Q7 **Chair:** I appreciate it is there, but is there scope for it being far more detailed and specific?

Dr Shuttleworth: I will leave that to David, perhaps, and then I will come in and respond as well.

Dr Marshall: Ian has covered some of those points. We have information on caregiving and general health. We have information on mental health. For the first time, we are going to provide some data on Asperger’s and autism from the 2021 census. We also have questions on household adaptations that will be published very soon.

On your point about the challenges of ageing, one of the things the census also provides is information on family demography—grandparents living with grandchildren and those sorts of things. We just cannot get that sort of household structure from any other source.

You are right that there are other options, and we are actively looking at this with colleagues in other areas. It is around linking health data with census data after the census—for example, information on mortality. We did this through the pandemic: we linked information from the death certificates of people who died from coronavirus.

- Q8 **Chair:** You have just frozen, Dr Marshall. While you defrost yourself, let us ask Ms McGahey that question.

Geraldine McGahey: The Equality Commission did engage from the outset with David and his team in relation to the development of



questions. We will continue to do that. From 2014 and particularly in 2015 and 2016, the commission was heavily involved in designing the questions and encouraging certain data to be pulled out. I look forward to the cross-tabulation, because that is where a lot of the granular detail that you are referring to will emerge. It is something that we need to keep an eye on as we move towards the next census, and planning for that will begin almost imminently. It is very important that that kind of data is pulled out, because it is going to inform public policy for all of the Government Departments.

Q9 Ian Paisley: To follow up on that point that the professor and Geraldine mentioned, in terms of cross-tabulation, do you look at the levels of applications for PIP and read that across into analysing the numbers of people who have disabilities or may have requirements, in terms of what household pressures will be? Is that all read across? Is that information shared?

Geraldine McGahey: That is all read across whenever it becomes available. You will be aware that the commission does not have a remit to look at deprivation in terms of poverty, but we do look at all of our policy issues through a poverty lens or an economic lens. We try to take that into account. It is not one of the grounds for discrimination or consideration under section 75—it is not one of the nine categories—but we do apply that. You will see from all of our key inequality statements that we do make reference to those issues and we try to build them in. The fact that we do not have a vires does not stop us.

Ian Paisley: That will give you a good picture in terms of quality-of-life issues.

Geraldine McGahey: Yes, it does, very much so. It highlights where key inequalities actually lie and you can see a theme running through all of the key inequalities in terms of the impact of poverty and deprivation. Those that are suffering from high levels of deprivation are really suffering the most inequality.

Q10 Mr Walker: First, can I join in the Chair's congratulations on what seems to have been a very successful process? Dr Marshall, you mentioned that you have been doing these surveys for 20 years. Is there anything in the current census that surprised you in terms of the outcomes? Just as a supplementary to that, I was quite struck by Dr Shuttleworth's point about online data actually being more accurate. From the political world in which we live, we are used to polls, and online polls are often significantly less accurate than ones taken in other ways. I just wondered if you could expand on that.

Dr Marshall: I will deal with the second question first. In terms of the paper questionnaires, which is essentially the main mechanism that we have used in the past for the census self-completion, there are various routes around the questionnaire so that you only fill in certain questions



that apply to you. For some members of the public, that is challenging for them. They fill out the whole questionnaire or they make a mistake.

With online questionnaires, first of all, they do not see questions that do not apply to them because of their age or whatever that might be. Secondly, if they put in a response that seems a bit out of the ordinary with what you might expect from their previous responses, you still accept it but you can say, "Is that true?" That allows you to do a degree of self-correction that just would not be possible with paper questionnaires.

In terms of things that surprised me, this was the most challenging census I have been part of, given the fact that we ran it through the pandemic. To be honest—this is not a surprise and I am delighted—without doubt the public's reaction has been remarkable and it has been very positive.

In terms of some of the statistics, there are more to come and I cannot talk about those.

Q11 Chair: Just between the privacy of all of us, go on. You are among friends.

Dr Marshall: As a demographer, the ageing population is clearly something I keep coming back to as something that is essential. We are going to have to, as a society, understand that. I do not know whether you caught me when I said it last, but with this challenge of ageing, we also need to recognise that people are alive and will become grandparents, and that would not have historically been the case. That is something that is a very positive thing for an ageing population as well.

Q12 Mr Walker: That is a good point, thank you. Dr Shuttleworth, on that point about the quality of data from online, is there anything further you want to add on that?

Dr Shuttleworth: No, there is nothing further I want to add. The point there was made by David as to why the online data is better and more accurate.

Q13 Mr Walker: You have mentioned the pandemic context of all this. I remember that I was in the NIO at the time when you were taking the decision to go ahead, and it was controversial at the time in terms of the background and the concern that people's lives could be disrupted. The Scottish Government took a different decision in terms of their census.

Has the timing affected the data? Are there any areas where you feel it needs to be caveated as a result of that? I was also struck by your mentioning 375,000 home visits that were able to take place; that seems a huge number. Is there anything you want to add about the extra precautions that might have been taken in doing those at that time?

Dr Marshall: Yes, there were a huge number of precautions we had to undertake in terms of the pandemic with our field staff. We were one of



the first parts of the public sector here in Northern Ireland that undertook lateral flow testing at that time. It was just coming in at that time. For our field staff, that opportunity was made available to them. We had a whole raft of new policies and procedures. The autumn of 2020 was, without doubt, probably one of the most challenging periods in terms of redesigning what we had set out in advance. All of that work paid dividends.

In terms of going forward, for my boss, the Registrar General, Siobhan Carey, and the National Statistician, Sir Ian Diamond, that was a very difficult and challenging period. We sought advice from the Chief Medical Officer, both here in Northern Ireland and in England and Wales. It was a very positive outcome, but it was not without risk and challenge. Thankfully, everything went well.

Q14 Mr Walker: That seems certainly to be borne out by the outcomes that you have talked us through so far. Is there anything from your perspective on that, as the equality commissioner?

Geraldine McGahey: No, unfortunately we are not involved in the actual undertaking of the census. My concerns, enthusiasm and remit are in relation to the outputs from the census collection.

Q15 Mr Walker: From that perspective, are you confident that the census process is an efficient use of public resources?

Geraldine McGahey: Yes, absolutely, because so many of our public authorities rely on census data in terms of designing their policies and making sure that the section 75 duties are complied with. The census data is a crucial element to us. Therefore, the reliance that we have on it is great and the reassurance that we get from NISRA as to the accuracy of it and the extent of participation in society is very valuable.

Dr Shuttleworth: Can I make an additional comment, please, in support of those points? I have had experience at various times of using national datasets about population in other countries—for example, Sweden—which are based on population registers. They are really timely and they are up to date. The census is only once every 10 years. You get data registers and it is more up to date. Crucially, those data miss out precisely some of the issues to do with household and the family structure that the census captures. In terms of a resource for the whole population and understanding of things like households, relationships within families and things like care and support, the census is absolutely vital.

Q16 Chair: Just on the data and how it is used, is it then broken down into digestible chunks, not in thematics but in geographies? Does each individual local authority have access to their data, and then there is data on a parliamentary constituency basis as well as on an MLA basis?

Dr Marshall: We publish all the geographical structures. We publish data for Northern Ireland for the 11 local councils, but there are statistics



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going to be published very shortly on the 80 district electoral areas. Then we go all the way down to around 4,000 small population units on the ground, of about 500 people each. We also publish statistics for grid squares—100 metre or 1 km grid squares—covering all of Northern Ireland for parliamentary constituencies. One of the most popular is around towns and villages. You can get the population of Crossmaglen or Calmore or Coleraine all the way back to the 19th century.

- Q17 **Chair:** Would our supposition be correct that the younger, smaller households are in the urban areas and the older, potentially more single-occupancy ones are in rural areas? Or is it not as easy to extrapolate that?

Dr Marshall: It is not as straightforward as that. There are a variety of figures we have published to date. There are different parts of the country ageing at different paces than others. For example, Ards and North Down has an older population than Mid Ulster. Even within Ards and North Down, there are younger areas and older areas, and similarly in Mid Ulster. This rich tapestry that we are going to publish in the next few weeks around the areas within each council area will help to plan services more effectively as well.

- Q18 **Ian Paisley:** Dr Marshall, as a demographer, what are the implications of the ageing population for the society and for the economy?

Dr Marshall: There are a variety of implications. I talked about impacts on planning services, healthcare and pensions. There are implications in terms of different societal structures, one-person households and those sorts of things. As I mentioned to the Chair, there are also positive implications in terms of people living longer into grandparenthood and family structures being wider and a lot larger than they have been in the past. There is a whole variety of implications. It is not for me to go into the individual elements of public policy, but you can imagine the sorts of implications that might have.

- Q19 **Ian Paisley:** I am sure one of the questions probably on your mind is whether taxation policy would be affected by this, as well as pension provision and early pension take-up. Those matters must have some impact on your thinking on this.

Dr Marshall: It would be for other parts of Government to take this forward. We are not directly involved. We make sure that the statistics are available to HMRC, to our colleagues in the Department for Communities and DWP, and indeed all parts of the Civil Service. We are talking to them at the minute. It will be for others to determine what new schemes and policies to bring forward and fit in.

- Q20 **Ian Paisley:** One of the stats that jumped out at me was that 139 deaths were people over the age of 100. That is three times higher than it was 30 years ago, which shows that the length of lifespan is increasing quite incredibly.



Dr Marshall: We have more centenarians today than we have ever had in the past. That will continue. The expectation will be to have more people over the age of 100 and those sorts of numbers. If the population projections we are presenting at the minute come to pass, around about one child in every five or one child in every six will live to the age of 100.

- Q21 **Ian Paisley:** Professor, in terms of tax-take policy, the outcome of this census must start to flag up some issues for Government about how they will actually raise enough money to care for an elderly population. Is that factored into any of your analysis post the census?

Dr Shuttleworth: At this stage, we are only just starting to consider the results and to analyse them. Decisions about policy, like decisions about the questions that are on the census, are a political matter. What we can say, in understanding the trends of population in Northern Ireland—and the trends in Northern Ireland are roughly the same as in most parts of Europe—is there will be implications for things like the number of school places that are going to be needed. There will be implications about the size of the labour force and the tax bases to support welfare as well. This is a common thing, which will be faced in other parts of the UK, and indeed over the border in the Republic of Ireland as well. These are political issues, but it is something that we will have to consider in the long term.

- Q22 **Ian Paisley:** Dr Marshall, I will come back to you on the other end of the scale from the elderly population, looking at the infant population. Where do you think Northern Ireland's birth rate will be in another 10 years?

Dr Marshall: That is a really difficult question. What we have witnessed over the last number of years are waves of increases and decreases of birth numbers, in part related to the baby boom generation of the 1960s. As those people come into parenthood age, then they have children themselves and you see a second wave of an increased number of children born from that cohort. We are currently sitting at around about 1.6 or 1.7 children, on average, per woman.

The world population, as you will have seen in the news last night, is now at 8 billion. The projections from the UN suggest that the fertility rate across the world will drop to around about two. I cannot see a set of circumstances where the Northern Ireland fertility rate will go back up to where it was whenever I was born—two and a half or three. That is not going to happen. Fertility rates will remain low unless something changes.

- Q23 **Ian Paisley:** That will have an exponential impact in, say, 20 years on the elderly population. This will rebalance the other way.

Dr Marshall: It will take a period of time for the baby boom generation to age through. The population projections for Northern Ireland are that, if everything comes to pass, our population will not continue to increase in the longer term.



Dr Shuttleworth: Can I make a further point in support of those comments as well? I wanted to also say that 1.6 children per woman means that the lack of births will mean, ultimately, that the Northern Ireland population will start to fall unless there is net in-migration. Net in-migration of younger people is a thing that will maintain or increase the population. Since migrants are often younger—they are mostly younger—they are people who will be in the workforce and will be paying taxes. This is again an issue that is not just for Northern Ireland but reaches across the UK.

There are some interesting issues around how we think about migration and how it relates to other parts of public policy. Ultimately, we could be looking at the population peaking, for example, roughly in 2040 or 2050 and then starting to decrease if we do not have net in-migration.

Ian Paisley: It certainly has an impact for employers and for their decisions about where they will get their workforce from and how productive that workforce will actually be. It certainly has huge implications.

Q24 **Chair:** Ms McGahey, what should cause public policy formulators more concern? Is it the ageing population, so more old or fewer young? Is it looking to that tax base, or who is going to be working in the health and care sector to provide the health and care and so on and so forth?

Geraldine McGahey: Ian has already mentioned the fact that migration will sustain the economy to the extent of employees and taxation. However, more pressing is the fact that we have a 25% increase in over-65s. That has an implication for Northern Ireland on a whole range of public policy areas, from healthcare to social inclusion—there are implications for bus passes, for example, to include society—to digital poverty and housing and the housing stock. It is right across the public policy spectrum. That is a key driver for society now, to look at how best we can meet those needs.

Northern Ireland is the only area that does not have discrimination protection in the access to goods, facilities and services for older people. That is really pressing on us now. When we have such an ageing population, we need to take measures to ensure that gap in legislation is addressed.

Q25 **Chair:** David Marshall, this is a question for you. Would the GB census tell us, not specifically but in broad terms, how many people were born in Northern Ireland but have migrated to England, Wales and Scotland?

Dr Marshall: Yes. There is a country of birth question in the census in England and Wales, and in Scotland. That will pull out the number of people who were born in Northern Ireland and now live in Great Britain.

Q26 **Chair:** Will you pull those figures out or have them pulled out for you? It is going to be very important, is it not, for policy formulators to get some idea as to the quantum of that young diaspora. We have been hearing



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that in our investment and economy inquiry as well, talking about the cap on student numbers—too many young people leave and go to GB never to return, or only to return in their very old age. We need to try to think of ways to encourage people to stay to help address that very dramatic demographic shift.

Dr Marshall: We are working with our colleagues in the Office for National Statistics and the National Records of Scotland, once the Scottish census figures are published, to produce a report that covers the census across all parts of the United Kingdom and to present that to Parliament. The country of birth and the labour market are the sorts of numbers that we will make sure that Parliament, and others who develop public policy, have access to.

Q27 **Chair:** Dr Marshall, without wishing to increase your workload, would you be able to furnish us with a copy of that note?

Dr Marshall: We will provide a note to you on that to give you more background information.

Q28 **Sir Robert Goodwill:** Just as a follow-up to Ian Paisley's question, obviously the census is very good at tracking people's ages, but we seem to have a very mixed picture in terms of whether people are economically active. The state pension age is increasing but also a number of people keep working beyond their pension age, particularly self-employed people or people who just need the money to get by. We also then have people who you meet in their late 50s who say, "I have retired," in certain occupations. The police give good pensions to people who retire early. Is the census able to give us a key figure on the number of people actually available to be in the workforce, rather than just the age bands?

Dr Marshall: Yes, the census will have information by age—the number of people who are working, who are employed, who are self-employed, who are retired and who are in different parts of the labour market. That will provide that by an individual single-year age, all the way up beyond 70 into the mid-70s. The census allows people all the way up to 80 and 90, if they wish, if they are still working, to record that.

Q29 **Sir Robert Goodwill:** Are we seeing a social divergence between poor people who are being forced to work longer and people in the professions who are retiring earlier, who probably, in terms of the salaries they were earning, are paying more tax and are more beneficial to the economy in that regard?

Dr Marshall: I am not sure the census will allow us to identify that. It will allow us to identify what the nature of employment of those people over the age of 65 or 66 would be. It would allow us to identify what their income levels or pension levels they may be entitled to. There will be some of that information but not to the level of detail, perhaps, that you are asking for. I know that is the sort of information that we will furnish to our colleagues in the Department for Communities and others who are looking at these matters.



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Q30 Carla Lockhart: You stole my thunder with regards to students leaving Northern Ireland, relocating and setting up home elsewhere. Are there any statistics via the census on that? Are there any around the religious breakdown of those who tend to decide to leave for GB or even global jobs and so on?

Dr Marshall: I know Ian has done some research on this. Yes, we will have information on the number of tertiary-level students, originally from Northern Ireland, who are in England and Wales. There is also administrative data on that. The Higher Education Statistics Agency will provide information on that, both by numbers and age. The census also allows us to break that down by religious make-up as well.

Dr Shuttleworth: Yes, we do have data on flows of students around the UK from HESA. Unless you can link data from that to the census, as far as I know it does not collect information and statistics on religion. Only the census collects that in terms of the whole population. I suspect that HESA data does not have that, but it does tell us how many students are moving around the UK.

Q31 Stephen Farry: David mentioned the issue around single households earlier, but you were reluctant to speculate too far on policy. Could I just ask you again what you think the implications of this may well be? I will then extend that to Geraldine and to Ian, who may have slightly more freedom to comment on it.

Dr Marshall: There is no doubt that the provision of care, for example, for elderly households, for people who are living on their own, is a different picture than whenever somebody is living with a relative who might be able to support them. That is just one example. I would say there is a raft of other conversations going on around loneliness. The census does not measure things of that nature, but there are conversations around those sorts of social factors and around those sorts of issues in terms of one-person households.

That said, we also need to reflect that it is not just older people who are living in one-person households. There are quite a number of younger people as well, in terms of apartment living and those sorts of things. Perhaps as they move into adulthood and starting a family that changes, but those sorts of things are different now than they were in the past. We need to reflect on that as well. Maybe Ian and Geraldine want to say something more about public policy.

Geraldine McGahey: I have already touched on some of the policy implications that there will be in relation to older and single households. It covers the full remit in terms of inequalities in housing stock, for example. There will be big implications for public sector housing, in terms of the suitability of the accommodation that is available and how more housing stock can be developed that is appropriate to needs. There is also potentially an implication for housing design in terms of making sure



that new housing stock is adapted at the outset, rather than at a later stage in terms of retrofitting for older people.

As David has said, in terms of younger people, there are implications for the types of private rented accommodation. No matter what public policy area you might stop to consider, there will be implications for our older population. On social inclusion, which I have already referred to, we are very much aware of digital poverty within the older age group. That is only going to get worse. You made a reference, Mr Chairman, to the reliability of broadband. I can assure you that in Northern Ireland it is not that good. It is not just in rural areas; it is also in urban areas as well.

Even in terms of our public transport, there are implications there. It is going to cost society more. That goes back to Ian Paisley's point in relation to taxation and the economy generally. Where is money going to come from to fund it all?

Q32 Stephen Farry: Can I add another layer to this perhaps, Geraldine? All of us as politicians in Northern Ireland—and I am sure elsewhere in the UK as well—are conscious of the huge pressures on housing. You have squatter units, potentially, growing waiting lists, and particularly problems with younger people who are almost sofa surfing at times, on waiting lists. Has any of that been picked up in the census? Do we have a picture as to how prevalent a problem that is?

Geraldine McGahey: I would expect that data to come forward whenever the cross-tabulation detail is released next year, but we currently have a problem in relation to the suitability of housing stock for people's needs. That is sometimes a wider issue than just the availability of housing. There are economic issues in relation to young people who are sofa surfing and so on, so it is a much wider issue than just the availability of housing stock.

Dr Shuttleworth: In addition to what has been said, there is something right here and right now that is important in terms of single-person households. That is basically that, if you live with somebody else or you live with a family, you can share costs. There are economies of scale in terms of heating, getting food and stuff like that. Single-person households, everything else being equal, are going to be more vulnerable to a cost of living crisis, simply because there is only one person in the household to bear all the costs. You cannot share it with a partner or with other people. In addition to the points that have been made by everybody else, which are valid, there is something right here and right now that actually could be important too.

Q33 Carla Lockhart: Is there a correlation between single-person households and geographical location?

Dr Marshall: We have not published all the relevant data right down to the smallest geographical area. There are clearly certain types of accommodation in certain parts of the country where they are more lined



up and designed, if you like, for single-person households—apartment living, for example, and those sorts of things. Yes, there will be a correlation. When we publish more data beneath local council area, you will see that.

Q34 Stephen Farry: Moving on to an entirely different angle, reference was made to questions on sexual orientation in the four nations of the UK. There was a question on gender identity in three, but not in Northern Ireland. Could we just clarify why that was not undertaken and asked? Do we lose anything in terms of public policy analysis from not having gone down that route? Let us start with Geraldine, wearing your Equality Commission hat.

Geraldine McGahey: It is an important area that we would like information on. We did have discussions with NISRA at the outset, whenever the census questions were being designed. On this particular point in relation to gender identity, the best person to address it is David himself. I think he is keen to address that issue.

Dr Marshall: On gender identity, the initial census consultation that we ran was in 2015. Although the commission came forward, there were only limited others who came forward with an interest in gender identity as a question. One of the parameters for this census was that we have larger household sizes here in Northern Ireland, on average, than in Great Britain. We wanted to retain, essentially, a six-person paper form, which meant that we only had around 40 questions. With the consultation not coming forward with a significant user need for that, and wanting to maintain the same number of questions from 2011, there was not the capacity to include it. We did not do any testing in 2015, 2016 or 2017. I know other parts of the UK did at that time.

Subsequently, we had requests for gender identity data in 2019 and 2020, when we were looking at the proposals, but at that stage we had not the capacity to include another question. We have included a gender identity question on our social surveys here in Northern Ireland. We have the continuous household survey, the crime survey and a number of surveys here in Northern Ireland. I know the Northern Ireland life and times survey also has a question on that. That will give us at least some information about the number of people from the transgender community there are here in Northern Ireland.

I would add that, although there is a question on gender identity and being transgender in Great Britain, it is not yet a consistent question between England, Wales and Scotland. This space is something that we will endeavour to work on with our colleagues in Great Britain, and indeed our colleagues in the Republic of Ireland, so that we have a consistent approach and methods to count this population here in Northern Ireland.

Q35 Stephen Farry: I will turn to Ian to ask the obvious follow-up question. Do you feel that we are losing something in not having had that question



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making the final cut in Northern Ireland as such?

Dr Shuttleworth: I really have no comment on that particular question and that particular issue. It is not an area in which I have conducted any work and have any particular expertise, so I would have to give no response. I am sorry.

Geraldine McGahey: I would just add that it is really important to us as an Equality Commission and to the wider public sector in Northern Ireland that the data that is produced on foot of a census is as comprehensive as possible. We very much welcome the fact that the Northern Ireland life and times survey and the surveys that David has referred to continue to ask that question, but the underlying point must be that it is comparable across the rest of the United Kingdom. It is important that those anomalies between the types of questions and the question structure are ironed out before it provides us with a meaningful comparator. Work must be carried out to address that, because we very much look forward to having that data.

Stephen Farry: There are live debates in all four jurisdictions around this issue at present. I would be slightly concerned if we waited until 2031 for the next formal iteration. There are things that can be done in the interim, but just in terms of closing that policy gap, it may well be a missed opportunity.

Q36 **Mr Walker:** One other area of inconsistency, in some respects, with other parts of the United Kingdom is around the treatment of veterans. We all understand some of the sensitivities that were expressed in the consultation with regard to that in Northern Ireland. I understand that there is work going on between NISRA and the Ministry of Defence to provide census-type information in other ways. Could you give any more detail on how that information compares, particularly when it comes to the commitments that were made in NDNA to having the armed forces covenant apply in Northern Ireland? Do you feel that gives sufficient information for those to be delivered?

Dr Marshall: There was not a question on UK armed forces veterans in the 2021 census in Northern Ireland, and there was a question in England and Wales and, indeed, in the 2022 census in Scotland. There was demand for a question here in Northern Ireland, and a number of people came forward. We looked at in a testing regime in 2016-17. We ran a question in our rehearsal in 2019 as well.

At the same time, we were also working with the Ministry of Defence. Its service leavers' database covers people who were in the services and who have pension rights or personnel records, going all the way back to the 1970s. It is continuing to improve that with data from the reserves, for example, to have medal data from the medal systems that it has as well.

We also did focus groups with the Veterans Commissioner here in Northern Ireland. There was a reticence here for people to disclose that, and that is why it did not make the final cut for the questionnaire. We



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have formally agreed with the MoD that we would work in partnership to link this service leavers' database and the medals information that the MoD holds with the 2021 census. That would allow us to publish information on veterans who live in Northern Ireland, as defined by the census, but who are veterans as defined by the MoD.

I believe the Office for National Statistics will also use that information alongside the census in England and Wales to help inform the most accurate figures on veterans that we can present across the UK, including Scotland. It will allow us to identify veterans by their health status, their housing, their education and their employment, which will give information for public policy.

Q37 Mr Walker: Is there any comment on that from the Equality Commission's perspective?

Geraldine McGahey: We wait for the data to come forward and will continue to look at veterans and their issues under the nine categories in section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act.

Q38 Ian Paisley: Geraldine, the minority ethnic population has effectively doubled in 10 years. I assume you believe that that will probably continue to happen in Northern Ireland. Is the census able to show how much of that ethnic minority population is fully engaged in the employment force? Going back to some of the earlier issues, that is going to be an essential element in driving our economy forward.

Geraldine McGahey: It is. At the moment, that granular detail is not available to us, but it will be coming shortly. There are wide implications for society as a whole in relation to the growing ethnic minority community. It is putting a bigger spotlight on the fact that data must be collected. There must be equality monitoring data provided right across society.

It reinforces the recommendations that we made previously to the Committee in terms of legislative change and the need for data monitoring. More importantly, the work that is being undertaken by the Executive Office at the moment is crucial. It is unfortunate that, at this moment in time, there is no timetable for that. The equality monitoring that it is rolling out is going to be on a voluntary basis until such time as the race relations order is reviewed. The first phase of it will look at employment practices within the Civil Service, before it starts to roll out into other areas.

It will require legislative change, so the sooner that happens, very much to the better. It is only through that kind of data that we can identify where ethnic minority communities are working and how we can encourage and support them to contribute more to our economic wellbeing in Northern Ireland. It is really important.

Q39 Ian Paisley: Some of the figures are about language provision for ethnic minorities—Polish, Romanian and Lithuanian are the three highest



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groups. In terms of policy provision, would that be one of the things that you are looking at going forward? How do we address that gap so that there is proper language provision for that population to learn English, but also for the provision of education in that language to assess those young children?

Geraldine McGahey: We currently have key inequality papers on all of those areas, including education, and it is something that the Department of Education and the schools have worked hard to address in preparing for newcomer children and addressing their attainment levels, but we still have recommendations to improve that.

One of the big issues would be racist bullying in schools. While we have legislation introduced in 2016, which became effective about 18 months ago, there is no statutory duty on schools to report incidents of racist bullying to the Department of Education. We have some recommendations in that regard, but we also feel that there should be protections for schools when they are reporting that.

It is important that schools learn from each other in relation to the kind of racist bullying that has taken place and that they can develop responses to that, not just in terms of how they deal with bullies in school but how they communicate with parents. There is some fine tuning of that piece of legislation to be undertaken, and that is just one area, but there are many others.

Q40 Ian Paisley: In terms of racist bullying at school, is it possible to show that some of that comes because of the lack of language provision and because of the language barriers?

Geraldine McGahey: At the moment, no. We do not have that information. Schools will keep records but they are not compelled to report that to the education authority, so there is no clear database of the type of bullying that has taken place without going to individual schools and asking for that data.

Chair: I do not want us to stray too far into this; I am conscious of the time. I am not seeking to avoid the issue, but I want to keep to the census data.

Q41 Carla Lockhart: My question is around languages. In the census, there are statistics around Ulster Scots and Irish language—12.4% age three and above for Irish, and 10.4% for Ulster Scots. On this basis, from the Equality Commission's perspective and in the context of equality, would you believe that those of us from an Ulster Scots identity feel that the ongoing disparity in spend on Ulster Scots compared to Irish language, which is at least £10 on Irish to every £1 on Ulster Scots, is unjustifiable and discriminatory?

Geraldine McGahey: To be honest, the Equality Commission has not developed a position in relation to this, or has not considered it in any great detail, but it is something that I am more than happy to take back



to the commission, gather evidence and make a recommendation and policy position to you. I will take that away and come back to you with much more detail on it.

Carla Lockhart: I appreciate that. I would very much value that. On 25 May, the Government announced the Northern Ireland Office awarding an Irish language group somewhere in the region of £4 million. In light of the census findings, given that there did not appear to be—I have asked for more clarity on this—equality in terms of what was given to Ulster Scots—

Chair: Ms Lockhart, that takes us off the census per se and how policy follows. Ms McGahey has committed to giving some thought to that.

Carla Lockhart: It is just the census findings, and it is important.

Chair: On those two figures, policy will have to flow to reflect both. You are right on that.

Q42 **Claire Hanna:** I wanted to come back to the discussion that you were just having with Ian Paisley about the data collection for minority ethnic people in particular. You gave evidence to us when we did an inquiry on this earlier in the year. You talked then—and we agreed and made recommendations—about the need to expand the scope and scale of data collection. Does the census data that we have provide enough of a foundation to make policy for that population? You have explained how the lack of a timeline from TEO is frustrating.

Geraldine McGahey: It is important to note that, whilst census data is crucially important to public authorities when they are developing their policy, it is not the only source of data that they should be using. They should be using data that they collect themselves in relation to their service users or their employee workforce and so on. Although it is important, it is not the only one, and most public authorities would recognise that. They are compelled to do it. They have a duty to consider the impact of their policies right across society on the nine categories, race being one, under section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act.

Q43 **Claire Hanna:** Does that need new legislation?

Geraldine McGahey: No.

Q44 **Claire Hanna:** At the moment, it is within the remit, powers and duties of bodies to better collect, so that could happen even in the interim, while we do not have the legislation required coming from TEO. People could make better use of the datasets that they have.

Geraldine McGahey: They have a duty to collect data, but it is not specifically in relation to race. Data collection for race requires specific legislation to make it mandatory. While the commission issues voluntary guidance in relation to employee monitoring and so on, the Executive Office is looking at reviewing the race relations order. We do not yet know the detail of that new piece of legislation, but it has already issued



guidance that makes it clear that data collection will be carried out, initially on a voluntary basis, until legislation is in position.

One thing that I would make clear about the guidance that has been issued to date is that we are concerned that, from the way it is structured, data in relation to the Roma community is not going to be visible. We have raised that with the Executive Office and, hopefully, that will be addressed before the guidance is finally issued. My understanding is that it is being consulted on at the moment, but it is something that we want to have addressed.

Q45 Claire Hanna: What is the rationale for that? Is there an explanation for why that particular group of people is an issue?

Geraldine McGahey: I am not too clear on the detail of that, to be honest, as to why they have done it that way, but the same issue addresses England and Wales in terms of the data that is being used or the monitoring that is undertaken. We know from the evidence that we have to date that the Roma community is very similar to Irish Travellers in terms of the level of deprivation and inequalities that they suffer, so we feel that it is an area of our society that we need to address. Hopefully, they will be able to work with their counterparts in England and Wales and make sure that data collection mechanisms will identify and make the Roma community visible in the datasets that they produce.

Q46 Chair: Let us turn to the final bit of the question for this session. The census has identified, for the first time, a population identifying as 45.7% Catholic and 43.48% Protestant. We also have the emergence of a growing third group that is neither one thing nor the other. What does that mean for Northern Ireland in the usual perpetual, legitimate drive, historically, for parity, balance of attention, resources and so on—as near as damn it—between the orange and green traditions?

Dr Shuttleworth: What it means for policy is that there are groups that are not a majority. It means that the legislation that we already have is there to protect the rights of all parts of the community and all population blocks. What it might mean in the future, with the growth of secularisation, and possibly an increase in people who say that they have a Northern Irish identity, is that monitoring, perhaps in 10 years' time or maybe further, will have to be tweaked a little bit.

We have quite a lot of understanding of how groups change and how they alter through time. One resource that we have in Northern Ireland is a longitudinal study, which links census data through time to health cards. In dealing with this question in particular, but also in responding to some of the earlier questions that were raised about retirement and occupation, for example, we are very well placed to try to answer those questions, because we can look at people at different censuses and at different stages of life, and we can see how people make transitions between different states between censuses.



In terms of public policy, I am not going to tell them their business in terms of electoral strategy, but it perhaps starts to raise questions for the two-monolithic-blocs model, although that still has truth. There is still truth in that, and Northern Ireland society is still shaped by that, but less so than 30 years ago. It is a different place to what it was in 1991.

Q47 **Chair:** Ms McGahey, do you have a thought or two on that?

Geraldine McGahey: I have loads of thoughts on this issue. It is something that we have been considering in relation to public policy making in its general form and in relation to specific pieces of legislation—for example, the fair employment and treatment order.

Policy makers in Northern Ireland are required by law to consider the whole make-up of society and the implications and impact of their policy proposals on wider society across nine specific grounds. Some of those are religion and political view. Census data is really important in that, but it is not the only source, as I mentioned earlier. The law requires them to pay due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity across those categories, but it also requires them to pay regard to the desirability of promoting good relations on grounds of race, religion and political opinion.

This does not just come into force whenever a new policy is being developed. It is also applicable when policies are being reviewed and revised, and it should be taken into account at the earliest possible stage, so that, when policy decisions are being made, they are made on an evidence base that is robust. It requires strong leadership.

One of the other things that has been getting a little bit of momentum in public discourse would be the relevance of the fair employment and treatment order. The commission is firmly of the view that that piece of legislation is still relevant in Northern Ireland society, because it provides a number of arms in terms of protections. First of all, it provides a legislative basis for people to seek redress if they feel that they have been discriminated against on the grounds of their religion or their political opinion. It is not just in relation to Catholic or Protestant, but people of any religion or none.

The important part of FETO is the monitoring requirements that it places on employers. It is not just about the religion that someone identifies themselves to be; it is about community background and the fair participation of people in the workplace. It provides us and employers with a means of being able to identify the perceived community background of people. It provides employers with the opportunity, on a three-year basis, to be able to review their employment practice and to make sure that everyone has the opportunity for fair participation. It is still very relevant, regardless of the fact that there is this growing middle ground, because it is about how people are perceived in terms of their community background.



Q48 Carla Lockhart: Do we have a breakdown of geographical location of "other"? The other thing is this headline figure that there is a lot of political conclusion around. Has there been any work on that side of things?

Geraldine McGahey: We are continuing to review our policy positions on all of the public policy statements that we currently have. We are looking in more detail at the data that has been produced on foot of the census, and that that is yet to come. Where we have drawn a conclusion so far is the relevance of the fair employment and treatment order.

Now is not the time in Northern Ireland society to play about with that. It has provided a very strong driver for change over the years in Northern Ireland. If one section of the community is starting to move above another, it is not about redress but about the continued fair participation of people in our society. That is why I am saying that particular issue is still very relevant, but we will, of course, continue to revisit all of our key inequality statements in relation to the data that is produced by the census and that that is still to come.

Q49 Stephen Farry: Geraldine, in terms of FETO, just to clarify, are you defending it exactly as it is or are you suggesting that there should be some modification? How do you account for people who are the products of mixed marriages or mixed relationships, so who are not brought up in one or other of the traditional religious backgrounds?

Geraldine McGahey: As I said, FETO is about the perception as to what community you have been brought up in, if you do not self-identify. It is about providing a basis for employers to be able to ensure that there is fairness. It is for the individual as to how they wish to identify themselves, but it is also for the employer to make sure that they take account of those issues.

It is still relevant in our society. It is not going to change in the near future. In the past, we have made recommendations that perhaps FETO should be amended slightly to include the monitoring of ethnic minorities in the workforce. The proposals in relation to amendments to the race relations order that are currently being worked on by the Executive Office and the racial equality sub-group will be addressing the equality monitoring of ethnic minorities in the workforce, as well as service provision.

Our recommendation in relation to FETO might be superseded by that, but we await the final documentation in the consultation that is coming out on that. Until such time as we see how they are going to do it, we will continue to recommend that FETO is amended to include racial minorities.

Q50 Chair: Can I thank, on behalf of the Committee, our three witnesses for session one? We will now turn to session two, which you are very welcome to stay and listen to, although I suppose Dr Marshall is now going to prepare for census 2031. We do not want to detain you. By my



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reckoning, David, you have another two censuses left in your working career, so we do not want to hold you up.

Dr Shuttleworth: Thank you very much.

Geraldine McGahey: Could I express my thanks to your staff for in organising this morning and the assistance that they offered us in terms of getting here?

Chair: It is our pleasure. We are very grateful to you all for coming.