

THE SCOTTISH Sun ON SUNDAY

SAYS 15|10|17

OUR census is vital for shaping policy that will determine the country's future.

So it is disturbing enough that the Office for National Statistics may decide not to make people declare their gender in the 2021 survey for fear of causing offence.

Today we reveal the ONS has already spent tens of thousands of pounds of public money quizzing 100,000 households about their sexual identity.

At the same time they have scrapped a plan to help Britain's 2.2million ex-servicemen and women by asking important information about their lives.



Cushy number . . . Pullinger

Wrong priorities on their a-gender

And they have ditched a move to quiz householders about their pet ownership.

There is no doubt that recording people's sexuality is important for some and could lead to policies that will help them. Fair enough.

Britons have given details to statistics chiefs every ten years since 1801 and

they have used the information to better our lot. But are the ONS's bosses living in the real world?

From the comfort of their new £17million offices, under the leadership of £155,000-a-year boss John Pullinger, they seem to be divorced from reality.

The census should be used to improve living standards and services for everyone in this country.

Not for driving some right-on agenda.

Ringing endorsement

WE welcome Big Ben's bongs returning for Christmas and New Year.

They've been badly missed.

We are sure House of Commons speaker John Bercow will be especially pleased to hear them.

His wife Sally has said in the past that she finds the sound of the bells a massive turn on...

No doubt Mr Bercow is counting down the 71 days until Christmas.

It's a case of big bonk merrily on high.

Who let the togs out

ANIMAL lovers will go the extra mile for their pets — or even an extra 2,000 miles.

The Campbell family from the Isle of Arran got some help all the way from Bosnia when a pup adopted from a rescue shelter there vanished without trace.

And they got some rather unusual assistance — in the form of dirty togs worn by the shelter boss to try to lure the missing dog back with the familiar scent.

Let's hope the bizarre plan works.

And shy pooch Drogo will soon be bark where he belongs.

the SUNDAY ISSUE

Is it wise to axe dozens of tourist info hubs amid a record year for visitors?

CASTLE DOUGLAS



ABERFELDY



DUNKELD



BALLATER



THURSO



STRANRAER



Hol wrong . . . information centres serving popular beauty spots are among 39 earmarked for the chop by VisitScotland

Wish few were here

VISITSCOTLAND chiefs have announced plans to axe nearly two-thirds of local information offices — just as the country celebrates a record-breaking year for tourism.

Bosses claim they are closing 39 of the 65 centres because travellers prefer to plan their adventures online.

But industry experts believe holidaymakers deserve to be welcomed to our homeland by a team of friendly faces.

Today SCOTT THORNTON, managing director of Edinburgh-based consultancy Hotel PR, explains why the personal touch is always best.

WE can't live without digital technology, but nothing is better than a face-to-face chat with a local expert.

Perhaps then, it's little surprise that VisitScotland has announced plans to shut dozens of its tourist information centres.

But I have my reservations about aspects of this decision.

While I applaud bosses for recognising the industry needs to keep modernising to maintain impressive growth in visitor numbers, they underestimate the importance of personal customer service.

They are pinning all their hopes on the network of "digital hubs" as well as their

website, knowing online information has the advantage of being available 24/7.

But shutting the offices at Edinburgh and Glasgow airports — the two main entry points for travellers — sends out the wrong message.

My own company now deals as much with web media as with conventional print outlets, a vast change compared to a few years ago.

But the online push brings its own set of difficulties.

Navigating an internet site can be challenging, especially for the increasing number of visitors whose first language isn't English.

And while lots of the material on VisitScotland's

pages is unquestionably first-rate, it's still the case that information — much of it contributed by third parties — must be kept up to date.

In addition, suggestions which pop up for accommodation and restaurants often cover just a 10-mile radius of the centre.

And many web users are left feeling wary of their personal data being captured for marketing follow-ups.

Then there's the access issue. According to VisitScotland, two out of three people look up information online — that means a third don't.

Three in four adults now own a smartphone. That means 25 per cent don't. And

there are still plenty of places in Scotland where you can't get a decent internet signal.

I wonder how much of the 58 per cent drop in visitors popping into centres over the past decade has been due to restricted opening hours?

Hotels and restaurants have a vested interest in promoting tourism in their area and are presumably among the 1,500 "information partners" VisitScotland claims will help to fill the gap.

But they're often too busy running their own businesses to be unpaid ambassadors.

VisitScotland may regard them as an anachronism, but I feel sorry for information centre staff who will no longer have a job they enjoy and generally do well.

DON'T MISS PLANET HEATHER — PAGES 55-59

£11bn Yearly contribution tourism makes to Scotland's economy

218,000 People working in holiday sector jobs across the country

14,000 Businesses — one in 12 — cash in on visitors' spending

14,000