

Issues with December LFS response in Telephone Operations



Social Data Collection & Admin Sources BDB on FA1APP003

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Background

1. LFS response decreases over the Christmas period. The average decline in response from November to December over the past 20 years has been 2.6 percentage points (wave 1). For the all waves figure the average decline is smaller at 2 percentage points.
2. There are a number of reasons that have been used to explain this seasonal decline in response. These include:
 - a. greater reluctance of survey participants to take part (inconvenient to do so because of other commitments at this time of year)
 - b. more respondents are unavailable
 - c. reduction in the number of days of field work because of public holidays
 - d. reduction in Interviewer resource (leave)
3. There are number of actions that SSD put in place to mitigate against the expected decline in response at this time of year. For the past five years, an unconditional incentive (book of 1st class stamps) has been included with the advance letter for wave 1 cases. This is thought to boost response between 1 and 2 per cent (although this has not been tested). This strategy is used to mitigate against the impacts of a. and b.
4. The impact on response from c. and d. above, is managed through workforce planning. Through voluntary cooperation, Interviewers and associated support areas will be asked to provide resource This will often involve Interviewers being requested to work at times and on days that they may not usually do.

LFS response December 2012

5. The level of decline in response was much greater in December 2012 than had previously been experienced at this time of year. The December wave 1 response rate was 54.4% and the all waves response rate 44.8%. This represented a fall of 3.6 and 5.2 percentage points respectively from the November monthly response rates. In a historical context, there have been larger falls in the wave 1 response rates between these two months (1997, 2002, 2004, 2009). This was however, the largest fall in the monthly all waves response rate.
6. In terms of the relevance of this for outputs, the first output for which December data will be used is the Oct-Dec quarter. The all waves response rate for that quarter is 48.4%. That is 1.6 percentage points down from the previous three-month period (Sept-Nov). In terms of number of households, interviews were conducted in just over 1,000 fewer households compared with the previous quarter.

Issues with December LFS response in Telephone Operations

7. It should be noted that all of the above figures are before the imputation of survey data. After imputation - the process where responses from the preceding wave are rotated forward - the response rate and number of interviews will be higher (albeit still below that achieved in previous months/years).

Mode of collection

8. The reduction in LFS response occurred across both modes of collection. However, whereas the fall in face-to-face response was broadly in line with previous years, the reduction in response in the TO was significantly higher than anything previously seen. Both the wave 1 and wave 2-5 response rates were the lowest single month figures that have been achieved in the TO.

LFS response by mode of collection, main survey, 2012.

	November	December
Telephone		
Wave 1	50.1	44.5
Wave 2-5	78.2	67.7
Face to face		
Wave 1	58.0	54.0
Wave 2-5*	47.9	42.3

* The 'low' wave 2-5 response rate in FtF reflects the fact that a large proportion of the cases that are issued in the field at waves 2-5, are cases which were un-productive (refusals, non-contacts) at the previous waves. Where an interview occurs, these cases are mostly covered by the TO.

9. Given that the major issue appears to have been response in the TO, the remainder of this note centres around this mode of collection.

Why was the response rate low in the TO ?

10. In general terms, a lack of interviewer capacity was the main cause of the low response rate. Both the number of Interviewers available to work (headcount) and the amount of hours actually worked were down in comparison with the same period the previous year.

	December 2011	December 2012
Number of Interviewers	228	217
Hours worked	15315	13038

11. The consequence of having reduced Interviewer capacity was a large fall in the number of calls being made. The extent of the reduction is most apparent when looking at the weekly figures. In the weeks up to the Christmas holiday, approximately 16,000 calls were being made, however this fell to just over 9,000 for week 24L. Weeks 24K onwards each lost working days from the usual two week field period, with 24L the most affected week (Annex 1). The field period for 24L started on 24 December, with the first three days being a privilege holiday followed by two bank holidays. The majority of LFS interviewing will be done in the first week of a period, and in this case, half of the usual available days were lost.

LFS reference week	1st day of field period	Calls made
24G	19 Nov	15948
24H	26 Nov	16247
24I	3 Dec	16681
24J	10 Dec	18541
24K	17 Dec	14509
24L	24 Dec	9192
24M	31 Dec	13192

Issues with December LFS response in Telephone Operations

12. However, the event of Christmas was not a shock, and in previous years SSD has been able to manage within the constraints of the LFS field period.

13. As in past years, early planning (from October) occurred to prepare for the loss in working days from public holidays and the demand for annual leave. Usual procedures were applied which essentially aim to provide adequate capacity but to also give staff an equal opportunity to take leave over the period. Management would be unlikely to fully deny leave applications, however managers would look to modify requests with the aim being to ensure that at least 85% of usual interviewing hours are available.

14. Analysis shows that the level of leave granted was in excess of the usual amount.

15. To compound this, there was a large increase in the incidence of unanticipated short-term sickness absences over December. The number of incidences was almost double that of the preceding month (76 compared with 49) with the total hours lost being c. 1,500 hours, or almost 12% of usual capacity (a loss of half that amount would be more normal).

16. It is usual over the Christmas period to seek volunteers to work additional hours (effectively overtime). Managers approached staff individually throughout September, October & November 2012 and a general request for additional hours was also sent to interviewers at the end of November 2012. In particular, efforts were made to get maximum attendance on the shifts running on 27th, 28th & 31st December. This was less successful than usual. The use of such overtime has been greatly reduced over the past year, and it is the view that some staff were reluctant to offer extra hours because they thought they would be offered less hours later in the year. Despite reassurances from management that this would not be the case, it is likely that this view reduced the number of staff willing to do overtime. An absence of support from lay officials contributed to this situation.

17. It is worth noting that the privilege and public holidays all fell on Mondays and Tuesdays (and one Wednesday) which are the days when the TO has its most capacity. The contract that Interviewers work on is a six day contract, which should mean that staff who would usually work on these days, should move their working time to later in the week. As indicated above, such flexibility has largely been achieved through voluntary cooperation. Such an approach needs to be reconsidered.

18. There were a number of employee relations issues which would have contributed to the lower than usual willingness to work flexibly over the Christmas period as well as general productivity. The main issue was the consultation exercise taking place with Team Leaders. While they were theoretically available to interview during December, the consultation period had reached a key stage: estimates for potential redundancy payments were pending, and others were involved in applications for the AO & EO posts which necessarily took them away from any work. A number of Team Leaders have also been on periods of extended sick absence. This issue has dominated conversations and has probably had some impact on the morale of Interviewers in the area, and has certainly distracted at times.

19. A further contributing factor has been the slow progress achieved in increasing Interviewer resource. A business case was drafted 28th September 2012 and approved 19th October 2012 for an additional 30 interviewers. This resource is unlikely to be operational until the start of March; this length of time from business case to the start of employment is standard and largely outside of the control of SSD.

Impact of TOCS

20. The new call scheduler was implemented from week 24G and therefore it is reasonable to question whether its implementation contributed to the lower than expected response.

21. It is clear that some aspects of TOCS would have improved performance. Since its inception there have been no instances when the system has been down, whereas previously, the call scheduler was regularly falling over and therefore reducing interviewer hours.

22. Where there is less certainty is the efficiency of the scheduling of cases, that is, the process of managing which calls are presented to Interviewers to attempt. In the weeks immediately after the

Issues with December LFS response in Telephone Operations

introduction of TOCS, response has been lower in the TO, although there were exceptions such as week 24J where a significantly higher level of response was achieved. It is difficult to make comparisons between the pre and post TOCS period because of seasonal factors although the over-riding factor influencing response still appears to be capacity: higher response rates were associated with more calls being made and more Interviewer capacity.

23. Further work needs to be done to ensure the optimal use of the scheduler. More analysis still needs to be done to understand the impact of changing the parameters, the use of information from previous waves to guide best calling times etc. It is also possible that changes to the scheduling parameters can be made to deal with the specific challenges of shorter working weeks, and this will be a priority for future analysis.

24. There have been some issues with TOCS that will have contributed to lower response. Essentially because the business accepted an off-the-shelf package, elements of the existing workflow had to change. For example, a new process had to be developed for dealing with new households. These new processes are a little "clunky" and probably reduce the efficiency of collection. But in reality these affect only a small number of cases. Additionally, there have been some operational problems, such as with the auto-coding and harvesting of cases. These problems have required manual interventions from both IM and Survey Operations staff. These are likely to have affected response "at the margins" for example by deflecting Field Office staff away from other work (e.g. managing reissues). It is difficult to quantify the impact on response of these, but it is likely to have been small. These issues need to be addressed in order to ensure the effective running of TOCS.

Summary

23. In summary, the factors that impacted during December were:

- Very high levels and numbers of sick absence which impacted on challenging capacity issues
- Holiday closures were not friendly eg. Week 24L lost the first three days of the week - possibly the most critical days
- Fewer calls made in the weeks where the above were more of an issue
- Higher and earlier non-contacts and refusals as a result
- Less staff this year compared to last
- Slow moving recruitment
- Recruitment taking staff from operational focus at key times
- Less uptake on additional hours for a variety of reasons
- Team Leader and other staff issues
- Some impact from TOCS but likely to have impacted on response at the margins

The single most important element appears to have been Interviewer capacity . A number of factors came together which meant that insufficient capacity was available to ensure that all cases had an acceptable number of call attempts .

It is agreed that management in the business area should have done more at an earlier stage to highlight the potential risk. They could have also made decisions at an earlier stage, for example, to re-prioritise work (e.g. from ad hocs to LFS) or implement a Sunday shift. There are some questions that need to be resolved concerning the autonomy of the staff in TO to make such decisions. However, there is also a recognition that there were fairly limited options available to address the capacity issues once they occurred. Factors such as the high level of unanticipated short term absences could not be countered.

What is being done going forward ?

A number of immediate actions are being put in place in order to restore levels of response to acceptable levels. There is a need for the TO to catch up on outstanding work from previous weeks as well as to manage the flow of new work into the schedulers. To do this the TO are:

- cancelling the February staff briefing sessions (will cascade necessary information using alternative methods)
- running Sunday shifts
- seek additional hours from staff

Issues with December LFS response in Telephone Operations

- adjust when other ad hoc work is done (moving it to times when LFS is less productive)
- adjust when mandatory training courses can be done (moving it to times when LFS is less productive)
- no new training courses or seminar attendances will be authorised unless required for work.
- sharing with staff the impact of and importance of lower LFS response rates.

More strategically, the business area will:

- review the processes for managing annual leave
- review capacity planning
- consider ways in which to promote greater flexibility of available resource (ie getting staff to work on days outside of their standard working pattern)
- look at the decision making processes and whether local TO managers have appropriate decision making autonomy
- review the demarcation of responsibilities between Operations Planner and Operations Managers
- further analysis of scheduling parameters
- further analysis of the use of recall preference data
- identify optimal scheduling parameters for use when survey field periods are truncated
- consider whether sufficient and relevant MI is available to highlight potential response problems at an earlier stage

Annex 1

Opening hours and closures over the period :

Friday 21st December - closed at 9pm instead of 8pm
Saturday 22nd December - closed at 3pm instead of 1:30pm
Monday 24th to Wednesday 26th December - closed
Thursday 27th December - usual working hours
Friday 28th December - closed at 9pm instead of 8pm
Saturday 29th December - closed at 3pm instead of 1:30pm
Monday 31st December - closed at 6pm instead of 9.30pm
Tuesday 1st January 2013 - closed

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