

---

# Information Recorded at the Registration of Births and Stillbirths

## Responses to the Consultation

**02 July 2012**

---

This paper analyses the responses to the Registrar General's consultation, in Spring 2012, about the proposed collection, from every mother, when a birth or stillbirth is registered, of information about whether she was married before, and the number of her previous children (if any) - information which is, at present, obtained only from married couples.

## Contents

1. Summary .....	3
2. Background .....	3
3. Analysis of responses.....	4
4. Answers to questions asked, and suggestions/points made, by some respondents .....	7

## Annexes

Annex A: Registrar General's letter of 21 February 2012 .....	11
Annex B: List of those who were consulted .....	13
Annex C: Anonymised verbatim responses .....	14

## 1. Summary

In total, 28 responses were received, half from local authorities (who are responsible for the registration services). They are analysed in [Section 3](#).

There were no objections to the proposal. Indeed, 25 stated that they supported the proposal, without expressing any reservations.

Two respondents questioned the need for some of the information that is collected: one was concerned regarding asking about previous children who were stillborn, or who died after birth; both queried the need for information about whether the mother was previously married or in a civil partnership. The reasons for collecting such information are given in [Section 4](#). National Records of Scotland (NRS) formerly General Register Office for Scotland does not believe that the proposal should be changed in any way, following the consultation, given that only two out of the 28 respondents expressed any concerns.

A number of other questions were asked, and suggestions or points were made, by respondents. These also appear in [Section 4](#), along with NRS's answers to them. Again, NRS does not believe that the proposal should be changed in any way, in the light of these results of the consultation.

Finally, NRS advises against the use of the term 'parity', because it means different things to different people (instead, one should specify precisely what is meant - for example, 'the number of previous live births' or 'the number of previous completed pregnancies').

## 2. Background

Under the Population (Statistics) Acts 1938 and 1960, when a birth or a stillbirth is registered, information about whether the mother was married before and the number of her previous children (if any) must be provided 'except where the birth is of an illegitimate child'. The number of previous children (if any) is of value to inform projections of population, research into fertility and other topics; and information about whether the mother had been married before may also be used to answer research questions.

At the time of the above Acts, only about 5% of births were to unmarried parents, so such information was collected in respect of around 95% of all births and stillbirths. However, since then, births to unmarried parents have increased greatly, to just over half of all births registered in the latest four years - and information collected when births to married parents are registered is of very limited value, as it cannot be considered representative of all births. Therefore, the Registrar General sought views on whether he should propose to Scottish Ministers that they should modify the wording of the Acts (a) to require such information to be recorded when any birth or stillbirth is registered and (b) to take account of the possibility that a mother may have been in a civil partnership (as marriage and civil partnership are treated equally at other stages of the registration of births and stillbirths).

The Registrar General undertook that such information would continue to be treated as confidential, and would not be shown in the entry in the register of births or stillbirths, nor in any extract from those registers (such as what is commonly known as a 'birth certificate'): it would be used only by NRS staff to prepare statistics.

More background information about the consultation is available in:

- [Annex A](#) - the Registrar General's letter of 21 February 2012, seeking views on the proposal
- [Annex B](#) - list of those who were consulted (i.e. all those to whom the letter was sent)

Monday 30th April 2012 was the closing date for responses to the consultation.

### 3. Analysis of responses

In total, 28 responses were received by the closing date (or shortly thereafter). These may be classified as follows:

- 25 stated that they supported the proposal, without expressing any reservations;
- 1 indicated that they had no objection to it;
- 2 supported parts of the proposal, but were concerned about some of the questions to be asked; and
- none opposed the proposal.

Full details of all the responses appear in [Annex C](#) - Anonymised verbatim responses. They are shown in three groups:

- 14 from Local Authorities (LAs), who are responsible for registration services, whose responses were often from a senior Registrar;
- 10 from the National Health Service, including both 'territorial' NHS Boards and organisations such as the Information Services Division of NHS National Services Scotland; and
- 4 from other individuals and organisations, such as academics.

In a couple of cases, responses were received from two different people in the same organisation (presumably because they work in different parts of that organisation).

There were several clear expressions of support for the proposal. For example:

- Overall we think the changes would be a very good idea (LA-3);
- I am very happy with the proposed changes (NHS-2);
- I think the changes sound very sensible and reflect the changes in society (NHS-3);
- Seems very relevant to modern behaviours. I would support this (NHS-6);
- I believe that the proposed changes are justified (NHS-7).

In some cases, Local Authority (LA) respondents made it clear that registration staff supported the proposal, or that they did not expect that there would be any problems implementing it:

- I have also spoken with all members of the registration staff and they are unanimous in their support of the proposals (LA-2);
- more than happy for Registrars to collect [the information] (LA-6);
- This particular issue has been raised at quite a few meetings of the Executive Council of the Association of Registrars of Scotland (AROS) so I'm quite certain registration staff in Scotland will support these proposed changes (LA-8);
- From a practical point of view, asking this question of all birth and stillbirth registrations would not incur any difficulties. The time taken to ask the question would be negligible and it is not foreseen that it would lead to an increase in the length of the registration (LA-11).

Some respondents said that they supported the proposal for reasons that were given in the Registrar General's letter. Others (Oth) gave additional justification, or expressed the rationale in a different way. For example:

- As a council with a well used family history centre ... The proposal ... will provide information which is of current value and will also be of considerable sociological and historical value over time (LA-4);
- a) The current stats obtained are indeed incomplete due to changes in lifestyles;  
b) Unlike the current statistical information requested, the new proposal is non discriminatory (LA-13);
- The changes you propose would improve the information collected and achieve a more representative picture for statistical analysis and record keeping (LA-14);
- ... similar changes have finally been implemented in England and Wales .... As well as benefitting Scotland, this would enable harmonisation with the rest of the UK and our contribution to international comparisons (Oth-3).

Academic researchers set out the arguments for the collection of the information in greater length than other respondents. Some of the points that they made included:

- The absence of information on birth order of children born to unmarried parents seriously limits the ability both (a) to develop sound population projections; and (b) to conduct research that will enhance understanding of temporal and spatial variations in fertility in Scotland (Oth-2);
- A better understanding of fertility dynamics will also contribute to a better understanding of population ageing. Fertility is a major driver of population ageing, which is advancing more rapidly in Scotland than in the rest of the UK. The need to meet the challenges of an ageing population is a major policy concern at the present time (Oth-2);
- ... [the current] question asks for previous children alive and stillborn by any current and previous husbands, which, aside from being quite a sensitive issue, is open to misinterpretation (Oth-4);

- [on why 'parity-based' fertility measures, which are measures of fertility that are based on women's numbers of previous children, are important]: 2 main advantages: First, the parity-based approach controls for past order-specific fertility. Therefore, parity-based period measures are much less prone than are age-based period measure to temporal fluctuations caused by changes in the timing of births. Second, fertility is coming to reflect more and more the decisions made by people about the appropriate number of children to have. Parity-based measures explicitly acknowledge this fact, whereas age-based measures do not (Oth-4).

A researcher noted that "the definition of parity changes across discipline", and stated that "Parity to demographers refers to the previous number of children a women has" and that the "clinical/medical" definition is "the number of previous pregnancies (hiding multiple births and include stillbirths)". NRS therefore advises against the use of the term 'parity': instead, it would be better to refer to (e.g.) 'the number of previous live births' or 'the number of completed pregnancies' (or whatever definition is appropriate in the given context), as this should reduce the potential for misunderstandings.

Two respondents supported parts of the proposal, but were concerned about other aspects:

- LA-5:
  - Staff are not comfortable asking ... about previous children who were stillborn or who died after birth. Often there are children present ... who may not have been told ... Could ... cause distress ... when difficult questions are then asked by the children. Why should the mother have to answer all these awkward questions and we not ask the father about any other children he has had.
  - Mother previously married or in a civil partnership - Staff asked what this information is used for? We are forcing a woman to divulge information she may not have shared with her current partner ... We do not ask the father ... is this not discrimination against the mother?
- (NHS-8) - ... I am not sure why we still need to ask about marriage or civil partnership. At such a distressing time as the loss of a baby this should not be a priority.

Answers to these questions are given in [Section 4](#) of this report. As will be seen, there are reasons for collecting such information.

Finally, a number of other questions were asked, and suggestions or points were made, by respondents. These also appear in [Section 4](#), along with NRS's answers to them.

#### **4. Answers to questions asked, and suggestions/points made, by some respondents**

This section provides answers to the questions that were asked, and the suggestions and points that were made, by some of the respondents, grouped according to the topic to which they relate. The questions and suggestions are worded exactly as they were received, apart from editing to 'anonymise' them, and (in a few cases) the addition of 'bullet points' (e.g.) to make it easier to identify separate questions .

##### **General matters**

###### **Question:**

[We] assume that the information that is to be collected will be asked for at registration of birth and not affect the notification process that we as midwives do.

**Answer:** Yes.

##### **Numbers of previous live births**

###### **Suggestion:**

There might be a case for also asking not just for the number of children but also their ages at the time of the birth being registered. This could provide useful information about intervals between children, and the age of the mother at first birth in relation to subsequent completed family etc. The changing patterns in when and how many children women are having, by social class or occupational group for example could thus be studied more carefully. However, I appreciate this would represent an additional burden to collect.

###### **Answer:**

Asking for the ages of any other children would indeed increase the burden on registrars and the people registering the birth. Information about intervals between children should be available (for samples of mothers) from other sources, such as the Scottish Longitudinal Study and the details about the members of households, and their relationships, that are collected in the Population Census and some sample surveys (e.g. the Scottish Household Survey). Information collected when births are registered cannot be used as an indication of 'completed family [size]' because, at that time, there is no way of knowing whether the mother will have any more children in future.

###### **Suggestion:**

Occasionally, a couple will register a birth together but the woman might be keen to conceal previous births or stillbirths from her partner. I don't think that there is much that we can do about this but it might be worthwhile occasionally calibrating this effect by reference to NHS data.

###### **Answer:**

In theory, it would be possible to do this. However, our previous experience of comparing NRS and NHS data suggests that the differences in coverage etc between the two sources could make it very difficult to determine reliably the scale of any such effect - so this is unlikely to be a 'priority' task.

## Numbers of previous stillbirths

### Question:

Previous stillborn or children who have died:

- Staff are not comfortable asking the question about previous children who were stillborn or who died after birth.
- Often there are children present at the registration who may not have been told of these previous events.
- Could turn a happy event (birth registration) into a sad one, or cause distress within the family when difficult questions are then asked by the children.
- Why should the mother have to answer all these awkward questions and we not ask the father about any other children he has had.

### Answer:

- **First**, the question of why the numbers of previous live and stillbirths are requested. In the case of the mother's number of previous live births, the answer is straightforward: when it becomes available in respect of all births, it should be used to inform projections of the size of the population, and research into fertility and other topics. The answer in respect of the number of previous stillbirths is more complex.
  - Such information is not used in the population projections, and does not appear in any of National Records of Scotland's (NRS's) published statistical tables.
  - While it has been used to produce some of the so-called 'unpublished' tables (which are produced when required for enquirers), in the past two years, there have been no requests for any of the 'unpublished' tables which include the mother's number of previous children, and only one of those tables was requested in each of the two years before that. (Several 'unpublished' tables break down married parents' total numbers of births, stillbirths [especially] and infant deaths in various ways, including by the mother's number of previous children. Usually, the breakdowns use the total live born plus stillborn; occasionally, they use just the number live born and/or just the number stillborn).
  - So, there has been very little recent use of the number of previous stillbirths. This does not mean that its collection should be stopped: the information may not be being used at present because it is currently obtained only when births and stillbirths are registered by married couples.
  - When it becomes available in respect of all births, the number of previous stillbirths could be used in statistical studies by public health researchers. Examples of this are: first, to see to what extent (if any) there is a greater risk of later problems for women who have had a stillbirth, or to the children who are subsequently born to women who have had stillbirths; and, second, when comparing the risks of later problems for women and their babies, distinguishing between those who have had a baby before (whether live or still born) and those who have not (since the fact of having had a completed pregnancy has a marked effect on [e.g.] future fertility and perinatal mortality).



- **Second**, the reason why only the mother is asked about any previous children is that statistics about fertility, and the related research that is used to inform projections of the size of the population, relate to the number of births per woman of childbearing age, simply because it is women who have babies. Information about the number of children that a man has fathered (which he may not even know, in some cases) is of no value for such purposes, so there is no reason to ask for it.

### **Whether the mother had previously been married or in a civil partnership**

#### **Questions:**

Mother previously married or in a civil partnership:

- Staff asked what this information is used for?
- We are forcing a woman to divulge information she may not have shared with her current partner- are we not overstepping the mark with this?
- We do not ask the father his marital status- is this not discrimination against the mother?

#### **Answer:**

- In the case of the first question, to the best of our knowledge, NRS has not made any use of this information in recent years (not even to produce statistics for, say, academic researchers). However, that does not mean that NRS should arrange for this question to be dropped from the registration process. As indicated in the Registrar General's letter, when the number of previous births becomes available in respect of all births, it will be possible to use the two types of information to answer research questions - for example, to what extent births to older women in co-habiting couples are, say, first births to women who had never married or later births to women who were previously married but are now living with another person. In addition, the data could be used to determine whether there is a difference in fertility (among those currently co-habiting) between women who were married before and those who had never married - if there is a significant difference, the likely accuracy of forecasts of fertility could be improved by using a more sophisticated methodology that takes account of it. The information could also be used to answer other research questions, in the longer-term.
- On the second point, it seems unlikely that a woman will divulge information, that she does not want her current spouse/partner to know, during the registration process, when she is told that it will be used only in the preparation of statistics: it seems more likely that she will simply keep quiet about it.
- On the final question, the reason that only the mother is asked is that analysis of fertility is based on statistics about mothers (please see an earlier answer).

#### **Point:**

In this day and age I am not sure why we still need to ask about marriage or civil partnership. At such a distressing time as the loss of a baby this should not be a priority.

#### **Answer:**

Please see the previous answer.

**Questions:**

- Would civil partnership encompass anyone who is in a relationship which bore children, as many of the mothers we see may not be in any kind of partnership with the fathers of their children i.e. they were present at conception only.
- As such there may be some confusion regarding what constitutes a civil partnership.
- I wonder whether it is worth just asking if they have any other children out with present relationship?

**Answer:**

- On the first point, 'civil partnership' means the registration of a partnership by a same-sex couple.
- However, that formal meaning of the term may not be known by many people - for example, some may think that a 'civil partner' is the opposite-sex person in an unmarried relationship (i.e. that it is the 'official' way of describing a 'bidie-in' or 'common-law husband/wife'). So, the question that Registrars ask will have to be worded carefully, to emphasise that the only kind of 'partnership' that should be counted is a formally-registered civil partnership (e.g. 'have you previously been married or in a formally-registered civil partnership').
- On the final point, what is needed (e.g. to inform projections of the population and research into fertility) is the total number of previous live births (and stillbirths), regardless of whether they were in a present relationship or a previous relationship. To ask separately for the numbers of children (i) in the present relationship and (ii) outwith the present relationship would increase the time spent registering the birth/stillbirth without producing much additional information of value.

## Annex A: Registrar General's letter of 21 February 2012

General Register House  
2 Princes Street  
Edinburgh EH1 1YY  
Telephone 0131 535 1312  
Fax 0131 535 1360  
E-mail [Registrar.general@scotland.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:Registrar.general@scotland.gsi.gov.uk)

21 February 2012

Dear Sir / Madam

### **INFORMATION RECORDED AT THE REGISTRATION OF BIRTHS AND STILLBIRTHS: WHETHER A MOTHER WAS MARRIED BEFORE, AND THE NUMBER OF HER PREVIOUS CHILDREN (IF ANY)**

1. I am writing to seek your views on a proposal that the registrar should collect, from every mother, when a birth or a stillbirth is registered, information about whether she was married before and the number of her previous children (if any). At present, such information is obtained only if the mother is married to the father of the child. I would welcome your comments, by 30 April please.

#### **Why are we seeking this change?**

2. Information about whether a mother was married before and the number of her previous children (if any) is required under the provisions of the Population (Statistics) Acts 1938 and 1960. There is a legal requirement that such details be provided "except where the birth is of an illegitimate child". At the time of those Acts, only about 5% of births were to unmarried parents, so the specified information was collected in respect of around 95% of all births and stillbirths, a level of coverage which would have been considered sufficient for the purposes for which the information was required. Since then, the number of births to unmarried parents has increased greatly, to just over half of all births registered in each of 2008, 2009 and 2010. As a result, the information that is collected when births to married parents are registered cannot be considered representative of all births.

3. A mother's number of previous children (if any) is of value to inform projections of population, research into fertility and other topics. The Office for National Statistics (ONS) and National Records of Scotland (NRS) produce projections of the population for Scotland as a whole, and for areas within Scotland. The information to be collected could be used to establish whether an increase in the birth rate was more likely to be a consequence of women bearing children which they had previously postponed (which might only have a temporary effect) or due to people having larger families (which could have a longer-lasting effect). The information could also improve our understanding of some aspects of fertility, by analysing it along with other information which NRS obtains at the time of the registration of a birth. For example:

- are there changes in the ages at which women typically have their first, second, third ... children?
- do the numbers of children of married couples and co-habiting couples tend to differ?
- how does fertility vary across Scotland?

Information about whether the mother had been married before may also be used to answer research questions - for example, to what extent births to older women in co-habiting couples are, say, first births to women who had never married or later births to women who were previously married but are now living with another person?

4. As marriage and civil partnership are treated equally at other stages of the registration of births and stillbirths, the question about whether the mother was previously married should also cover the possibility of her having previously been in a civil partnership.

#### **Proposal in more detail**

5. At present, when a birth or stillbirth is registered, the information required under the Population (Statistics) Acts 1938 and 1960 *only in those cases where the parents are married to each other* includes:

- Was the mother previously married before her marriage to child's father (Y or N); and
- Number of mother's previous children (excluding the birth[s] or stillbirth[s] now being registered) by present and any former husband, sub-divided as follows:
  - number born alive (including any not now living);
  - number still-born; and
  - total.

6. Section 21 of the Family Law (Scotland) Act 2006 abolished the status of illegitimacy, so it follows that the registration process should not distinguish between births which occurred within marriage and those which occurred outwith marriage. Section 44 of that Act enables other legislation to be amended, by a statutory instrument, to give full effect to any provision of the Act. An order made under the 2006 Act could change the provisions in the Population (Statistics) Acts which mean that the information above cannot be collected in the case of an illegitimate child. Therefore, I intend to propose to Scottish Ministers that they make such an order to modify the wording of the Acts (a) to require such information to be recorded when any birth or stillbirth is registered and (b) to take account of the possibility that a mother may have been in a civil partnership.

7. Should such an order be made, instead of the details which are described in paragraph 5, the following information would be required, when any birth or stillbirth was registered:

- Was the mother previously married or in a civil partnership (i.e. before her present marriage or civil partnership, if any)? (Y or N); and
- Number of mother's previous children (excluding the birth[s] or stillbirth[s] now being registered), subdivided as follows:
  - number born alive (including any not now living);
  - number still-born; and
  - total


Such information would continue to be treated as confidential, and would not be shown in the entry in the register of births or stillbirths, nor in any extract from those registers (such as what is commonly known as a "birth certificate"): it would be used only by my staff to prepare statistics.

### Timing

8. Subject to Ministerial and Parliamentary agreement, an order might be made to come into force at the start of the next registration year (1 January 2013). That would give sufficient time to amend the electronic registration system and also to prepare revised versions of the paper *Forms of Particulars* that are used by non-computerised registration offices.

9. I would welcome your comments on this proposal: please send them by email to [frank.dixon@gro-scotland.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:frank.dixon@gro-scotland.gsi.gov.uk) or by post to Frank Dixon, Vital Events Statistician, National Records of Scotland, Ladywell House, Ladywell Road, Edinburgh EH12 7TF, by **30 April 2012**.

Yours sincerely



**GEORGE MACKENZIE**  
Registrar General

## **Annex B: List of those who were consulted**

This Annex describes those to whom the Registrar General's letter was sent. In many cases, the letter was sent to the head of the organisation; in some cases, it was sent to an organisation's 'contact' e-mail address, or to a person in the organisation with whom National Records of Scotland (NRS) had dealt.

- Association of Registrars of Scotland
- Association of the Directors of Public Health
- Birth Choice UK
- British Medical Association (Scotland)
- Central Equalities Unit, Scottish Government
- Chief Executives of Local Authorities
- Chief Executives of NHS Health Boards
- Citizens Advice Bureaux Scotland
- Convention of Scottish Local Authorities
- Edinburgh Ethnicity and Health Research Group
- Equality and Human Rights Commission
- Healthcare Analysis and Forecasting
- Healthcare Improvement Scotland
- Information Services Division, NHS National Services Scotland
- Mothers' Union
- National Childbirth Trust
- NHS Board Directors of Public Health
- NHS Board Medical Directors
- NHS Health Scotland
- Office for National Statistics
- One Parent Families Scotland
- Royal College of General Practitioners
- Royal College of Midwives - UK Board in Scotland
- Royal College of Nursing in Scotland
- Royal College of Pathologists
- Royal College of Physicians
- The Academy of Medical Royal Colleges and Faculties in Scotland
- St Andrews University
- Scottish Government - Maternal & Infant Health Policy, Public Health Statistics, Demography Research
- Scottish Women's Rural Institute
- Scottish Youth Parliament
- Chief and Senior Registrars, and Registration Managers

## **Annex C: Anonymised verbatim responses**

This section provides all the responses, exactly as they were received, apart from a little editing to 'anonymise' them, remove (e.g.) salutations and very general introductory sentences, and correct a few 'typos'. The numbering within each sub-section is usually the order in which responses were received, and provides a means of referring to individual responses from [Section 3](#) of the paper.

### **Local Authorities (LAs)**

#### **LA-1**

... this authority supports the proposal.

#### **LA-2**

... Council is in agreement with these proposals and has no concerns about the recording of this additional information. I have also spoken with all members of the registration staff and they are unanimous in their support of the proposals.

#### **LA-3**

Overall we think the changes would be a very good idea.

I have attached a couple of comments from 2 registrars for your information.

(Name of first registrar)

I think it should be changed.

I had a mother who got very upset with me because she had a child when not married to a previous partner and thought I was disregarding that child as not important.

(Name of second registrar)

I have often thought it was an out of date question, in the present climate, to concentrate on mother's marriage.

I can think of more than 1 family which has produced 3 children with no reference in the birth reg. Therefore it seems a sensible proposal.

#### **LA-4**

... Council is in support of the proposal outlined.

As a council with a well used family history centre in [name of centre], we fully appreciate the need for, and the value of, accurate registration information. The proposal to collect information related to previous marital status and the number of previous children will provide information which is of current value and will also be of considerable sociological and historical value over time.

#### **LA-5**

I attach comments from registration staff in [name] Council on the above consultation.

Recording the number of births or stillbirths of unmarried couples:

- We register more births/stillbirths of unmarried couples, therefore it makes sense to include all children born to the mother regardless of whether she was married or not.
- All people should be regarded in the same way and therefore asked the same questions.

Previous stillborn or children who have died:

- Staff are not comfortable asking the question about previous children who were stillborn or who died after birth.
- Often there are children present at the registration who may not have been told of these previous events.

- Could turn a happy event (birth registration) into a sad one, or cause distress within the family when difficult questions are then asked by the children.
- Why should the mother have to answer all these awkward questions and we not ask the father about any other children he has had.

Mother previously married or in a civil partnership:

- Staff asked what this information is used for?
- We are forcing a woman to divulge information she may not have shared with her current partner- are we not overstepping the mark with this?
- We do not ask the father his marital status- is this not discrimination against the mother?

#### **LA-6**

... we here in [name of Council] are more than happy for Registrars to collect from every mother when a birth or still birth is registered information on whether she has been married before and the number of any previous children she may have had, if any, for exactly the same reasons you have already stated in your proposal letter issued in Feb 2012.

#### **LA-7**

Our response would be to welcome this change and feel that it's long overdue. [Name of Council] has a high volume of unmarried parents and this proposal would certainly assist statisticians and other bodies in their research.

#### **LA-8**

This statistical information is required under the Population Statistics Acts 1938 and 1960 at a time when by far the majority of births registered were born to married parents. In my personal opinion this has been a long time coming. The number of unmarried parents registering the birth/stillbirth of their child(ren) has steadily increased over the last 20 years or so and now outweighs the number of married/civil partnered parents registering births/stillbirths.

This must result in the statistical information from "married to each other" parents only simply cannot be useful to Vital Events, NRS, Edinburgh.

The changes proposed to include all Mother/parents when any birth or stillbirth is registered would clearly create meaningful statistical data for Vital Events, National Records of Scotland.

I would encourage the proposed changes to be made. It would result in treating all Mothers/Parents equally regardless of whether they were married to each other; unmarried to each other or civil partnered to each other.

This particular issue has been raised at quite a few meetings of the Executive Council of the Association of Registrars of Scotland (AROS) so I'm quite certain registration staff in Scotland will support these proposed changes.

#### **LA-9**

I agree that the Population Statistics question should be updated as shown in the Registrar Generals proposal

#### **LA-10**

... Council support this proposal.

#### **LA-11**

Registrars, as part of their statutory remit, already ask for information under the Population (Statistics) Acts of 1938 and 1960. There is also an awareness that the information is confidential and does not appear in the Register. From a practical point of view, asking this question of all birth and stillbirth registrations would not incur any difficulties.

The time taken to ask the question would be negligible and it is not foreseen that it would lead to an increase in the length of the registration.

To ensure equality the council acknowledges the need for this change and the value placed upon the statistics through obtaining this information, particularly its use in population projection and research into fertility and other topics.

#### **LA-12**

...we support the proposal to collect the information required for any birth or stillbirth.

#### **LA-13**

We are in agreement with the proposed changes: -

- a) The current stats obtained are indeed incomplete due to changes in lifestyles
- b) Unlike the current statistical information requested, the new proposal is non discriminatory.

#### **LA-14**

The Council agrees that at the time of the registration of births and stillbirths, the current practice of the Registrar collecting information about whether the mother was married before and the number of her previous children (if any), should be extended from only asking this question of mothers who are married to the father of the child she is registering to include asking this question of mothers who are not married to the father of the child she is registering.

As you state within your consultation document, there has been a significant increase in births occurring from circumstances where the parents are unmarried thus the statistics are no longer representative of the population. The changes you propose would improve the information collected and achieve a more representative picture for statistical analysis and record keeping.

We also recognise that marriages and civil partnerships are treated equally at other stages of the registration of births and stillbirths and we would agree that changes should include identifying whether the mother had been previously married and this would also cover the possibility of her having previously been in a civil partnership.

### **National Health Service (NHS)**

#### **NHS-1**

I support the proposed change.

There might be a case for also asking not just for the number of children but also their ages at the time of the birth being registered. This could provide useful information about intervals between children, and the age of the mother at first birth in relation to subsequent completed family etc. The changing patterns in when and how many children women are having, by social class or occupational group for example could thus be studied more carefully. However, I appreciate this would represent an additional burden to collect.

#### **NHS-2**

I am very happy with the proposed changes.

My only comment is that occasionally, a couple will register a birth together but the woman might be keen to conceal previous births or stillbirths from her partner. I don't think that there is much that we can do about this but it might be worthwhile occasionally calibrating this effect by reference to NHS data.



**NHS-3**

I think the changes sound very sensible and reflect the changes in society.

**NHS-4**

I would be supportive of the proposals – that is in favour of amending the registration system to collect this information from ALL births and stillbirths regardless of the marital status of the mother.

**NHS-5**

... maternity services senior management team are in agreement with the proposed changes.

**NHS-6**

Seems very relevant to modern behaviours. I would support this. Of note would civil partnership encompass anyone who is in a relationship which bore children, as many of the mothers we see may not be in any kind of partnership with the fathers of their children i.e. they were present at conception only. As such there may be some confusion regarding what constitutes a civil partnership. I wonder whether it is worth just asking if they have any other children out with present relationship?

**NHS-7**

I believe that the proposed changes are justified.

**NHS-8**

I can see the relevance of knowing a woman's previous obstetric history, but in this day and age I am not sure why we still need to ask about marriage or civil partnership. At such a distressing time as the loss of a baby this should not be a priority.

**NHS-9**

[Name of body] would support this proposal for all the reasons stated in paragraph 2,3 and 4; and assume that the information that is to be collected will be asked for at registration of birth and not affect the notification process that we as midwives do.

**NHS-10**

... we have no problem with the proposed amendment

**Others****Oth-1**

This is not a matter I have a strong opinion on, but the change seems sensible.

**Oth-2**

As an academic researcher who has conducted research on Scotland's fertility, I fully support the proposed amendments on the following grounds:

1. The current legislation governing the registration of births and stillbirths is anachronistic in its treatment of births outside marriage. Over 50% of births in Scotland in the last few years have been to unmarried parents, and no information on birth order of the child (or previous births to the mother) is recorded when these births are registered.

2. The absence of information on birth order of children born to unmarried parents seriously limits the ability both (a) to develop sound population projections; and (b) to conduct research that will enhance understanding of temporal and spatial variations in fertility in Scotland.
3. Collecting information on previous marriage/civil partnership and mother's previous children, as proposed, will enable researchers to undertake new research that will strengthen the evidence base for policy development. Population projections are used by many local authorities to inform the planning of services, and improved projections would have obvious benefits in this respect. A better understanding of fertility dynamics will also contribute to a better understanding of population ageing. Fertility is a major driver of population ageing, which is advancing more rapidly in Scotland than in the rest of the UK. The need to meet the challenges of an ageing population is a major policy concern at the present time.
4. There are no alternative sources of representative and reliable data on the birth order of children born to all mothers in Scotland.
5. The proposed amendments to Scotland's birth registration are comparable to those adopted in other parts of the UK and would thus facilitate comparative research.
6. The present Scottish Government has published a policy target for population growth in Scotland which requires a comparison with growth across other countries in the EU. Although the headline data are available to make the comparison, the proposals will furnish NRS (and other researchers) with additional information to help explain why Scotland's population is growing at a particular rate.

On all these grounds, I welcome and strongly support the proposed amendments to the information collected at the registration of all births and stillbirths in Scotland.

### **Oth-3**

I would like to support the recording of whether a mother was married before and the number of her previous children (if any) for the reasons given in the letter signed by your Registrar General. Such changes are long overdue and as similar changes have finally been implemented in England and Wales many years after they were first proposed, I would strongly support similar changes in Scotland. As well as benefitting Scotland, this would enable harmonisation with the rest of the UK and our contribution to international comparisons.

### **Oth-4**

This proposed change to the way the statistical information is gathered is much welcomed, since as demographer with a background in fertility research, I have an interest in Scottish fertility behaviour and birth parity. Parity to demographers refers to the previous number of children a woman has, i.e. a woman having her first child was at parity zero (nulliparous). Ideally demographers would not include miscarriages, abortions and stillbirths, as the interest is in previous live born children (neonatal deaths etc are ignored since they result in a live birth before the death).

However, virtually no studies have been able to examine birth parity in Scotland due to the lack of data, yet information on birth order is crucially important if we are to understand recent fertility trends in Scotland. In the UK in past years there has been a drop in the Total Fertility Rate (TFR) along with a shift in the shape of the Age Specific Fertility Rates (ASFR) which can be explained in the context of birth postponement. For Scotland, as in England, there has been a slight rise in the last few years, from a low TFR of 1.48 in 2002, to 1.60 in 2004, to 1.73 in 2007 and 1.75 in 2010 (GROS 2008:22 & 2011:20). The ASFR and the TFR can be investigated easily using civil registration, commonly referred to as

Vital Events (VE), data along with Census data (or population estimates), but these do not explain the full fertility behaviour of women. For example, even the ASFRs do not indicate if the changes in the shape of the rates, which relate to the timing of births, are due to women changing the timing of first births or women going on to have second or third births. Thus knowledge of a women's birth parity is key to uncovering these important aspects of fertility behaviour.

It is not possible to derive parity for all women using civil registration VE data, since as described in the letter only previous births within marriage (and previous marriages) are recorded, however, (also described in the letter) given that recently such a large proportion of births in Scotland occurred out with marriage compared with, for example 90% within marriage back in 1977 (GROS 2008:64), any civil registration estimates of parity are thus not truly reflecting the fertility behaviour of the Scottish women today. This is worrying, as the information collected from the questions (in section 5 of the letter) may be wrongly used in that the implications about future assumptions (or trends) for population projections etc will not be reflecting what is happening for all women living in Scotland, only those who select into marriage. Moreover, the questions (in section 5 of the letter) can be it is problematic since the exact question asks for previous children alive and stillborn by any current and previous husbands, which, aside from being quite a sensitive issue, is open to misinterpretation. For example, if a woman marries a man who is the father of previous children (previous to being married) and then has other children born within marriage, then the first time the women is asked this question she will reply not zero to the question, but say 1 or more as these children have the same father. With the result that the statistics recorded, owing to the way the question was asked, will completely miss the zero to 1 transition of birth in cases where a couple marry after having a child out with wedlock. This problem is highlighted by Smallwood (2002) and Chamberlain and Smallwood (2004). Moreover, to use the information from VE on live births within marriage could be a non-representative sample of all women, for example, marrying later and having children later etc.

Further, as to why parity fertility measures are important, Hinde (1998:118) commenting on work by Feeney & Yu (1987) describes 2 main advantages:

First, the parity-based approach controls for past order-specific fertility. Therefore, parity-based period measures are much less prone than are age-based period measure to temporal fluctuations caused by changes in the timing of births. Second, fertility is coming to reflect more and more the decisions made by people about the appropriate number of children to have. Parity-based measures explicitly acknowledge this fact, whereas age-based measures do not.

For Scotland there has been a limited amount of previous research into birth order and parity using the VE and General Household Survey (GHS) by Chamberlain and Smallwood (2004). The estimates of birth order for Scotland were only for 5-year age-groups (due to small numbers in the GHS), with no geographical breakdown and for 5 year periods up until 1999.

On a slightly different note, which may be of use, thought it best to highlight that in my research I have tried to uncover Scottish birth parity using an alternative source, namely the Scottish Morbidity Record (SMR) data, the maternity inpatient and day case dataset (known as SMR02) linked (after PAC approval) to a sample originating from the Scottish Longitudinal Study (SLS). However, using this was not straightforward, as the definition of parity changes across discipline; for example, there is a paper by Opara and Zaidi (2007) on the interpretation and clinical application in the Journal of Obstetrics and Gynaecology. In this context, the Derived Variable (DV) 'Parity' available as part of the SMR02 is based entirely on questions asked to patients and is derived internally by the Information Services

Division of NHS (referred to as Information Services Division (ISD)) from previous pregnancies, rather than completed pregnancies which result in live births. Moreover, the DV 'Parity' excludes (or hides) multiple births since it only records pregnancies and includes stillbirths. It is calculated by previous pregnancies minus spontaneous and therapeutic abortions. The demographic definition I was hoping to use was not the same as clinical/medical one that is derived by ISD as the number of previous pregnancies (hiding multiple births and include stillbirths). The alternative, more close to the demographic definition of parity, is to request a DV 'Previous Live Births', which is actually a count of previous live pregnancies and is also created from patient replies to questions. It is calculated by total previous pregnancies less the sum of previous abortions (spontaneous and therapeutic) and less stillbirths. However, even this proved hard to create, as for the years 1974-1997 no information on stillbirths was recorded in the SMR02 back then and therefore previous perinatal deaths were included instead (which is not correct). Nevertheless, the main problem in operationalising both DVs 'Parity' and 'Previous Live Births' for research on parity is that they are based on patient responses, whereby patients may give incorrect answers for a variety of reasons (genuinely forgetting information, due to sensitive nature of the questions, not wanting to disclose things that happened previously or with previous partners etc). Additionally, specifically given that these questions are asked at every birth (as oppose to ISD calculating or counting up over time) there will be incorrect responses, this was apparent from both repeated responses for both DVs and specifically for 'Previous Live Births' negative values after there was a (normal/positive) previous live birth value recorded at an earlier time.

(Full details of cleaning the SMR02 data linked to the SLS for creating Synthetic Parity Cohorts to estimate period Parity Progression Ratios for Scotland using the SLS can be provided, if useful.)

If the proposed changes go-ahead many of these problems will be solved, as the questions to be asked (in section 7) will result in previous births identified, rather than previous pregnancies being recorded from both DVs 'Parity' and 'Previous Live Births'. Moreover, while these questions are of course of a sensitive nature, given they are asked to supply this supplementary statistical information while recording a birth which is a legal requirement this is (I assume) less chance of giving false information, due to the formality of the procedure. Further, the proposed questions do not include questions on different types of abortions, unlike the SMR02 DVs which includes questions on abortions asked of the patients, meaning less sensitive information is to be collected and with the rise of more complicated family structures and partnering, there will be no requirement to conceal information, as only live and stillbirth information is required.

Finally, while I work with longitudinal linked data and have the advantage of being able to create life-course person files, the question of previous marriages/civil partnerships is useful to retain, as it can be used as a marker of changing family structure if used in essentially a cross-sectional way (ie looking at changes in registration details year on year).

## Further Explanation on Terms used within Annex C

Anonymised verbatim	anonymous word for word quote
temporal and spatial variations	Variations over time and geographical area
Perinatal mortality	Stillbirths and deaths in the first week of life
'bidie-in'	co-habiting
anachronistic	outdated
Nulliparous	Medical term for a mother who has never given birth to a living child
Spontaneous abortion	Miscarriage
therapeutic abortions	To save the life of the mother

**References:**

Chamberlain, J. and Smallwood, S. (2004). Estimates of true birth order for Scotland, 1945–1999. *Population Trends*. 117, Autumn 2004.

General Register Office for Scotland (GROS). (2008). *Scotland's Population 2007: The Registrar General's Annual Review of Demographic Trends*. 153rd Edition.

General Register Office for Scotland (GROS). (2010). *Scotland's Population 2009: The Registrar General's Annual Review of Demographic Trends*. 155th Edition.

General Register Office for Scotland (GROS). (2011). *Scotland's Population 2010: The Registrar General's Annual Review of Demographic Trends*. 156th Edition.

Hinde, A. (1998). *Demographic Methods*. Arnold, London.

Opara E, Zaidi J. (2007). The interpretation and clinical application of the word 'parity': a survey. *Journal of Obstetrics and Gynaecology*. pp114:1295–1297.

Smallwood, S. (2002). New estimates of trends in births by birth order in England and Wales Presentation on the revised and updated estimates of true birth order and their construction. *Population Trends*. 108, Summer 2003.