

Culture, Tourism, Europe & External Affairs Committee
Room T3.40
Scottish Parliament
Holyrood
Edinburgh
EH99 1SP
CTEEA.inquiries@parliament.scot

15 November 2018

Reform Scotland is delighted to have the opportunity to respond to the Culture, Tourism, Europe & External Affairs Committee's inquiry into the Census (Amendment) (Scotland) Bill.

While we are aware that the legislation is primarily aimed at issues of gender identity and sexual orientation, Reform Scotland believes that the legislation provides an excellent opportunity to address problems with the way the Scottish Census records data about the languages that are spoken in Scotland.

The Scottish Government has recognised the benefits of learning and speaking other languages. As it states on its website:

“Language is central to our cultural heritage and national identity, and essential for supporting a diverse and inclusive society. We recognise the importance of Scotland's rich diversity of languages, and the cultural, economic, historic and social benefits they bring.”¹

It goes on to refer to the 2011 census stating:

“The 2011 Scottish Census found that more than 150 languages other than English are used in Scottish homes.”²

The Scottish Census data gives a basic snapshot of some of the languages being spoken in Scotland. Unfortunately, prior to 2011 the census only asked questions about Gaelic language use, not other languages, so there is no way to use the census to measure change.

However, more importantly, the 2011 question was not particularly helpful and may have misled conclusions.

¹ <https://beta.gov.scot/policies/languages/>

² <https://beta.gov.scot/policies/languages/>

It asked “Do you use a language other than English at home?”

As Thomas Bak and Dina Mehmedbegovic highlight in their article “*Towards an interdisciplinary lifetime approach to Multilingualism*” in the European Journal of Language Policy, there is a danger of politicising such a question that guides people towards certain answers, as opposed to finding out genuine information.

Would families feel pressure to answer “English only”? The question implies that if someone speaks a language other than English at home, then they do not also speak English.

Equally, the question allows for only one non-English language to be spoken at home, whereas in reality many families in our multicultural society may well speak two, or indeed more, reflecting different backgrounds of family members.

The Scottish Government clearly values languages skills, so this sort of data should be sought.

As a result, Reform Scotland would call for the question to be amended so that it asked “What languages do you regularly use”. This should result in more accurate and meaningful data.

Yours sincerely,

Alison Payne
Research Director
Reform Scotland