

The Future of the General Lifestyle Survey

Summary of responses to consultation

June 2011

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Summary

The Office for National Statistics (ONS) conducted a public consultation on the Future of the General Lifestyle Survey (GLF) which ran from 11 February to 6 May 2011. The consultation was conducted in accordance with the Code of Practice on Consultation issued by the Department for Business Innovation and Skills (which is available online at www.bis.gov.uk/files/file47158.pdf).

A total of 30 responses were received to the consultation on the future of the GLF together with GLF-specific responses to the wider public consultation on ONS's work programme run in winter 2010. Responses were primarily from academics, but also from government departments, and alcohol concern charities/organisations. The survey results indicated that GLF data is most commonly used to analyse smoking, drinking, health and family formations.

ONS proposed to stop running the GLF in its current form. The main concerns of GLF users to this proposal surrounded a break in the time series of GLF outputs and the risk that losing a wide variety of confounding factors from one survey source would reduce the potential for explanatory analysis currently afforded by the GLF.

ONS welcomes all of the responses received and notes the concerns. These responses will be taken into consideration during the next steps of this project. Given the need to harmonise UK and EU poverty indicators, and ensure efficient data collection, we propose that the GLF ceases to run in its current form from January 2012. Statistics on Income and Living Conditions required by European law (EU-SILC) will be collected via the Family Resources Survey (FRS) with a standalone survey providing the longitudinal SILC element. GLF questions not covered by EU-SILC will be collected using a separate survey, subject to continued funding for non-EU-SILC variables. Over the next six months, ONS will explore the exact format for this survey to best meet users' needs. Details will be made available later in the year.

1. Background

This document summarises the responses received to the public consultation on the future of the GLF and provides ONS's reply to the consultation responses. A consultation on the wider ONS work programme was conducted from 1 November to 24 December 2010, and GLF-specific responses to this have been incorporated into this document.

It was proposed in the consultation that ONS would discontinue the GLF in its current form after the 2011 survey year. This was due to the need to improve the efficiency of data collection by ceasing to produce different UK and EU poverty estimates, which are currently derived from separate surveys. There was also a requirement to deliver cost savings in response to the 2010 Spending Review. The data needed for the Statistics on Income and Living Conditions required by European law (EU-SILC), which are currently collected using the GLF, would be provided through alternative sources, namely the Family Resources Survey (FRS), supplemented by a standalone survey to provide the longitudinal element of EU-SILC. Additionally, the consultation provided the opportunity to explore how non-EU-SILC information currently collected on the GLF could be collected on other ONS surveys, such as the ONS Opinions Survey.

In light of the proposed actions, consultees were invited to comment on the following questions:

Question 1

What are your current uses of the GLF Survey?

How do you use the GLF Survey data?

Please provide information on:

- a. The topic areas you find most useful
- b. The analysis you need to undertake
- c. The purpose for which you currently use GLF survey data
- d. The current frequency of the Survey and your need for time series
- e. Which outputs you find most useful and why
- f. What level of precision you require for these estimates

Question 2:

What are the implications for stopping the GLF Survey?

- a. What would be the impact to you if GLF Survey data were no longer available?

Question 3:

What are the alternatives to the GLF Survey?

- a. What other sources of data on topics that the GLF Survey covers do you, or could you use instead?
- b. Would data of a less stringent quality (e.g. collected through quota sampling) be good enough quality for your purposes?
- c. In the absence of the GLF Survey, how could the ONS help with access to other sources of similar data?

- d. Would data collected from one randomly selected adult per household, rather than all household members provide sufficient information for your non-EU-SILC GLF information requirements?

Question 4:**What are your views on questionnaire content?**

Which questions currently included in the 2010-11 GLF Survey are essential to your needs?

Question 5:**Do you have any other comments?**

- a. Do you have any further comments on plans for the future of the GLF Survey?

2. Outcome of consultation

ONS received 14 written responses to the consultation. Responses came from a mixture of central and local government departments, academics, and other bodies. In addition, 16 responses to the wider ONS work programme consultation specifically mentioned the GLF survey, making a total of 30 responses

Table 1: Responses by stakeholder group

Type of Respondent - combined consultations		
Type of organisation	No. of responses	% of total
Central government	6	20
Other bodies/voluntary organisations	9	30
Academics	13	43
Local government	2	7
Total	30	100

A full list of responding organisations can be found in Appendix A. No requests for confidentiality or anonymity of response were received. Some submissions were combined responses on behalf of several related organisations, such as the nine regional public health observatories (PHOs) in England. While the majority of responses were from academics, the range of responding bodies reflects the importance of the GLF Survey as a valuable source of information about the various topics relating to UK society.

Some respondents provided detailed answers to the specific questions asked in the consultation while others provided general comments about the use of the survey for their own work or strategic comments about the implications of ceasing to run the survey in its present form. This document summarises the responses received to the five questions asked in the GLF-specific consultation and the wider ONS work programme consultation. As mentioned in this consultation, feedback received on the GLF as part of the consultation on all ONS Statistics is also reviewed as part of this summary. The 16 responses to the wider ONS consultation generally included comments that fitted into the questions asked in this consultation, especially with regards to the current uses of the GLF survey and the implications of stopping the survey. These responses are included in the relevant question summaries.

Question 1: current uses of the GLF Survey

Of the 30 responses received, 27 (90 per cent) mentioned how they used the GLF survey data. The most frequently cited topic areas were alcohol consumption and general health. Smoking and family formation and fertility were also popular topics for users. The table below shows the number and percentages of responses.

Table 2: Responses by topic area

Combined consultations		
Topic area	Reponses	% Responses
Alcohol consumption	14	47
Health	11	37
Smoking	10	33
Family formation	7	23
Other	7	23
Pensions	3	10

A wide range of analyses using the data were reported, reflecting the diversity of the responding organisations. The most frequently reported level of analysis was at a UK and Government Office Region level. Responses indicated that annual estimates and the current level of precision afforded by the GLF were sufficient for users' needs.

Question 2: implications for ceasing to run the GLF Survey in its current form

The main concern identified for ceasing to run the GLF survey in its current form was the discontinuity of the time series in GLF outputs, used to identify and analyse trends. Two-thirds of respondents mentioned this as a concern. Nearly a third of all respondents mentioned the impact of no longer having a wide variety of demographic, social, and economic factors available from one source. Concern was expressed that the potential for explanatory analysis currently afforded by the GLF might be reduced.

Question 3: alternatives to the GLF Survey

Just over half of respondents said that alternative sources of data were available to them. The Integrated Household Survey (IHS), the Health Survey for England (HSE), the Labour Force Survey (LFS), and Understanding Society were all mentioned as possible alternatives for current GLF topics. However, nearly all those that mentioned an alternative source pointed out that the current GLF questions were more detailed and of better quality (due to sample size, or availability of related variables from the same source).

Question 4: views on questionnaire content

Responses mentioned topic areas of use rather than specific questions (see summary of responses to Question 1).

Question 5: any other comments

Other points raised by respondents included the value of the GB coverage, large sample size (and associated accuracy of estimates) and data available from all members of the household provided by the GLF. The loss of the longitudinal data for non-EU-SILC questions was also mentioned. Some respondents cited the need to consider differences in design when transferring questions between different surveys. One respondent commented that the proposal to use telephone interviewing for the EU-SILC standalone survey, outlined in the communication note on EU-SILC integration into the FRS, could introduce bias into the results. For reference, the communication note can be found at:

www.ons.gov.uk/about/consultations/open-consultations/eusilc-integration-into-frs/index.html

3. Next Steps

We would like to thank all respondents for taking time to respond to the consultation and we welcome all of the responses received. Based on the need to harmonise poverty indicators used by the UK and EU, ensure efficient data collection, and taking into account the results of the consultation, we are proposing the following actions:

- The GLF will cease to run in its current form from January 2012
- EU-SILC questions to first time respondents will be asked within the Family Resources Survey (FRS) from April 2012, with repeated waves of EU-SILC questions (covering the longitudinal element of the EU-SILC requirement) asked as an ONS stand-alone survey
- Non-EU-SILC questions will be collected on a separate survey which would also satisfy existing and new ONS Opinions Survey (OPN) data requirements from January 2012, subject to continued funding for non EU-SILC variables

Time series

The loss of the time series provided by the GLF and the ability to cross-tabulate between a variety of demographic, social, and economic factors were the main issues raised in the consultation responses. ONS is committed to minimising any breaks in the time series for GLF outputs. As such, a separate survey will be used to satisfy non-EU-SILC questions. This survey would consist of a core set of demographic questions, with ad hoc modules of questions funded on a monthly basis by other government departments, academics, and not-for-profit organisations. The survey would have a similar sample size; the same sampling approach (that is, probability stratified 2-stage sample design where the Postcode Address File, or PAF, is ordered by geography before addresses are randomly sampled from within randomly selected postcode sectors); the same mode of interview (that is, face-to-face) and the same weighting/calibration adjustments (to ensure that the sample is representative of the population) as the GLF. ONS plans to test any non-EU-SILC GLF questions elected to be run on this new survey later this year. The transfer of the EU-SILC questions to the FRS will allow users to analyse variables in conjunction with those demographic, social, and economic factors available on the FRS. Similarly, non-EU-SILC questions asked on a separate survey will be asked in conjunction with a core set of demographic questions.

Sample coverage

Responses to the consultation emphasised the value of the sample size, coverage, and design of the GLF. The FRS covers the UK and interviews approximately 20,000 households a year. The sample size from the FRS is greater than the sample size of the GLF, which interviews approximately 9,000 households a year. The proposed separate survey to meet non-EU-SILC and Opinions Survey (OPN) data requirements would cover the whole of Great Britain and comprise approximately 12,500 interviews per year. ONS is investigating the option of interviewing all household members on the proposed survey, which would ensure a comparable sample size with the GLF. We are currently conducting consultations with non-EU-SILC GLF question sponsors to determine the survey questionnaire content and design, subject to funding. We are also exploring the design of

this survey, the possibility of a household level interview as previously mentioned, as well as the inclusion of extra core questions to provide more detailed data for users.

Longitudinal data

The loss of the longitudinal data from the GLF was raised in some responses to the consultation. The GLF has collected longitudinal data since 2005. The longitudinal EU-SILC data currently collected by the GLF will continue to be collected longitudinally. There are other longitudinal surveys which may, in part, be able to meet users' longitudinal requirements, for example, Understanding Society. In light of this, and the need to balance the demand for longitudinal statistics with the relative cost of data collection, the non-EU-SILC questions will not be collected longitudinally from January 2012.

Telephone interviewing

One response to the consultation pointed out potential bias from using telephone interviewing for the standalone EU-SILC survey. ONS is exploring the use of a mixed-mode approach (that is, the combination of telephone and face-to-face interviews) for this survey to manage the introduction of any possible bias. ONS will develop methodology to adjust for any potential bias introduced from using mixed-mode data collection. Telephone interviewing is already used on the GLF Survey where a personal interview was not possible at the time of the face-to-face interview and has proved to be a cost-effective way of data collection.

ONS will publish an update about these proposals later in the year. If you have any questions or comments on the consultation or this document, please contact us at glf.consultation@ons.gsi.gov.uk.

Annex A: List of responding organisations

Alcohol Concern
Alcohol Health Alliance
Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion (CASE), London School of Economics and Political Science
Centre for Economic Performance (LSE)
Centre for Health Analysis and Life Events
Department for Work and Pensions
Department for Work and Pensions: Health and Wellbeing
Department of Epidemiology and Public Health
Economic and Social Data Service
English public health observatories (joint response)
ESRC Centre for Population Change
Essex University
Fire and Rescue Service
London Borough of Ealing
NatCen (National Centre for Social Research)
NHS Information Centre
Public Health NHS South Central
School of Health and Related Research (Sheffield University)
Sheffield University
SVP (UK)
UK Centre for Tobacco Control Studies
University of Leeds
University of Southampton
Warwick University
Welsh Government
Wessex Alcohol Research Centre