

From the Parliamentary
Under Secretary of State
for Work and Pensions

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Lord Freud,
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Dear David

24 February 2010

During the Child Poverty Bill Committee session on Monday 8 February, I agreed to write to the members of the Committee, regarding the assertion about "Government stopped collecting proper data on ... whether couples are married or cohabiting" and that "the term "marital status" was deleted from government forms".

I would like to reassure you that the Government continues to collect and produce statistics on the marital status of couples. The Households Below Average Income (HBAI) dataset presents child poverty figures for couple families and lone parents families. However, the Family Resources Survey, from which we produce HBAI, collects marital status information for all families, distinguishing between couples who are married and those who are cohabiting. Other National Statistics surveys also collect this data, and it is publicly available.

It is correct that the wording of marital status questions on government forms has changed in recent years. This has been in response to the introduction of Civil Partnerships. Considering how this issue should be addressed in 2003, a Women's Equality Unit report stated:

"It is envisaged that Government forms currently asking for details of a person's "marital status" would be altered to read "civil status". This category would then include both marriage and civil partnership and there would be no automatic presumption of someone's sexual orientation."


(Responses to civil partnership, Nov 2003, Women's Equality Unit)

Although the report did envisage a replacement of the term 'marital status' with 'civil status', in practice changes have usually taken the form of adding the term 'civil partnership' to the existing wording. The wording on Government forms differs depending on what they are for and who they are aimed at, but the approach of HMRC, as stated in their Regulatory Impact Assessment of the Civil Partnership Act, is similar to that taken for many other forms:

"...the term 'marital or civil partnership status' will be used unless there is a specific need to identify people in one or other category."

I hope I have reassured you that changes to Government forms reflect the need to capture civil partnership status and are not in anyway motivated by a change in policy towards marital status, and that a variety of government surveys, including the survey used to measure child poverty, have in the past and continue to distinguish between marriage and cohabitation when collecting data on marital status.

I have arranged a copy of this letter to be placed in the House Library.

Yours sincerely


Bill McKenzie