

# 2021 Census

## UK Armed Forces Veterans Topic Report

April 2019



Northern Ireland  
Statistics and Research Agency

---

Gníomhaireacht Thuaisceart Éireann  
um Staitisticí agus Taighde



## 1. Executive Summary

- A specific question on UK Armed Forces veterans has not been asked in the census to date
- The 2021 Census Topic Consultation and subsequent stakeholder engagement have shown a user need for this information. NISRA is committed to providing census type statistics on this sub-population.
- Qualitative and quantitative research, has been carried out to assess whether a question on UK Armed Forces veterans could be included in the 2021 Census. The findings indicate that:
  - the inclusion of a question on UK Armed Forces veterans in the 2021 Census in Northern Ireland is generally acceptable to the public;
  - older people consider that a question on UK Armed Forces veterans may not be answered accurately. It is not known to what extent this view reflects the views of UK Armed Forces veterans; and
  - the number of UK Armed Forces veterans living in Northern Ireland is estimated to be between 40,000 and 60,000 people.
- NISRA intend to undertake further research prior to making a final recommendation on the best way to provide UK Armed Forces veterans census type statistics. This research is likely to include using administrative data from the Ministry of Defence on service leavers to assess whether this information could be used to provide the relevant statistics. In addition it is planned to include a question on this topic in the 2019 Census Rehearsal.

## **2. Introduction**

To date a specific question on UK Armed Forces veterans has not been included in the census. This report sets out research and evidence gathered on this issue by the Northern Ireland Statistics & Research Agency (NISRA).

## **3. Topic Consultation and Position in Great Britain**

NISRA conducted a 2021 Census Topic Consultation between September and December 2015<sup>1</sup>. During the topic consultation, a need to provide information on the UK Armed Forces veterans population living in Northern Ireland was identified. In their response to the topic consultation, the Royal British Legion expressed support for the inclusion of a question on the 'ex-service community'.

In the 'You Said We Did' report, published in Summer 2016<sup>2</sup>, NISRA reported that it did not intend to collect information on UK Armed Forces veterans in the 2021 Census. This was in line with the position taken by the Great Britain Census Offices. Thereafter a large number of representations were made to UK Census Offices to reconsider this position. Subsequently the Office for National Statistics (ONS), who are responsible for the census in England & Wales, and National Records of Scotland (NRS), who are responsible for the census in Scotland, have indicated that they propose to include a question on UK Armed Forces veterans in their 2021 Censuses<sup>3,4</sup>.

Statistical outputs on the UK Armed Forces veterans from the 2021 Census would provide a baseline estimate of the number of UK Armed Forces veterans living in Northern Ireland. The statistics could also be used to provide a picture of living conditions, health, education and labour market conditions of UK Armed Forces veterans.

The remainder of this paper sets out the latest research on this issue.

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nisra.gov.uk/statistics/2021-census/planning/consultation/topic-consultation>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.nisra.gov.uk/statistics/2021-census/planning/consultation/topic-consultation>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-2021-census-of-population-and-housing-in-england-and-wales>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.scotlandscensus.gov.uk/plans-scotland%E2%80%99s-census-2021>

#### 4. Research on a UK Armed Forces veterans question in Great Britain

Currently a question on UK Armed Forces veterans is included in the Annual Population Survey in Great Britain – a copy of the question is shown below:

**Have you ever served in the UK Armed Forces?**

*[Asked only of those aged 16 and over]*

No

Yes as a regular

Yes as a reservist

The 2017 evidence from this survey shows that there were an estimated 2.4 million UK Armed Forces veterans living in Great Britain. This makes up an estimated 5% of people aged 16 and over<sup>5</sup>. The survey also shows that older veterans (aged 75 and over) are disproportionately represented in the veteran population living in Great Britain. There are two main reasons for this. The first relates to large scale service mobilisation during the Second World War. The second is due to the impact of the National Service Act 1948. From 1949 to 1960 young adult males living in Great Britain were expected to serve in the Armed Services. National Service did not apply in Northern Ireland.

As part of their research, ONS and NRS have undertaken a further exercise with the Ministry of Defence (MoD). The MoD maintains a Veteran Leavers Database (VLD), of approximately 1.9 million service personnel who have left the UK Armed Forces since 1975. ONS and NRS linked the VLD to the 2011 Census - with a view to assessing whether data linkage would work and could be used to provide the full range of statistics without a census question. Both ONS and NRS have concluded that, whilst data linkage between the census and the VLD was successful it would under-represent the older service population (as it does not include veterans who left prior to 1975)<sup>6,7</sup>. Following this, ONS and NRS have concluded that a question should be included in the 2021 Census. The exact question is not yet finalised but it will be asked only of those people aged 16 and over and may include guidance for those people who have undertaken National Service.

---

5

[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/774937/20190128 - APS 2017 Statistical Bulletin - OS.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/774937/20190128_-_APS_2017_Statistical_Bulletin_-_OS.pdf)

6

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/census/censustransformationprogramme/questiondevelopment/armedforcescommunity/updateonmeetinginformationneedsonthearmedforcescommunityveterans>

<sup>7</sup> [https://www.scotlandscensus.gov.uk/documents/census2021/Ex-Service\\_Topic\\_Report.pdf](https://www.scotlandscensus.gov.uk/documents/census2021/Ex-Service_Topic_Report.pdf)

## **5. Public Acceptability Research in Northern Ireland**

In Northern Ireland there are a number of issues in relation to including an UK Armed Forces veterans question in the census. An important consideration is the public acceptability of including such a question.

NISRA has commissioned two separate studies into the public acceptability of including a question on UK Armed Forces veterans in the census.

In Spring 2018 NISRA commissioned a private research company to include a series of public acceptability questions on this issue in their Omnibus Survey of 1,000 households in Northern Ireland. The survey indicated that less than one fifth of respondents felt that a question on UK Armed Forces veterans in the census was unacceptable. The results did not vary greatly by religion (Protestants and older respondents were slightly more likely to find the question unacceptable). The most common reason raised for finding the question unacceptable was “the security risk” of supplying this information.

In Summer 2018 NISRA included a series of questions in the Omnibus Survey, a survey of around 1,000 people living in households in Northern Ireland. The survey indicated that one-third of respondents felt that an UK Armed Forces veterans question in the census would be unacceptable. This result did not vary greatly by religion (Protestants and older respondents were slightly more likely to find the question unacceptable). For those that found the question unacceptable the most common reason raised was “the security risk” of supplying this information.

Together this research has shown that most members of the public think that a question on UK Armed Forces veterans is generally acceptable. There is however a concern amongst a minority that the question may not be answered accurately as there may be a “security risk” in supplying this information (even to the census authorities). It is not known to what extent this view reflects the views of UK Armed Forces veterans.

## 6. Size of the UK Armed Forces veterans population

To assist in understanding the issue, NISRA have made an indicative estimate of the size of the UK Armed Forces veterans population living in Northern Ireland in 2017/18. This has used two methods

*Method 1: Assumes that the age-specific veteran rates in Great Britain (from the Annual Population Survey<sup>8</sup>) applies to the Northern Ireland population. In doing this a number of assumptions have had to be made about the relative impact of National Service in Great Britain.*

*Method 2: The private research company study (noted above) asked respondents if they had ever served in the UK Armed Forces. In total, 4% of local respondents said they previously served in the regular UK Armed Forces.*

Taken together the two methods in combination give an indicative estimate of between 40,000 (lower bound) and 60,000 (upper bound) UK Armed Forces veterans living in Northern Ireland.

## 7. Further research

NISRA plan to undertake further research on this issue.

NISRA plans to include a question on UK Armed Forces veterans (adults aged 16 years and over) in the census rehearsal in 2019. In the rehearsal issues around security/privacy will be managed in a number of ways:

- the question will include an instruction that 'current servers' do not identify themselves;
- public messages will be given on the confidentiality and security of the census data;
- NISRA will work with ex-service organisations to ensure a message on data security is given; and
- respondents can request an individual questionnaire should they wish to use one.

---

8

[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/774937/20190128 - APS 2017 Statistical Bulletin - OS.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/774937/20190128_-_APS_2017_Statistical_Bulletin_-_OS.pdf)

In addition, NISRA plan to work with the MoD to gain access to the Veteran Leaver's Database. This research will attempt to replicate the data linkage research carried out in Great Britain. In Northern Ireland this research may come to a different conclusion than that in Great Britain. This could happen for a variety of reasons such as the impact of National Service not being as large in Northern Ireland or that the quality of information in the Veteran's Leavers Database for Northern Ireland may not enable data linkage here.

NISRA intend to use this further research prior to making a final recommendation on the best way to provide UK Armed Forces veterans census type statistics. This decision will be based on a range of evaluation criteria, such as: operational requirements, respondent burden and other considerations such as public acceptability.

## **8. Conclusion**

NISRA has conducted research and testing into the potential to include a question on UK Armed Forces veterans in the 2021 Census. NISRA has identified a user need for information on UK Armed Forces veterans. NISRA has commissioned public acceptability testing of including an UK Armed Forces veterans question in the 2021 Census questionnaire. The findings suggest that it is generally acceptable. For those that found the question unacceptable the most common reason given was "the security risk" of supplying this information.

NISRA are committed to producing census-based statistics on UK armed forces veterans. NISRA plan to undertake further research on this issue before making a final recommendation for the 2021 Census later in the year.

**Census Office**  
**April 2019**