

census
2021

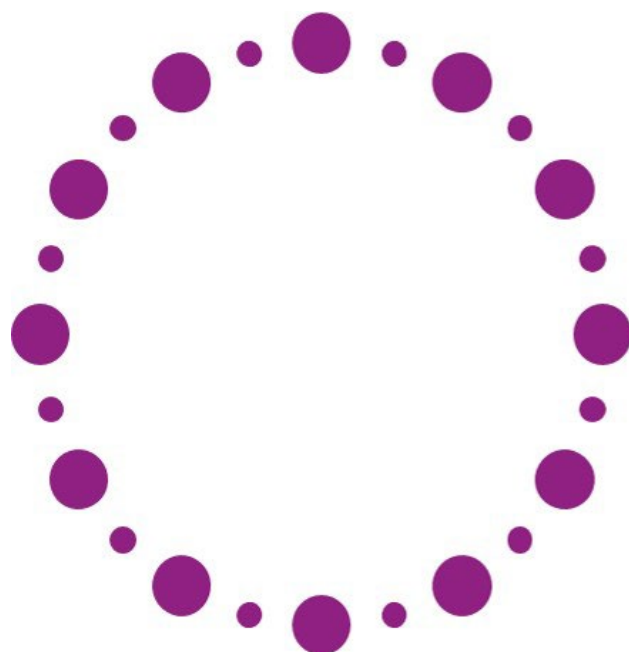


Main statistics for Northern Ireland

Statistical bulletin

Language

22 September 2022



[nisra.gov.uk/Census2021](https://www.nisra.gov.uk/Census2021)

1. Introduction

The Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) today released further results from Census 2021, which was held on 21 March 2021. The statistics released today provide a profile of the Northern Ireland population covering demography, ethnic group, identity, language and religion. The information covers Northern Ireland and the 11 Local Government Districts (LGDs).

This report relates to language – for display purposes figures are appropriately rounded but full figures are available in the [Census 2021 tables](#) on the NISRA website.

2. Key points

The key points relating to the language topic are as follows:

- On Census Day 2021, 4.6 percent (85,100 people) of our population aged 3 and over had a **main language other than English**. In 2011, English was not the main language of 3.1 per cent (54,500 people).
- In 2021 the most prevalent main languages other than English were Polish (20,100 people), Lithuanian (9,000), Irish (6,000), Romanian (5,600) and Portuguese (5,000).
- The statistics released today show an increasingly diverse population across ethnic group, main language, country of birth and passports held. This increasing diversity is evident to a greater or lesser degree across all 11 local councils.
- Census 2021 shows that 12.4 per cent (228,600 people) of our population aged 3 and over had some ability in the **Irish language**.
- Census 2021 shows that 10.4 per cent (190,600 people) of our population aged 3 and over had some ability in the **Ulster-Scots language**.

3. Main language

3.1. Questions asked

The first question related to the main language of all respondents, and for those who do not have English as their main language, their English language ability. The question is shown in Figure 1 (online) and Figure 2 (paper).

Figure 1: Census 2021 questions on main language – online

What is your main language?

> [What we mean by “main language”](#)

English

Other, including British or Irish Sign Language
You can enter your main language on the next question

Save and continue

How well can you speak English?

Very well

Well

Not well

Not at all

Save and continue

Figure 2: Census 2021 question on main language – paper

15 What is your main language?

English ➔ **GO TO 17**

Other, write in (including British/Irish Sign Languages)

16 How well can you speak English?

Very well	Well	Not well	Not at all
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

On Census Day 2021, English was the main language of 95.4% (1,751,500) of the population aged 3 and over. Thus 4.6% (85,100) of people aged 3 and over living in Northern Ireland did not have English as their main language. The most prevalent main languages other than English were Polish (20,100), Lithuanian (9,000), Irish (6,000), Romanian (5,600) and Portuguese (5,000). This is shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Main language of usual residents aged 3 and over – Census 2021

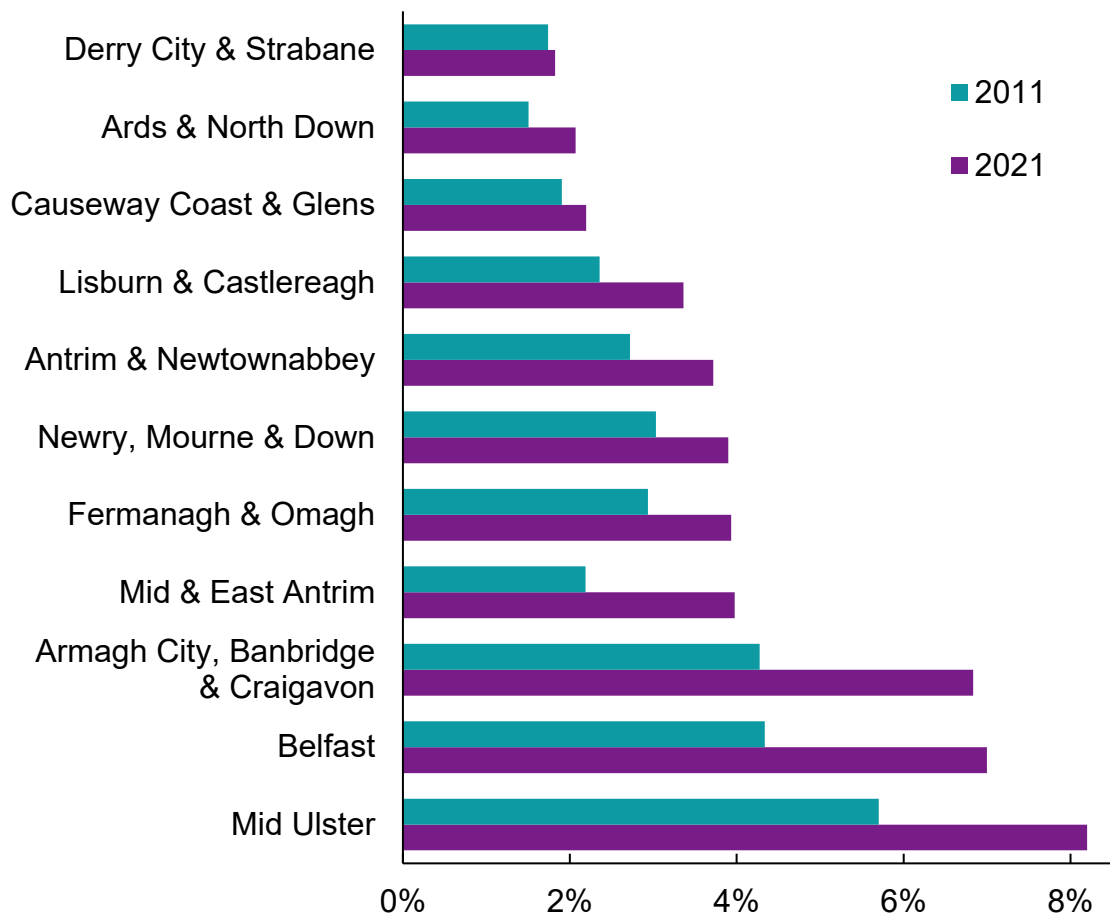
Main language	Number	Percentage
English	1,751,500	95.4%
Main language not English	85,100	4.6%
Polish	20,100	1.1%
Lithuanian	9,000	0.5%
Irish	6,000	0.3%
Romanian	5,600	0.3%
Portuguese	5,000	0.3%
Arabic	3,600	0.2%
Bulgarian	3,600	0.2%
Other languages	32,200	1.8%
All usual residents aged 3 and over	1,836,600	100.0%

4. Main language – Change over time

Census 2021 shows there is an increasing number of people living in Northern Ireland who do not have English as their main language. Ten years ago, in 2011, English was not the main language of 54,500 people aged 3 and over (3.1%); this increased to 85,100 people (4.6%) in 2021.

There is local variation in the percentage of people who do not have English as their main language – see Figure 3. Mid Ulster has continued to have the greatest proportion of people with English not as their main language, rising from 5.7% in 2011 to 8.2% in 2021.

Figure 3: Percentage of population aged 3 and over with English not as their main language by LGD (2011 and 2021)



Percentage of population aged 3 and over with English not as their main language

5. Main language – Ability in English language for those who do not have English as their main language

Census 2021 included a follow up question on spoken English language ability for those people who did not have English as their main language. Of the 85,100 people who did not have English as their main language, around three-quarters (76.3% or 64,900 people) could speak English well or very well. Thus, just over 20,200 people, (1.1%) of the population, did not have English as their main language and could not speak English well or not at all.

6. Irish language ability

6.1. Questions asked

A question related to Irish language ability was also included in Census 2021. This question is shown in Figure 4 (online) and Figure 5 (paper).

Figure 4: Census 2021 question on Irish language - online

Can you understand, speak, read or write Irish?

Select all that apply

<input type="checkbox"/>	No ability
<input type="checkbox"/>	Understand Irish
<input type="checkbox"/>	Speak Irish
<input type="checkbox"/>	Read Irish
<input type="checkbox"/>	Write Irish

Save and continue

Figure 5: Census 2021 question on Irish language - paper

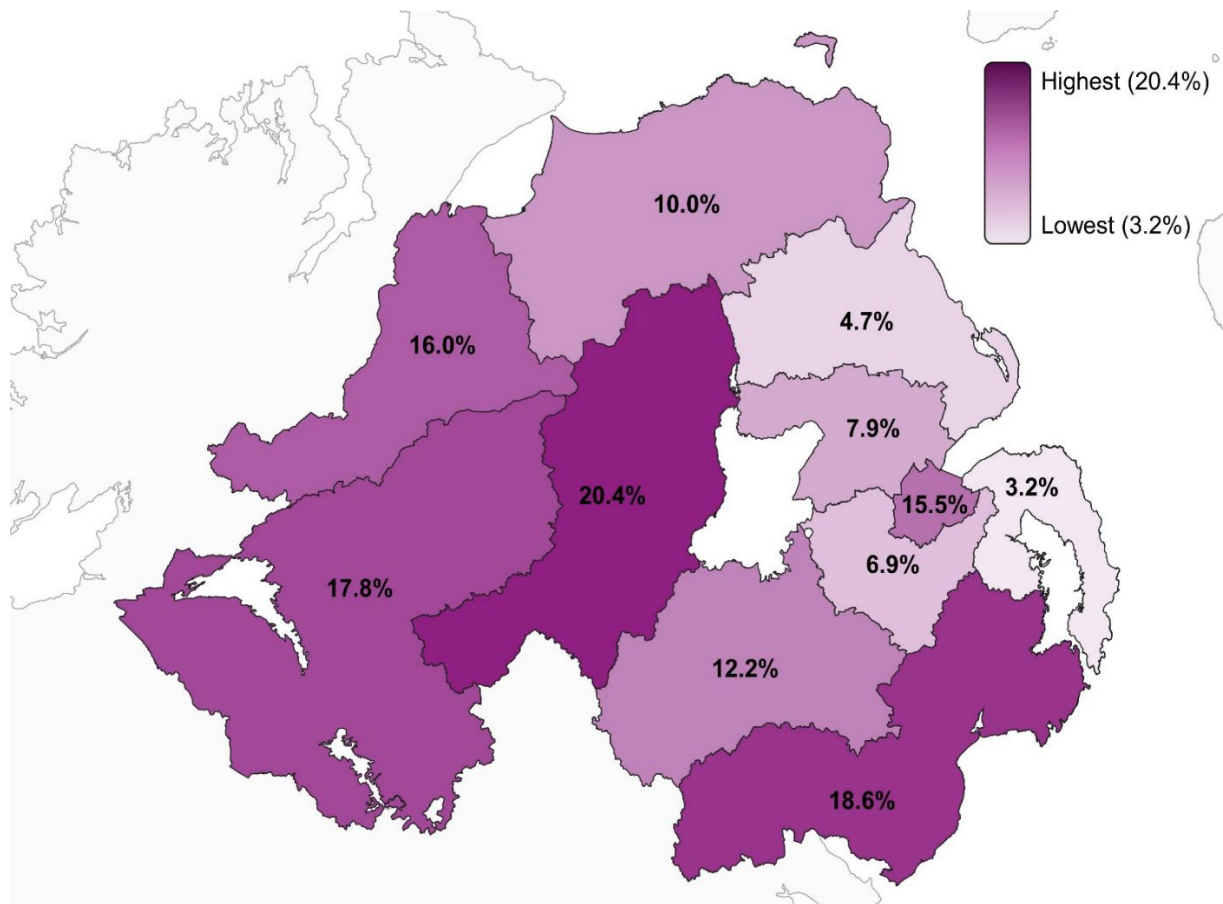
17 Can you understand, speak, read or write Irish?
Tick all that apply.

No ability	Understand	Speak	Read	Write
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

The census shows that 87.6% (1,608,000) of people aged 3 and over had no ability in the Irish language. In contrast, 12.4% (228,600) of people aged 3 and over had some ability in the Irish language. This is an increase from 10.7% (184,900 people) in 2011.

The proportion of people aged 3 and over with some ability in the Irish language varies by Local Government District. The proportion is greatest in Mid Ulster (20.4%) and lowest in Ards and North Down (3.2%). All Local Government Districts had an increase in this statistic over the period 2011 to 2021. A map of this statistic by Local Government District for 2021 is shown in Figure 6.

Figure 6: Map of percentage of population aged 3 and over with some ability in Irish language by LGD – Census 2021



Whilst 228,600 people had some ability in the Irish language, around two in five (39.7%) of this group (90,800 people) had the ability to understand only. In contrast 31.4% of this group (71,900 people) had the ability to understand, speak, read and write.

The census also included a further question on frequency of use of spoken Irish. Results from this will be published in due course.

For the first time, in Census 2021 people were able to respond online using an Irish language form. In total, around 1,300 households used the Irish language online form (or 0.2% of submitted online household forms).

7. Ulster-Scots language ability

7.1. Questions asked

A final language question in Census 2021 related to Ulster-Scots language ability. The question is shown in Figure 7 (online) and Figure 8 (paper).

Figure 7: Census 2021 question on Ulster-Scots language – online

Can you understand, speak, read or write Ulster-Scots?

Select all that apply

<input type="checkbox"/>	No ability
<input type="checkbox"/>	Understand Ulster-Scots
<input type="checkbox"/>	Speak Ulster-Scots
<input type="checkbox"/>	Read Ulster-Scots
<input type="checkbox"/>	Write Ulster-Scots

Save and continue

Figure 8: Census 2021 question on Ulster-Scots language – paper

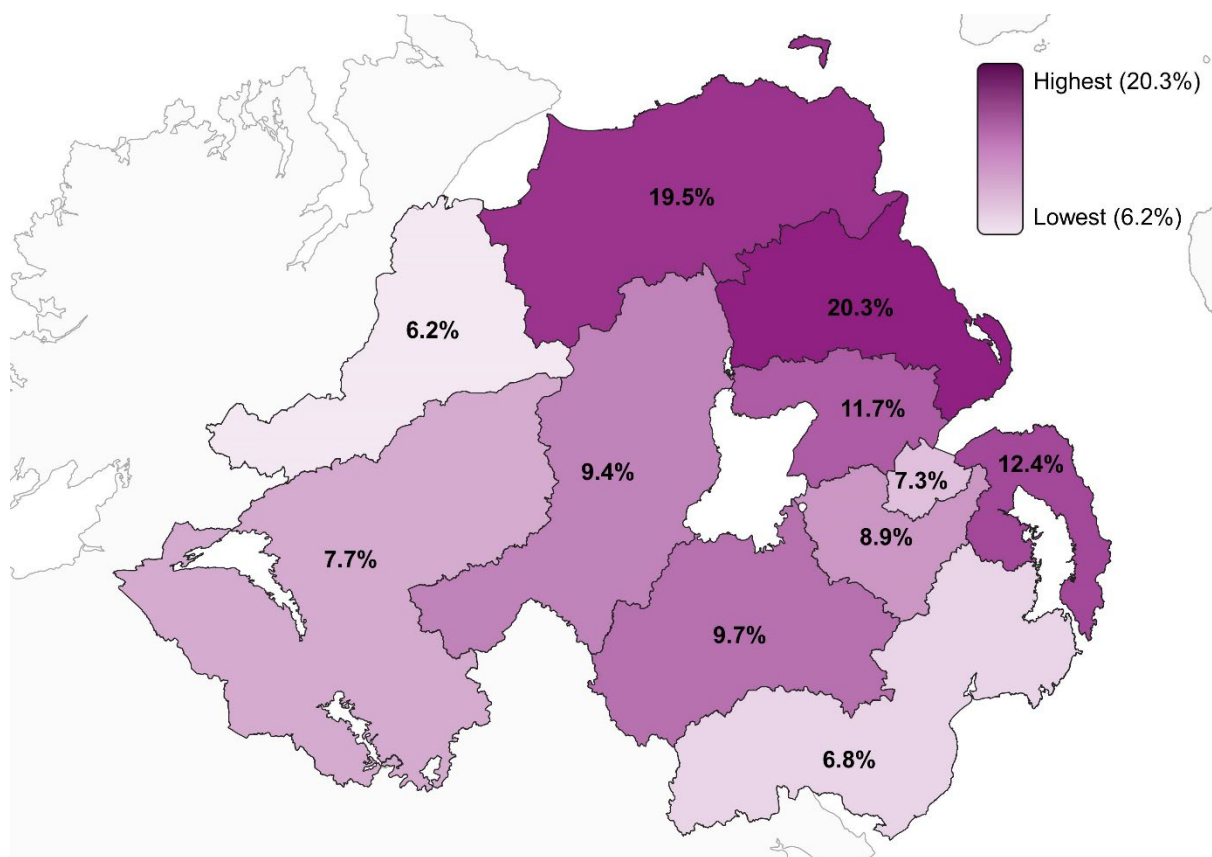
18 Can you understand, speak, read or write Ulster-Scots?
Tick all that apply.

No ability	Understand	Speak	Read	Write
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

The census shows that 89.6% (1,646,000) of people aged 3 and over had no ability in the Ulster-Scots language. In contrast, 10.4% (190,600) of people aged 3 and over had some ability in the Ulster-Scots language. This is an increase from 8.1% (140,200 people) in 2011.

The proportion of people aged 3 and over with some ability in the Ulster-Scots language varies by Local Government District. The proportion is greatest in Mid and East Antrim (20.3%) and lowest in Derry and Strabane (6.2%). Again all Local Government Districts had an increase in this indicator over the period 2011 to 2021. A map of this indicator by Local Government District for 2021 is shown in Figure 9.

Figure 9: Map of percentage of population aged 3 and over with some ability in Ulster-Scots language by LGD – Census 2021



Whilst 190,600 people had some ability in the Ulster-Scots language, 60.4% of this group (115,100 people) had the ability to understand only. In contrast 11.0% of this group (20,900 people) had the ability to understand, speak, read and write.

The census also included a further question on frequency of use of spoken Ulster-Scots. Results from this will be published in due course.

For the first time, in Census 2021 people were able to respond online using an Ulster-Scots language form. In total, around 800 households used the Ulster-Scots language online form (or 0.1% of submitted online household forms).

8. Associated outputs

[Census 2021 outputs on language](#) are available to download from the NISRA website, they include:

- MS-B05 Knowledge of Irish
- MS-B08 Knowledge of Ulster-Scots
- MS-B12 Main language
- MS-B14 Proficiency in English

9. Further Information

Census statistics are produced by the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency free from political influence. In May 2022, following a full assessment, the United Kingdom Statistics Authority designated these statistics as National Statistics, in accordance with the [Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007](#) and the [Code of Practice for Statistics](#). National Statistics status means that the statistics meet the highest standards of trustworthiness, quality and public value, and it is NISRA's responsibility to maintain compliance with these standards.

The census plays a fundamental role in the provision of official statistics – census data are used to inform key policies, plan key services and allocate public funds.

9.1. Quality of the results

The census data collection operation was supported by an independent [coverage survey](#). The coverage survey along with administrative data and information from the field operation were combined to allow statistical estimates to be made of the small proportion of people who did not make a return. The statistical estimates discussed here, as with all Census 2021 outputs, reflect the full population of Northern Ireland.

Further information on accuracy, coverage and imputation is provided on the NISRA website in the [Census 2021 quality assurance report \(PDF 275 KB\)](#).

9.2. Confidentiality

Census Office has taken steps to ensure that the confidentiality of respondents is fully protected. All published results from the census have been subject to statistical processes to ensure that individuals cannot be identified. For more information, please refer to the [statistical disclosure control methodology](#). These processes may result in very marginally different results between tables for the same statistic.

9.3. Comparability with previous censuses

The census is designed to provide the most accurate possible picture of the population on the day the census is taken. Whilst this report contains a small number of historical tables that give comparisons at the Northern Ireland level of some key demographic statistics, users should be aware that comparisons may be affected by other differences, in particular, between the census questionnaires, impacts of issues of the day, etc.

As the last three censuses (2001, 2011 and 2021) were all adjusted for under-enumeration and reflect the Northern Ireland population on census day, this supports comparisons between those censuses.

9.4. Supporting material

A number of [supporting documents](#) are available on the census pages of the NISRA website. These documents describe the census methodology in more detail, the quality assurance processes applied, the paper questionnaire used in the census, and a full list of definitions and output classifications.

9.5. More details

Further information on the statistics provided in this publication can be obtained from Census Customer Services at:

Telephone:	028 9025 5156
Email:	census@nisra.gov.uk
Responsible Statistician:	Dr David Marshall

This report was made possible by the co-operation of the public in responding to the census, the commitment of the census field and headquarters staff, and the assistance of many other people and organisations throughout all aspects of the census. The Registrar General for Northern Ireland, who is responsible for the planning, conduct and reporting of the census, would like to thank all of those who contributed to the census.

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