

RSS RESPONSE TO THE CONSULTATION ON USER NEED FOR ADDITIONAL RESPONSE OPTIONS IN A FUTURE ETHNICITY STANDARD

4 February 2026

This is the Royal Statistical Society (RSS) response to the ONS's consultation on user needs for additional response options in a future ethnicity standard.

The RSS is a membership organisation for statisticians and data scientists and we advocate for the importance of statistics and data. We have over 12,000 members internationally, and about 8,000 in the UK. We champion the role of statistics and data in society, and work to ensure that policy formulation and decision-making are informed by evidence for the public good. This involves advocating for a statistical system which delivers reliable and relevant statistics that help us better understand the world and challenge decision-making.

We have encouraged individual members who use ethnicity data to respond to the consultation and give detailed responses. We make a more strategic recommendation – based on the view of our members – that a more fundamental review of ethnicity classification might be helpful.

Our thinking on this topic is guided by two key principles:

1. Harmonisation should not be a goal in and of itself; it should only be sought when the goal is to compare across populations. If that is not the objective, then seeking harmonisation may mean that suboptimal data (from the perspective of meeting user needs) is collected. A poorly designed harmonised standard for ethnicity risks trade-offs in analytical utility, which may have negative consequences in areas such as health inequalities, small-population analyses and intersectional research.
2. It is critical that the voices of ethnic minority groups are taken into account when decisions are made about what questions about ethnicity to research, and how the data should be collected.

These inform our view that a future ethnicity standard must go further than simply adding additional response options; rather, we advocate thinking again about ethnicity classifications from first principles. This would mean a comprehensive review which considers the current demographic landscape and redresses the issues with the current response options.

Our primary concern is that the current options mix ethnicity and nationality, through which the categories of 'Indian' or 'Pakistani' are classed as ethnicities, while the categories of 'Polish' or 'Romanian' are nationalities. Skin colour further complicates the classification, for example with individuals from western Asia potentially split across 'white', 'Asian', and 'other' categories. We would also like to see stronger guidance on the collection of ethnicity data; at present, there are significant groups in Britain (for example, Sikhs and Jews) who are recognised ethnic communities in UK case law for the purposes of the Race Relations Act (1976), but cannot be adequately identified within the current ethnicity classification. This limits the ability to compile meaningful statistics relating to their experiences and outcomes.

We recognise that these classifications have emerged through gradual changes over many years, and that a substantial change may make it hard to compare future responses with historical responses. We think that does need to be considered as part of the review. However, we believe that the issues with the current classification are sufficiently substantial that a full review would be the right course. This review should also consider clarity of definitions, labelling and explanation. It is critical that there is a clear process for involving professional statisticians on technical and challenging areas, and the standards should highlight areas where users of ethnicity standards may wish to consider consulting a statistician.

Regardless of whether our recommendation for a review is taken up, we believe that the standards should aggregate to seven ethnic groups: white British, black, Asian, mixed, white other, other, not specified. Given that 'white other' now represents around ten percent of the population, we think the white category should be separated into 'white British' and 'white other'. In addition, the most appropriate way to count people who do not wish to identify themselves as a particular ethnicity is to record this; adding a 'not specified' category would allow this.

