

## 5.4. Quality

### 5.4.1. Response rates

Response rates across surveys have been decreasing over the last 10-15 years (although seem to have stabilised on a lot of surveys over the last 3-4 years). This is due in part to the public being less willing to give up their time to take part in a survey, as well as changing working patterns and lifestyle behaviours that makes it more difficult to make contact with potential respondents.

Although such a decrease has been observed across many social surveys in Great Britain, response rates on ONS surveys seem to have decreased over the last 10 years in a pattern that has not always been seen on other surveys where the data collection is not undertaken by ONS (see Figure 3.4.1)<sup>12</sup>. This figure compares some of the large scale random probability continuous ad-hoc surveys conducted in Great Britain.

It is hard to assess with certainty the reasons behind such patterns. Survey specific characteristics, such as topic, respondent burden, use of incentives, and length of fieldwork are all well-known factors that have a significant impact on response rates.

One big difference between the LFS and the other surveys in Figure 3.4.1 is that LFS does not employ 'extended efforts' (usually referred to as 'reissues') to try and boost response. These extended efforts include making additional attempts to persuade sample members who initially refuse to take part, and making additional attempts to try to contact sample members who have not been contacted after normal field procedures have been completed.

A couple of decades ago, survey organisations only used to implement extended efforts when a survey was unexpectedly suffering from an unusually low response rate. Now, however, such efforts tend to be commonplace and can account for a sizeable proportion of the field budget. A recent ISER working paper<sup>3</sup> demonstrated that for three NatCen surveys the proportion of total interviews gained from extended efforts increased between 1997 and 2007. For the Health Survey for England it increased from 18.6% to 27.3%, for the British Social Attitudes Survey it increased from 21.0% to 42.2% and for the Family Resources Survey it increased from 15.8% to 20.3%.

Due to the necessary short fieldwork period for the LFS there is not the opportunity to make these extended efforts. Given the increased dependency of other surveys on extended efforts it is perhaps not surprising that the LFS has experienced a larger fall in response compared with other surveys.

However, ONS still appears to lag behind other UK data organisations in some fieldwork trends. In particular, ONS non-contact levels are particularly high (between 6-8%) compared to other data collection agencies (normally in the 3-4% range). As contact rates should be immune from factors such as topic and interview length, this points towards issues with either the availability of

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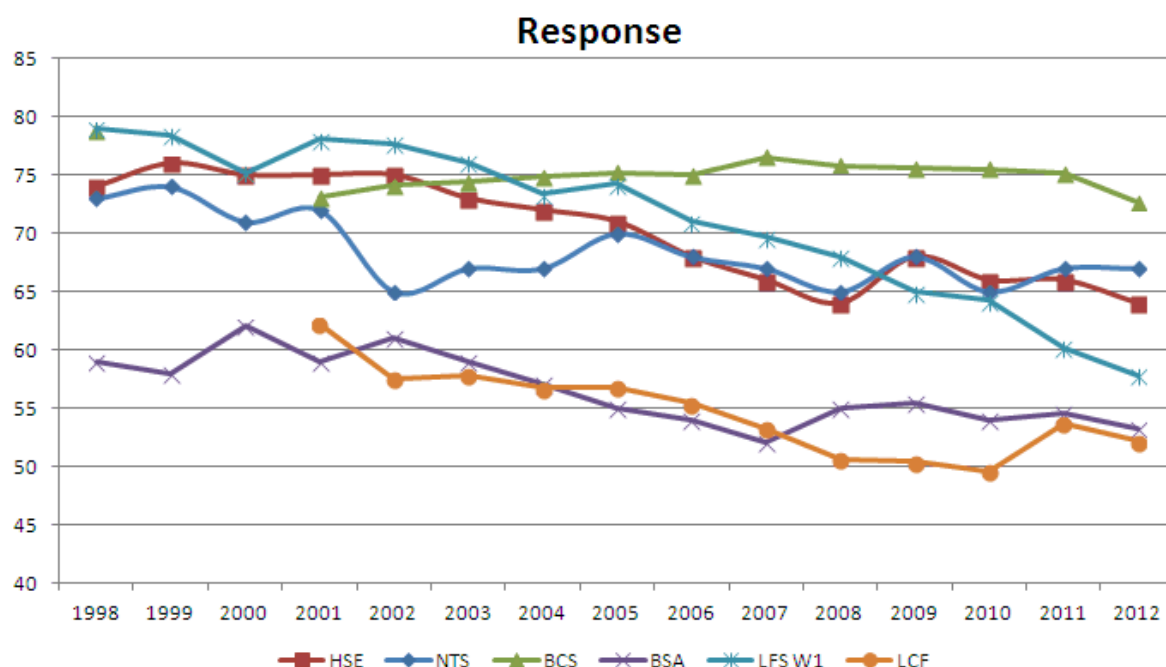
<sup>1</sup> HSE, NTS and BSA fieldwork is conducted by NatCen Social Research. BCS fieldwork is conducted by TNS-BMRB. LFS and LCF fieldwork is conducted by ONS.

<sup>2</sup> For LFS, the steep decrease observed in 2011 and 2012 is due, at least in part, to the initial allocation of a higher proportion of cases to telephone rather than face-to-face interviewing. This was reversed in July 2013 and response rates seem to have in part recovered up to around 60%.

<sup>3</sup> P.Lynn et al. Extended field efforts to reduce the risk of non-response bias: Do they pay off? Institute for Social & Economic Research working paper no. 2011-24, September 2011.

interviewers to cover the work, or interviewer working patterns such as proportion of hours spent working in the evening and at weekends.

**Figure 5.4.1. Historical response rates across main national representative household surveys**



Discussions with HQ field management staff seem to indicate that part of the reason ONS tends to achieve lower response rates is due to capacity constraints. As shown in section 5.1.1, ONS face-to-face fieldforce has contracted over time. Because of recruitment constraints and risks (see section 5.1.4 and 5.2.1) temporary increases in workload tend to be managed through the use of excess hours.

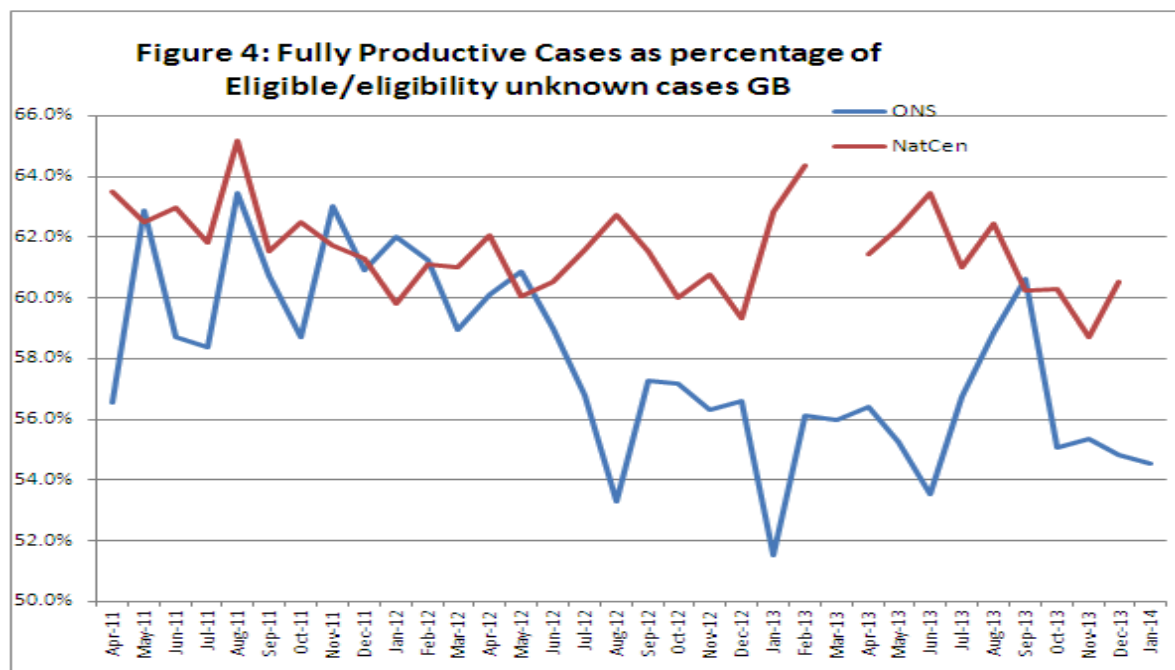
While these arrangements have in the past guaranteed full coverage of on-going and ad-hoc work, some evidence suggests that this may have in some instances negatively impacted on survey response rates. Analysis of FRS<sup>4</sup> response rates (see Figure 5.4.2) shows a steep decrease in response rates around the summer of 2012, coinciding with the beginning of fieldwork for the ad-hoc Town Travel Survey.

While FRS response rates recovered by summer 2013, the start of fieldwork for the Child Dental Health survey in August 2013 appears to have had another knock on-effect. Survey managers commented how this could have been due to interviewers not having enough time to make as many calls (to make contact and/or convert circumstantial refusals) as previously due to the additional TTS and CDH workload. A Field manager also commented that while TTS could be allocated, at the time it did stretch capacity in some of the areas where it was conducted, with risks to data quality due to over allocation. Further detailed analysis of response in the areas where TTS and CDH were

<sup>4</sup> Among all surveys, FRS is likely to have been impacted the most. This may be a legacy of the survey priority list which existed in the past, which placed FRS in the lower priority group. While such a list does not longer exist, FRS may still be perceived by some as a lower priority survey when it comes to allocating interviewing resources.

conducted will be required before making any firm conclusions. Sub-optimal calling patterns may also contribute to ONS response rates. As discussed in section 5.3.1., calling patterns are complex to assess and monitor and they are also interrelated to capacity constraints.

**Figure 5.4.2: FRS response rates**



## 7. Telephone Operations

### 7.4 Quality

#### 7.4.1 Response rates

Response rates across surveys have been decreasing over time. This is due in part to the public being less willing to give up their time to take part in a survey, as well as changing working patterns and lifestyle behaviours that makes it more difficult to make contact with potential respondents. Figure 1 demonstrates response rates over the previous 3.5 years of telephone fieldwork on Waves 2-5 of the LFS (data for telephone interviewing is not available before January 2011).

**Figure 1: Historical response rates for telephone interviewing on Waves 2-5 of the Labour Force Survey**

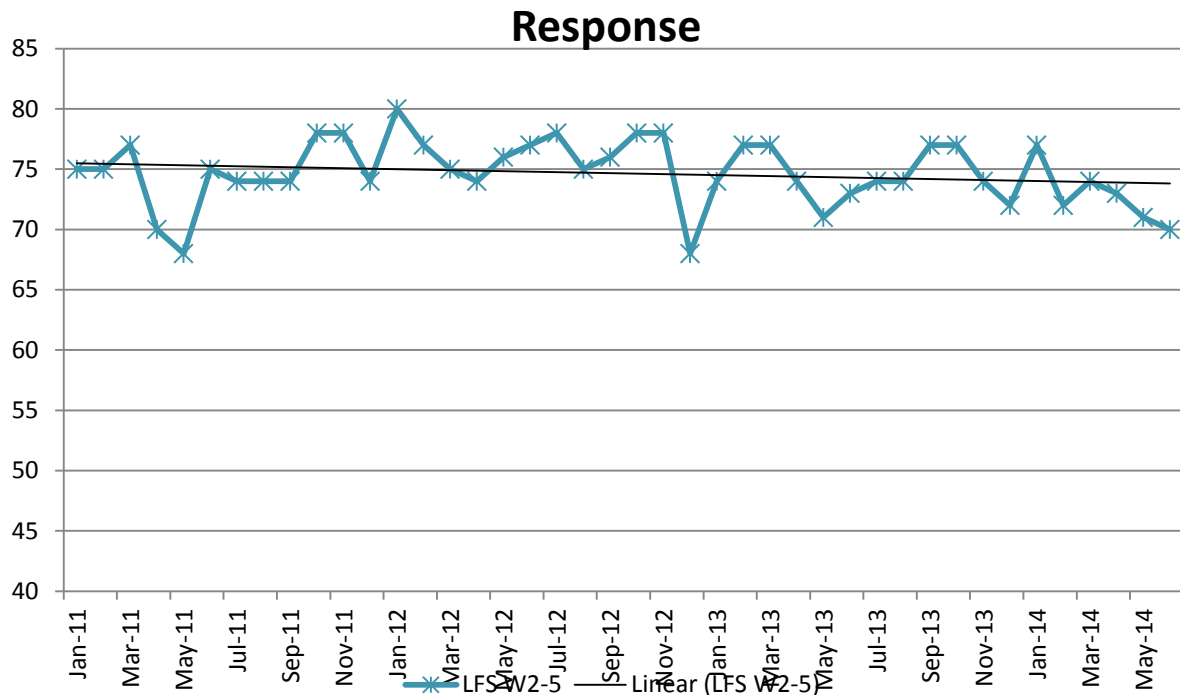


Figure one shows that in recent years the response rate for the majority of LFS work that Telephone Operations undertake has remained around 75% with only a gradual overall decline in response over this period.

Work on the LFS is the only relevant evidence when assessing whether current response rates are being maintained or improved as the rest of the work of Telephone Operations (TO) involves either adhoc surveys or pieces of work where response rates are not a consideration (such as the work to support the Audit team).

## 8. International Passenger Survey

### 8.4 Quality

#### 8.4.1 Response rates

Response rates across household surveys have generally been decreasing over time. This is due in part to the public being less willing to give up their time to take part in a survey. However, the response rate over time on the IPS has remained relatively stable at around 80%. This may be due to the areas where the IPS works (typically they are close to Border Force), the fact that passengers are relatively compliant with authorities, that IPS interviewers are in uniform and that there is a short questionnaire.

Given that the refusal rate is so low (around 2%), any adverse affect on response is likely to result from an increase in the proportion of passengers who are unapproachable or where passenger flows become faster than the available number of interviewers. It is possible that refusal rates could increase, but there is nothing to indicate that this is likely to change in the short term.

Although there are many issues within the IPS fieldforce at the current time (such as staffing levels), IPS interviewers at the group discussions seemed to be reasonably motivated, appreciated the diversity and variety of the work, and the opportunity to contribute to improvements and have their say.

## **10. Crime Survey for England and Wales**

### **10.4 Quality**

ONS gets a good service from TNS-BMRB who has maintained a response rate of around 75% consistently since 2001 at a time when many survey response rates have declined. This good service is evidenced by TNS-BMRB winning the new contract to collect data even though we understand that it was not the cheapest bid.