International Comparison Census.

# Introduction:

The purpose of any Census is to establish the population of the state and for the Government to use that data to plan how it will provide public services across the State. The form includes questions on topics such as age, marital status, sex, place of birth, occupation and religion.

The answers to Questions 15 and 16 are related to disability so as to provide vital information on the number of people with disabilities and the effect of their disability on their everyday lives. This helps to inform what healthcare and other services might be required.

The Census in Ireland is carried out every five years in April. Under the Statistics Act, everyone in the state must complete or be included in the Census form. [[1]](#footnote-2)

NCBI (National Council for the Blind of Ireland) is the national agency for people with sight loss. NCBI believes that people who are blind or vision impaired have the right to opportunities and choices as others to fully participate in society. NCBI provides support services to people who are blind and vision impaired, so they can gain confidence and independence in their day to day lives, thus supporting the social model. This includes full participation in the completion of the mandatory Census.

# International Recognition for People Living with Disability

The United Nations Convention for the Rights for People with Disability states that all people with disability have a right to live independently and to inclusiveness in order to enjoy full participation in society.[[2]](#footnote-3)

The European Directive on Web Accessibility 2016 makes it mandatory for all Government departments and agencies to have their website and apps accessible.[[3]](#footnote-4)

The Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission (IHREC) purpose is to protect and promote human rights and equality in Ireland for people with disabilities and build a culture of respect for human rights, equality and intercultural understanding in the State. The ambition of IHREC is to eradicate discrimination towards people living with disabilities. Ensuring that people with disabilities including people with sight loss can enjoy inclusiveness in all aspects of society is paramount, not least to be able to independently complete their State Census in accessible formats.

# Irish Census 2022: Inaccessible for people who are blind or vision impaired

The UNCRPD recognizes that accessibility is paramount. It states that Parties shall take all appropriate measures to ensure that persons with disabilities can exercise the right to freedom of expression and opinion, including the freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas on an equal basis with others and through all forms of communication of their choice, as defined in article 21 of the present Convention, including by providing information intended for the general public to persons with disabilities in accessible formats and technologies appropriate to different kinds of disabilities in a timely manner about additional cost.[[4]](#footnote-5)

However, the Central Statistics Office (CSO) Census 2022 did not provide an accessible format specifically requested by some people who are blind or vision impaired. Only the paper Census form was accepted. The CSO did provide supplementary information in accessible formats and offered enumerators to complete the form on a person’s behalf. This was a departure from the Census 2016 when an accessible electronic form was available upon request for individuals who are blind or vision impaired. While the availability of enumerators is welcomed by some, the inability to complete the Census form independently online undermines a person’s self-esteem and confidence and makes them feel excluded from society.

# Accessibility: A road to inclusion and independence

According to the European Blind Union, making information accessible is not more expensive or more complicated, it requires a change in process. Accessible information is inclusive. Forms are a specific type of document and therefore it is imperative that they are designed to be accessible. Since paper forms require handwriting they are by nature totally inaccessible to blind and many vision impaired people. Forms that can be filled in electronically are thus preferred but not all formats are as accessible as others.[[5]](#footnote-6)

# International research for Census format related to accessibility for people who are blind or vision impaired

EU Member States decide which way to best carry out their Census. In addition to the ‘traditional’ Census, options include using population registers, a combination of a traditional Census and sample surveys.

Following extensive research in other European Countries to look at evidence of Census accessibility, a varied picture was found.

Spain

Spain has recognized the importance of accessibility and inclusion when completing the Census form for people who are blind and vision impaired. An online Census was designed in 2001 for everyone in the state. The National Statistics Office (INE) emphasizes that blind people will also be able to use this system, since the questionnaires have been prepared in compliance with the standards of accessibility. The Census can also be completed online in any language of the state, in addition to English, German, French or Arabic. [[6]](#footnote-7)

France.

The EU recommend a ten-year interval to conduct a Census but in France it is carried out annually. An online Census was introduced in France in 2015. The driving force for the creation of the online version of the Census was efficiency and to also to reduce the cost of the Census. Furthermore, adapting the Census to increasing trends of the French citizens in the use of technology was another key driver in order to provide a better service. However, there is no reference to accessibility for those with sight loss. The only alternative for those who cannot use the online version, whether this is related to inaccessibility or unfamiliarity with IT, is the paper form available. It is unclear therefore if the French online Census is compliant with the EU Directive and is completely accessible for people with sight loss.

In 2015, 33% of households chose the internet response option, representing 38% of inhabitants. Although an online format is available in France, there does not seem to an emphasis on the importance of accessibility aids available for people with sight loss. [[7]](#footnote-8)

Germany

In Germany the information obtained appears to convey that an online version is available and is favoured as a more convenient method and good for sustainability. Whether this online version is accessible for people with disabilities Census format, that is both user friendly and accessible is not clear.

The online version of Census data seems to be an option that is offered in some European countries, full accessibility for everyone particularly for people who are blind or vision impaired does not seem to be available as a standard format.

# UK 2021 Census: Road to Accessibility

This development ensured that people with disabilities were included fully in the UK Census 2021, by allowing people to complete the data collection independently through a simple and easy to use accessible online format. [[8]](#footnote-9) To support this, materials were produced to ensure ease of completion in a range of accessible formats, such as Braille, easy read and large print. For example, a large print paper questionnaire pack including a guidance leaflet, Privacy Notice and return envelope. Also, a Braille guidance booklet, including information about the Census and a Braille translation of the household paper questionnaire is available. [[9]](#footnote-10)

The UK Census 2021 website changed with improved accessibility features for example, change colours and contrast levels, as well as zoom in up to 300%. It was also designed so that people could navigate most of the site using the keyboard, speech recognition software or a screen reader. This included the most recent versions of JAWS, NVDA and VoiceOver.

Another key component to the success of the UK Census 2021 was comprehensive testing and accessibility testing respectively was carried out including for those with sight loss.

# Conclusion and recommendations

The preference for a paper-based Census format for the recent Census 2022 in Ireland is not inclusive especially when the Census is to be completed by everyone. The paper-based format results in depriving many people who are blind or vision impaired, the opportunity of completing the Census form independently rather than relying on an enumerator. This approach is not in keeping with the UNCRPD recommendation of the importance of people with disability to live their lives independently. The approach taken by the CSO in 2022 was also a departure from previous Census exercises where accessible forms were available in Braille and online.

Spain is an example of a collaborative effort between the INE (the Spanish National Statistics Office) and ONCE (Spanish blind organisation) by creating an inclusive and accessible outcome, which is a Census that can be completed by all.

Also, the UK Census 2021 model appears to be an effective example of a recent and well researched, consultative model that promotes independence and participation in society for people with disabilities, particularly those with sight loss. The success of the UK model was clearly based on consultation with relevant stakeholders and specific testing of the accessibility prior to the implementation of the new accessible online Census format.

The CSO needs to take a proactive approach ahead of Census 2027 to ensure full accessibility for all people in Ireland. The CSO needs to engage with NCBI to understand accessible formats in order to develop further the accessible methods that ensure the Census is simple and easy to use for everyone in Ireland. This ensures that the Irish Census would be inclusive, especially for people who are blind or vision impaired who can participate independently.

1. Central Statistics Office. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. United Nations Convention for Rights for People with Disability 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. European Directive Web Accessibility 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. UNCRPD Article 21. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Making Information Accessible for All; European Blind Union. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Spanish News in 2001 Announcing The Census Available

[https://www.elmundo.es/navegante/2001/11/04/esociedad/1004892586.html](https://m365.eu.vadesecure.com/safeproxy/v4?f=ufOIRg5VAMQJO23EbGZgPGVLqF2pYkAIKIzAritppAzNwn5AJtlYVlgbfvp-_OhD&i=-NtP6Nf5vrkey765CUTMvbeH120jbbjUHjry1KZqfoR27R4nnspNCNjCWe2nLGnBCek3Yy4pwMZRHftl4P3XnA&k=wp2u&r=fjSM17d9YmI-tjJs6abpA4ii1TrqumRRmKX2nSemCdnB9-ITdWeaPgM2VYEYd3Sv&s=43b6db16963eb18c5e61320d784bacb101c172ba14e30bab1f47db1bcde15158&u=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.elmundo.es%2Fnavegante%2F2001%2F11%2F04%2Fesociedad%2F1004892586.html) [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. The French Online Census: UNECE 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. UK Census 2021. Creating an Accessible and Inclusive Campaign. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. Look-uk.org/Census-2021 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)