

Forces in Mind Trust's response to Northern Ireland Census User Needs Consultation

Section 3: Future need for existing census subtopics

1. Would you like to tell us about your future data needs for your subtopics of interest for Census 2031? *

- ☒ Yes (go to question 2)
- ☐ No (go to [Section 4](#))

2. Please state your first subtopic of interest. *

UK Armed Forces Community/Veterans

3. What do you need information about this subtopic for? *

- ☒ Resource allocation
- ☐ Service planning and delivery
- ☐ Targeting investment
- ☒ Policy development and monitoring
- ☐ Research requirement
- ☐ Other purposes – please specify:

4. Specifically, how do you intend to use information about this subtopic and why is it important?

Forces in Mind Trust (FiMT) was founded in 2011 to improve transition to civilian life for Service leavers and their families. Our mission is to enable successful transition to civilian life, and the Trust's strategy is to provide an evidence base that will influence and underpin effective policy-making and practice.

UK Armed Forces veterans data in the NISRA 2031 Census will provide a robust insight into the size and demographics of the veteran population living in Northern Ireland, as well as understanding the prevalence of different needs. This includes providing a picture of these demographics and needs at differing geographical levels. The data provided by the Census also enables a comparison with the non-veteran population.

There is currently no systematic data collection on veterans living in Northern Ireland. Without this information, it renders it difficult to understand the size of the veteran population, and veterans' demographics and needs. Northern Ireland remains the only UK nation without equivalent Census data, meaning it cannot benefit from the same independent, population-level evidence. Census data has proven to be an essential tool elsewhere in the UK for understanding trends and targeting support for the Armed Forces community.

As an evidence-based organisation, using this data allows for better identification of Armed Forces veterans and their needs. It can lead to better support mechanisms being developed, resources being implemented in the right places, and inform service planning.

At a policy-making level, using Census data alongside our own evidence-based research allows us to communicate with the correct and relevant stakeholders, such as Government departments, healthcare providers, and support services, by using the Census data for the identification of trends and areas of prevalence or need. In addition, the Census data can be used to formulate a picture of

need at different geographical levels, which is used to understand local support needs, whether services are effective and commission research where needed.

Findings from our recent [Our Community Our Covenant and Beyond](#) report, which focused on England, Wales and Scotland, show that local authorities are using data from the England and Wales Census and Scottish Census to identify veterans, enabling them to better understanding the needs of their local Armed Forces communities. The findings also indicate how and where local disadvantage has improved, particularly since the release of the England and Wales Census in 2021.

FiMT is aware that a veteran question was previously proposed for NISRA's 2021 Census, but the decision was made to exclude this after consultation and consideration. FiMT is aware of the additional circumstances which occur within Northern Ireland and as such would agree with [The Harmonised Standard for Previous UK Armed Forces Service](#) which notes that a "Prefer Not to Say" option may be included if needed, or providing respondents the option of skipping the question. We recognise that some veterans, as well as individuals who object to the question being asked, may choose not to respond, and that this would limit the completeness of the resulting data.

5(a) At what geographical level do you need information about this subtopic? *

- ☒ Northern Ireland
- ☒ Regional level (for example, Health and Social Care Trust)
- ☒ Local Government District
- ☒ Assembly Area/ Parliamentary Constituency
- ☒ District Electoral Area
- ☒ Electoral Ward
- ☒ Super Data Zone
- ☒ Data Zone
- ☐ Other – please specify:

5(b) Which of these geographical levels are most important to you?

National-level data provided would ensure a comprehensive understanding of the Armed Forces Community. The inclusion of Northern Ireland data on veterans and their households in Census 2031 would enable UK-wide Armed Forces community data to be integrated accurately for the first time. Data harmonisation across censuses is vital as this enables cross-national comparison. As FiMT's remit covers the UK, it is integral to us being able to compare cross-nationally. This allows us to consider and identify where veterans may be disadvantaged compared to the non-veteran population and, if the issue extends to devolved nations within the UK, to decipher if it is a wider trend or nation-specific. This also enables consideration of whether policy implementation and/or interventions are effective or if there are additional barriers that need to be addressed.

Census data pertaining to smaller population groups, such as at regional, local government district, electoral ward, and health and social care trust levels, will allow FiMT to identify any trend shifts in these groups in the future, which could reveal specific barriers these small population groups face, such as those from differing small population groups experiencing disproportionate housing or employment issues. Through identification, it allows for policy implementations to be made, and for FiMT, it identifies areas where there are potential issues and barriers where further research is needed to inform a specific policy problem and subsequent implementation of policy development and service delivery.

It is also a useful tool to be able to compare outcomes and demographics for veterans and non-veterans across policy areas.

6. Do you need information about this subtopic for population sub-groups? Please tell us which sub-groups.

There are a variety of sub-groups FiMT would like to identify within this subtopic, which would be beneficial across a number of our core areas, such as policy development/implementation and identification of barriers or issues where further research or activity is needed. Some core sub-groups would include:

- **Gender** – Our [recent research](#), which examined the facilitators and barriers to ex-Servicewomen successfully transitioning out of the Armed Forces, suggested that ex-servicewomen faced unique additional challenges. As such, having the ability to interpret data on this sub-group would be useful to measure improvements on recommendations made within this research, but also to be able to interpret any additional or further barriers through the usage of multivariate comparatives such as health status or employment status post-service
- **Age** – Different age ranges within the veteran population will have different experiences and therefore often different unique needs above those of their non-veteran counterparts. As such, data breakdown availability is useful to be able to understand the size of differing age groups and where targeted approaches are needed in areas such as healthcare, social care and employment. A [recent report](#) found that Gurkha veterans of a certain age were impacted financially during their service and post-service, which has impacted the level of health and social care support they require. Being able to use census data to identify the numbers within this cohort allows for better-targeted support. The area of support for working-age veterans is a topic that FiMT is interested in and sees the benefit of conducting work within the area. Currently, data is available for working-age veterans from the 2021 England and Wales Census and the 2022 Scotland Census and having joined-up data across all devolved nations within the United Kingdom would be beneficial.
- **Ethnicity** – Veterans from ethnic minorities or Non-UK service-personnel and veterans can face additional or unique needs, and as such, understanding the makeup of this sub-group is useful to understanding the level of those that may be impacted and in which local geographies.

Multivariate outputs have also enabled us to understand different demographic groups and identify trends where two variable factors are directly correlated with one another. Using comparisons of variables aids in showing where veterans may be more or less likely to experience worse outcomes compared to the non-veteran population. Using this data to target interventions and policies effectively is beneficial. For example, [recently published research](#) showed the barriers some ex-Service personnel, in particular those with mental or physical health disabilities, face when interacting with the benefits system. When considering the Census data, it showed that whilst veterans and non-

veterans have similar levels of employment, the proportion of disabled veterans was larger than the proportion of non-veterans. In using this comparison, it shows a more accurate picture of the proportions of veterans who may be more likely to interact with the benefits system and face barriers than employment levels alone show.

7. Do you need information about this subtopic for multivariate analysis? *

- ☒ Yes
- ☐ No

8. If yes, which topics would you use information about in combination with this subtopic?

- ☒ Housing, Accommodation and Communal Establishments
- ☒ Demography, Household Structure and Migration
- ☒ Ethnicity, Identity, Language and Religion
- ☒ Health and Care
- ☒ Sexual Orientation
- ☒ Education/qualifications
- ☒ Labour Market and Travel to work
- ☐ Other – please specify:

9(a) Is UK comparability a requirement for you/your work for information about this subtopic? *

- ☒ Yes, essential

- ☐ Yes, strong need
- ☐ Yes, some need
- ☐ No

9(b) If yes, please indicate the type of comparisons you would be making.

- ☒ Comparisons at similar levels (for example, comparing Local Government Districts across countries)
- ☒ Comparisons at different levels (for example, comparing Local Government Districts with the UK)
- ☐ Other – please specify:

10(a) Is Republic of Ireland comparability a requirement for you/your work for information about this subtopic? *

- ☐ Yes, essential
- ☐ Yes, strong need
- ☐ Yes, some need
- ☒ No

10(b) If yes, please indicate the type of comparisons you would be making.

- ☐ Comparisons at similar levels (for example, comparing Local Government Districts across countries)
- ☐ Comparisons at different levels (for example, comparing Local Government Districts with the Republic of Ireland)

- ☐ Other – please specify:

11. Is other international comparability a requirement for you/your work for information about this subtopic? *

Tick one option.

- ☐ Yes, essential
- ☐ Yes, strong need
- ☐ Yes, some need
- ☒ No

13. Are you aware of other non-census sources of information about this subtopic? *

- ☒ No (go to question 15)
- ☐ Yes – please specify:

There are some alternative and limited sources of data on UK Armed Forces veterans, such as the Annual Population Survey, Veterans Survey, MONARCH, the King's College Health and Wellbeing Cohort Study, as well as survey data from previous (e.g., the 2014 RBL Household Survey) and ongoing studies on the veteran community. However, there is no other data source currently available at a comparable level for veterans living in Northern Ireland and data is not being routinely collected by any statutory sector organisations. The data held by charitable and MOD organisations is also incomplete.

Whilst research has been conducted with veterans living in Northern Ireland, such as the FiMT-funded Northern Ireland Veterans Health and Wellbeing Study, without knowing the size or characteristics of the veteran population, it is difficult to assess whether studies are achieving representative samples.

14(a) If yes, please tell us whether the alternative source(s) meet your current needs.

Tick one option.

- ☐ Yes, fully
- ☐ Yes, partially
- ☒ No

14(b) If you selected 'Yes partially' or 'No', please tell us what more information you would require.

To our knowledge, there is no alternative data source that provides data that can be compared over time frames with a rich diversity of data across a national level on the veteran population in Northern Ireland. In considering 2031, it is also unlikely that there will be an alternative comparable data source at this point. FiMT, as a spend-out trust, will be closing in 2031 and will therefore not be funding independent research after this point, which further limits the potential availability of an alternative data source.

In addition to including a question on veterans in the census, it would be useful to identify the wider Armed Forces community, such as Armed Forces partners and children to better understand the size and needs of the whole veteran community.

15. If NISRA did not collect information about this subtopic in Census 2031, what would be the adverse impact on you/your work? (0 = no impact, 10 = highest possible impact) *

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