

Social Data Collection & Admin Sources BDB
on NP3APP001

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Title: Response strategy for ONS Social Survey

Categorisation
PWA Personal Work Areas [REDACTED]

Why is social survey response important?

Better Statistics, Better Decisions, the joint strategy of the UK Statistics Authority, Government Statistical Service (GSS) and Office for National Statistics (ONS), sets out a collective mission for the official statistics system:

High quality statistics, analysis and advice to help Britain make better decisions.

This supports ONS's own mission: **Trusted statistics, understanding the UK** and its vision: **To be widely respected for informing debate and improving decision making through high quality, easy to use statistics and analyses on the UK's economy and society.**

Survey data collection from businesses, households and individuals currently plays a critical role in contributing to key strategic objectives for ONS and for the wider official statistics system. High quality survey data provide a firm evidence base to inform sound decision making and response rates to surveys are one indicator of the quality of the data provided. While participation in ONS business surveys is compulsory, there is no mandate for participation in social surveys, so response to these surveys is closely monitored as an indicator of their quality.

ONS Social Survey collects data for a number of cross-sectional and longitudinal household surveys in England, Scotland and Wales. Addresses for these are sampled using the Royal Mail's Postcode Address File and interviews are conducted either by face-to-face or telephone interviewers. In addition, a separate interviewer force conducts the International Passenger Survey mainly at British airports and ports. Some of the surveys are

funded internally; others are externally commissioned, usually by other government departments. ONS is responsible for managing the Crime Survey for England and Wales, but does not currently collect the data for this. Details of the surveys are included in Annex A along with a link to some key facts about our survey data collection.

ONS has three field forces, with around 600 face-to-face interviewers, 200 telephone interviewers and 200 International Passenger Survey interviewers. There are a further 75 remote or Telephone Operations managers. All interviewers and interviewer managers are permanent civil servants.

The long-run trend in response rates to ONS social surveys - the proportion of the eligible sampled addresses at which full or partial participation in the survey is achieved - is downwards. This downwards trend in response rates has been experienced by most other UK data collection agencies and by National Statistical Institutes worldwide.

Response rate is the single value often used to measure success in data collection, and is considered important by users of survey outputs as an indication of the confidence they can have in the data. Representativeness, however, is equally important: falling response rates increase the *potential* for non-response bias, but does not necessarily mean that non-response bias has become more of a problem. The 2011 Census Non-Response Link Study (CNRLS) found no evidence of significant non-response bias in the Labour Force Survey, the largest of the ONS social surveys.

There is a market for social surveys in which ONS bids for work alongside private sector agencies like TNS BMRB, Ipsos MORI and the National Centre for Social Research. Response rates affect ONS capacity to win new data collection work or to maintain its current portfolio of externally funded surveys. For some externally funded surveys there are financial penalties for not achieving agreed response rate targets.

Where are we now?

A chart showing trends in response rates over the last ten years is included as Annex B. Typical response rates are now between 50 and 60%, whereas in 2004 they ranged between 55 and 75%. The downward trajectory has been most marked for the Labour Force Survey, which is the largest ONS social survey: wave one response rates in 2004 were around 75% and now stand at just under 60%.

In February 2014 ONS published a National Statistics Quality Review of the Labour Force Survey, which concluded that:

"currently the LFS enables the production of good quality estimates from the survey outputs, ie these are acceptable in terms of their accuracy and timeliness and are of comparable quality to those estimates produced elsewhere in the countries included in this review".

The review concluded that if response rates were to continue to decline this would raise concern for both accuracy and the precision of the survey estimates and it made several recommendations to address response rate concerns. The review referenced findings from the Census Non-Response Link Study, carried out at the time of the 2011 census, that there is no evidence of substantial non-response bias in the Labour Force Survey:

"Despite declining response, the available evidence suggests the biasing impact on key labour market estimates is minimal, although comparisons to the Census 2011 labour market status do suggest some under-coverage of certain groups in the population."

A chart showing response on current ONS social surveys between 2004 and 2014 is included as Annex B. [Annex C shows the proportion of LFS non-response accounted for by non-contact and by refusals; non-contacts account for around one-third of non-response while refusals account for two-thirds. These proportions have remained fairly constant over the last twenty years. International comparison carried out as part of the LFS National Statistics Quality Review indicated that UK non-contact rates were comparable with those of other countries which achieved higher response, but that refusal rates were substantially higher.](#)

Compulsory participation is not a guaranteed route to higher response: of the 33 member states of the EU, EFTA and EU candidate countries, participation in the LFS is compulsory in 14 and while average reported response is higher in those countries (85 per cent compared with 74 per cent), some countries with voluntary participation achieve higher response than others where participation is compulsory. In 2011 ten countries with voluntary participation reported response of 78 per cent or higher, while two of the countries with compulsory participation reported response of below 70 per cent.

Many factors have been proposed to explain the general long-term downward trend in response rates. Lower survey response is a combination of:

- reduced contact rates, attributed to, for example:

 - rise in single person households;

 - rise in households where all adults are in work;

 - rise in controlled access to properties; or

- increased refusal rates, reflecting reduced public willingness to participate in surveys, for example because of:

 - survey and market research overload: the salience of a survey topic has become a more important determinant of response;

 - growing intolerance of interview length;

 - concerns about whether survey responses will be kept confidential;

 - concerns about privacy and personal safety.

Where the decline in response is steeper than would be expected given long term trends, there are sometimes organisational reasons for not reaching target levels of response, such as lack of interviewer capacity or problems with IT infrastructure interrupting the normal collection of data.

Response to the International Passenger Survey is less of a problem than for household surveys, but there are different challenges in working from airports and seaports. [For example, ONS has no statutory right to work at these ports and is therefore treated in the same way as any other tenant. As a result, changing priorities for the airport authorities can result in ONS staff having to shift their interviewing location, which can have an impact on response and data quality. There are also ongoing pressures to collect at different sites and at different times of the day \(i.e. earlier start times to shifts\) as a strategy for improving representativeness of the IPS data.](#)

Where do we want to be? Vision and Strategic objectives

It is our aim over the duration of this strategy (2015-16 to 2017-18) to present a comprehensive plan for managing survey response that meets the requirements of our customers. This plan will need widespread support from across the Office as it is recognised that improvements in survey response rates cannot be achieved solely from within ONS Social Survey. It will also need to balance competing priorities: maintaining data quality, as measured by response rates and non-response bias against the need to control costs and achieving additional efficiencies.

Maintaining response with a flat or declining budget will be extremely challenging as long run trends show response becoming harder to achieve. A radical transformation of data collection may be necessary, for example involving greater connectivity between interviewers and the office; new models for collecting data; reducing survey burden by using administrative data; facilitating data collection by use of big data; or new survey designs raised through National Statistics Quality Reviews (of LFS & LCF for example). We will also need to work with Census to build up shared capability which will allow us to offer mixed mode data collection. Any radical transformation will require buy-in from stakeholders, who may be reluctant to accept changes to the existing products we supply them with.

At present our response strategy assumes that participation in social surveys will continue to be voluntary. The 2014 National Statistics Quality Review of the LFS considered the work that had previously been done to explore making participation compulsory and concluded that: "ONS should continue to concentrate on maintaining or improving LFS response, with a view to minimising non-response bias, rather than at present pursuing compulsory participation." However, if response continues to fall to a point where the validity of outputs is considered to be doubtful, compulsory participation may need to be reconsidered.

How will we get there? What will we keep on doing? What will we start doing?

The two main strategic drivers affecting response over the duration of this strategy will be the outcome of the Data Collection Review carried out in 2014 and the development of capability for online collection of social survey data.

The Data Collection Review aimed to establish the optimum sustainable model for data collection now and in the future. It considered a full range of models, from full outsourcing of data collection to new models for in-house data collection. The review included research into models of data collection adopted by other survey organisations and other National Statistical Institutes. The recommendations are currently being considered by the National Statistics Executive Group

Development of online data collection capability, which has until now been overseen by the Electronic Data Collection programme, is likely in future to depend on integration with Census Transformation's development of an online census capability. The likely take-up of online data collection and the consequent effect on traditional data collection modes is unknown, but will be an important driver affecting strategies to maintain response.

Against this backdrop, Social Survey has an ongoing programme of work to address falling response, which is refreshed and reviewed on a continuous basis. The table below summarises the main actions that have been implemented over the past five years and that are planned to be implemented in the next couple of years. This work falls into five main areas:

Respondent engagement, making information available to respondents, as well as influencing the survey environment and raising general awareness via traditional media and social media channels - an area where the National Statistician can play a particularly valuable role.

Researching survey response and non-response, developing response improvement strategies, understanding the drivers of non-response and estimating the extent of bias caused by non-response

Organisational structure, improving terms of employment, management structures and systems which underpin data collection.

Capability, recruiting, training and managing the performance of interviewers.

Survey design, reducing respondent burden by reviewing questionnaires, using alternative sources of information or providing new ways to respond.

Response Area	Response Initiative	Corporate Objective supported	What have we done? What will we continue to do?	What will we do between 2015-16 and 2017-18?
Respondent Engagement	Respondent Charter	Helpful	Available on website, in telephone interviewing booths and carried by each field interviewer: sets out what the people we ask to take part in our surveys can expect from us, under headings: we will value your time and contribution; we will treat you with respect; we will communicate with you and listen to your views; and we will keep your information secure and confidential.	
	Survey materials	Helpful Professional Efficient	We conducted a major review and refresh of advance letter in 2013: a new-style advance letter, which a split sample trial showed to improve efficiency of contact process, was rolled out to all surveys in 2014. We are using behavioural insight techniques in materials to encourage participation. Materials are available to interviewers for contacting addresses in gated communities.	
	Accessibility	Helpful	Materials available in a range of languages; Equal Chance guidance for including people with impairments in surveys; minicom facility; Braille/large print materials.	Engage with charities representing people with dementia and autism to improve their experience of taking part in a survey and to improve interviewer guidance. All interviewers to become Dementia Friends in 2015.
	Website	Helpful Efficient	Redesigned web pages include dedicated link for survey respondents on ONS front page. Podcasts and videos about taking part in a survey with links via website and QR codes.	Engage with website developers to benefit from opportunities offered by current website redesign. Review
	Traditional and Social Media	Helpful Efficient Innovative	Using all available opportunities (eg 40 years anniversary of the LFS) to raise profile of social surveys and for National Statistician / Director General to thank respondents for their contribution.	Enlist help of Head of Communications by providing her with information about steps we can take to improve the survey environment and acknowledge the role of respondents
	Feedback and	Helpful	Providing channels to collect respondent	Review the collection of satisfaction

	Insight	Professional	feedback, for example, a feedback mailbox, satisfaction questions on audit check calls and monitoring of Twitter comments about surveys and regularly assess the feedback received.	questions on audit check calls
Researching survey response and non-response	Incentives	Professional Efficient Innovative	Trials on a number of surveys e.g. LCF experiments (increasing conditional incentive); FRS trial (targetting incentives to non-contacts); trial of unconditional voucher incentive on Wealth and Assets Survey.	Conduct a national trial of targetted incentives for non-contact cases on FRS (in 2015); consider implications of results of this trial for other surveys.
	Researching local areas	Professional Efficient	In response to a recommendation of the National Statistics Quality Review of the Labour Force Survey (LFS) a dedicated Local Area Response research team was established to explore and address reasons for falling LFS response in individual interviewer areas with the most serious falls since the 2011 Census;	Monitor the success of actions taken as a result of the Local Area Response project and, where necessary, implement additional measures to address response in the interviewer areas identified.
	Calling patterns research	Professional Efficient	Work done by Methodology previously on optimum calling patterns	Provide data to external researchers (via ADRC-E) to research calling patterns, with view to using insights to adapt data collection strategies (for example limiting maximum number of calls)
	Non-response bias	Professional	Census Non-Response Link Study (CNRLS) in 2011 concluded that there was not significant bias in current estimates of LFS	
	Survey-level performance	Professional Efficient Capable	Survey-level management information is available to HQ managers daily so that short- and long-term response issues can be quickly identified and addressed. A monthly Response Update is provided to survey and operations managers to highlight successes and concerns. Response against targets is reported in the interviewers' monthly Comms Pack and regional/team performance against targets is reported on the Interviewer Website, so that all involved are aware of the latest picture on response.	

Organisational Structure	IT infrastructure	Capable Professional	Improvements are being made to the existing IT infrastructure to mitigate against the risks of using aging technology to support data collection activities. A new Call Scheduler was introduced to Telephone Operations and improvements are being made to the stability of systems underpinning LFS data collection. Have also initiated a project to deliver improved communications with remote working interviewers - a product of this will be more timely survey information that will allow for more responsive designs.	Roll out of new LFS data collection systems (via Social Data Collection Transformation Project) From late 2015, broadband to be rolled out to interviewers Introduction of tablets for IPS interviewing Upgrading telephony systems (potential area for alignment with Census)
	Interviewer contracts	Capable	Improvements in and harmonisation of terms and conditions following on from change in interviewer status to Civil Servants. A Data Collection Review was completed in 2014 to establish the optimum sustainable model for future data collection.	Act on decisions made by National Statistics Executive Group, which is currently considering recommendations in the Data Collection Review report. Implement recommendations of Health and Safety Review to improve safeguarding of remote workers (which should help to improve recruitment and retention of interviewers)
Capability	Interviewer training	Capable Professional	A strategic approach has been adopted to the training of social survey interviewers, with an eight week structured Interviewer Learning Programme for all new interviewers. This contributed to reduced turnover.	Review of Interviewer Learning Programme being conducted by external consultant
		Capable Professional	Achieving Cooperation Training (ACT) has been rolled out to all interviewers, based on ART (Avoiding Refusal Training) developed by ONS in conjunction with Bob Groves, University of Michigan. Training materials on separate modules - such as Know your Area; Selling the Survey; and Influence - are available to FMs to use at Support Group Meetings.	
		Capable Efficient	Achieving Contact Effectively (ACE) training module was developed - along with the Calling Checklist - to promote better patterns of working to improve both contact rates and the representativeness of data collected. The ACE module was rerun at SGMs in 2014. Improved	

			MI on interviewer calling patterns was made available to FMs in 2014.	
		Capable	Gathered and provided interviewers with examples of use of survey data by third sector organisations for use in doorstep persuasion. Provide regular media summaries for interviewers of how survey data are used.	Produce 'infographic' materials for interviewers to use in doorstep persuasion
	Interviewer performance	Capable	Large improvements to the provision of performance metrics for interviewers. Under-performance is managed using ONS corporate procedures. Metrics on quality, as well as just response (eg calling patterns reports).	Review use of improved MI reports for FMs
Survey Design	Response modes	Helpful Efficient	The Electronic Data Collection programme is developing the capacity to offer online completion of the LFS.	In May 2015, we will do a pilot electronic data collection exercise on the Labour Force Survey with 2000 households. Further developments in electronic data collection take lessons learnt from this pilot into account and will be closely aligned with Census developments. Exploring possibility of offering online response option for Opinions and Lifestyle Survey (outside of the EDC programme).
	Adaptive design	Efficient Innovative	A model is being developed to use information already known about LFS addresses from their responses in previous waves and calls received in the current wave to better allocate limited calling resources in Telephone Operations. The method could prioritise different groups of cases depending on whether the aim is to minimise costs or to reduce non-response bias.	Continue work to develop the model. If it is considered promising, an adaptive design will be implemented in the third quarter of 2015. A Lean Six Sigma project is underway to improve the process for reissues.
	Use of administrative data	Helpful Efficient	The Administrative Data programme is exploring the use of administrative data to fulfill data requirements currently met by surveys and so reduce survey length and respondent burden.	
	Questionnaire reviews	Helpful Efficient	Most surveys have been reviewed with key stakeholders to see whether they are fit for purpose. Questions have been removed as a	Continue to review questionnaire length and content for all surveys.

			result of this exercise. Aiming to reduce survey length where possible.	
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Annexes and Further Information

A	Table summarising ONS social surveys and link to key facts about social survey interviewing
B	Chart showing long run trends in response rates (for first wave) of ONS social surveys
C	Chart showing non-contact and refusal as a proportion of non-response (for LFS first wave)

Annex A: ONS Social surveys (link to key facts about social surveys [Notes Link](#))

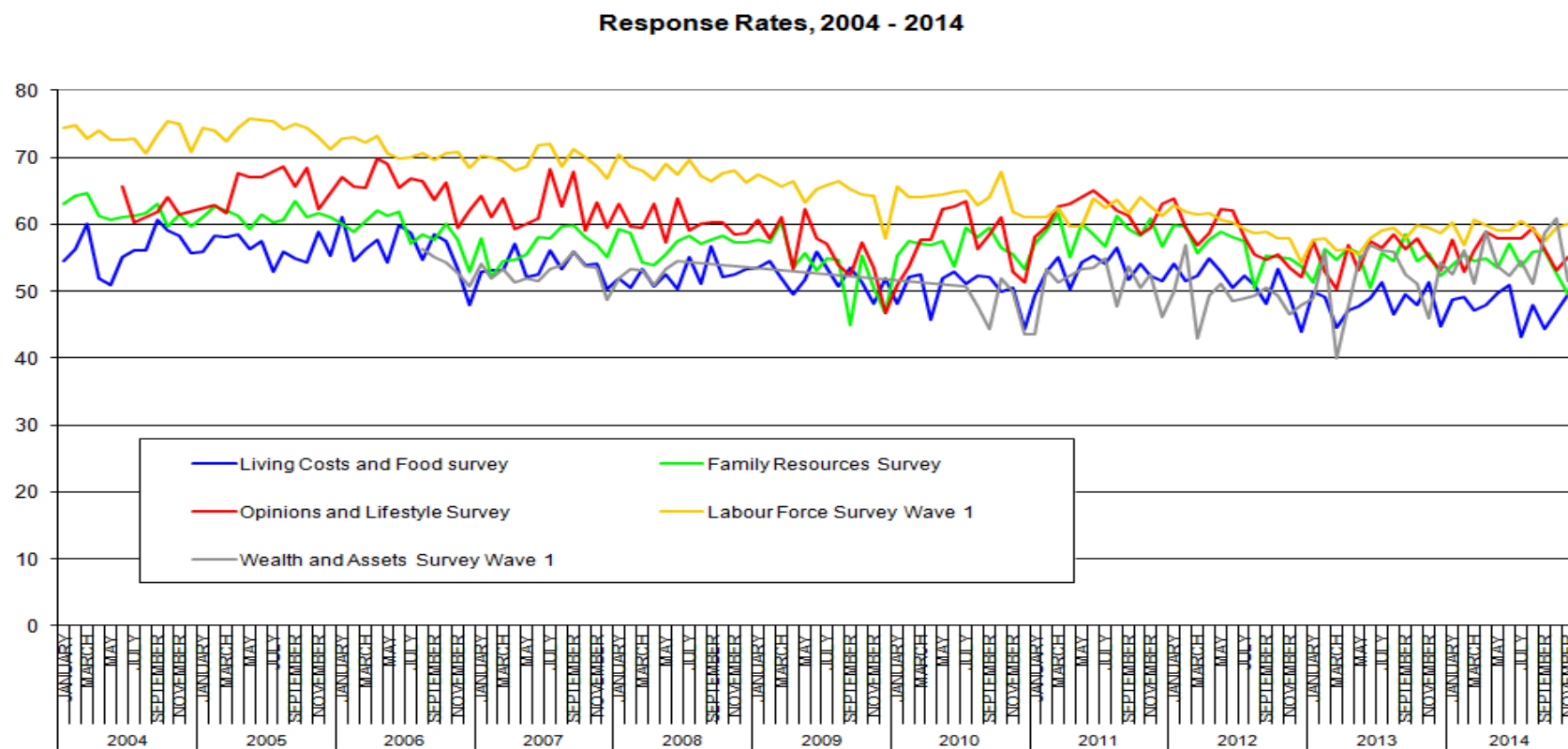
Survey	Approximate number of sampled addresses, 2014	Number of waves	Mode of data collection*	Average response rate for latest 12 months (%)	Other comments
Labour Force Survey (LFS) Wave 1 Waves 2-5	355,000 67,000 288,000	Five quarterly waves	CAPI/CATI	Wave 1 59 Waves 2-5 45	
Labour Force Survey Boost (LLFS) Wave 1 Waves 2-5	187,000 43,000 144,000	Four annual waves	CAPI/CATI	Wave 1 55 Waves 2-5 46	
Living Costs and Food Survey (LCF)	12,000	Single wave only	CAPI	48	Includes completion of an expenditure diary
Opinions and Lifestyle Survey (OPN)	16,000	Single wave only	CAPI	57	Data collection reduced to two out of three months in June 2014
Wealth and Assets Survey (WAS) Boost sample Main sample	17,000 4,000 13,000	Currently in fourth wave	CAPI	Boost sample 56 Main sample 67	A 'boost' sample (new cohort) was included in the current wave
Family Resources Survey (FRS)	14,000	Single wave only	CAPI	56	Funded by Department for Work and Pensions. ONS successfully bid for new contract from 2015-16, with NatCen
Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SLC)	9,000	Three waves	CAPI	75	Respondents sampled from FRS participants
International Passenger Survey** (IPS)	375,000	Single interview	PAPI	Approximately 80 per cent	
Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW)	50,000	Single wave only	CAPI	Approximately 75 per cent	Data collection outsourced to TNS-BMRB

* CAPI = Computer-Assisted Personal Interviewing (i.e. face-to-face interviewing); CATI = Computer-Assisted Telephone Interviewing; PAPI = Paper And Pen Interviewing

** Respondents to the IPS are sampled on a 1 in x basis as they come through arrivals, departures or according to a preset route through a ferry

or Eurostar train.

Annex B: Long-run trends in response rates for ONS social surveys (wave one only)



Annex C: Refusals and Non-Contacts as a Proportion of non-response (LFS wave one only)

