



Consultation

Community Life Survey: Development of content and methodology for future survey years

Overview

The Survey

The Community Life Survey was commissioned by the Cabinet Office in summer 2012 and aims to track the latest trends and developments across areas that are key to encouraging social action and empowering communities. It provides robust and nationally representative Official Statistics to inform and direct policy and underpin further research and debate on building stronger communities. The 2012-13 survey was delivered by TNS BMRB and involved approximately 6,600 face to face interviews of adults in England throughout the period August 2012 – April 2013.

In addition to commissioning the survey in 2012-13, the Cabinet Office sought to develop the content and methodology, to maximise cost effectiveness and value:

- **The development work – content**

Due to tight timescales in initiating the survey, the initial survey questionnaire was largely based on a reduced version of the Citizenship Survey, and Cabinet Office worked with survey users to define and develop further questions in line with emerging policies and issues. User group meetings and a written consultation helped to identify the types of additional questions that would be useful for survey users. The contractor, in conjunction with the survey team, then developed a set of questions based on this information that went through several rounds of cognitive testing. These questions were added to the survey in Quarters 3 and 4 of the 2012-13 survey and in the 2013-14 survey.

- **The development work - methodology**

While costs were reduced as far as possible in 2012-13, the approach of face to face interviews remains expensive and resource intensive. Given the significant appetite for the survey data and the importance of this dataset, the Cabinet Office embarked on development work to explore the feasibility of delivering the survey through online methods, offering the opportunity to improve convenience for users and pursue efficiency savings, while determining if sample size and quality can be maintained.

- As such, alongside the 2012-13 face to face survey, the Cabinet Office commissioned TNS BMRB to carry out development work, to test the feasibility of a

random probability web survey. The experiment was one of the largest tests of online methodology, using a random probability sample, in the UK, covering 6,700 addresses with opportunities to complete the survey by post also offered. Results from this test were broadly positive, showing lower, but viable response rates, good data quality and a similar respondent profile to face to face, but further exploration was needed to understand the differences that mode of data collection can make. Further details are included below and within Annex B.

2013-14 survey approach

The encouraging findings uncovered by the web test in 2012-13 indicate that a web methodology could be a viable approach to ensuring the longer term future of the survey. The results from the original test were not available in time to allow consultation before the 2013-14 survey year, and as such the test is continuing throughout this year to gather further information and allow time for a full consultation before any potential switches in methodology in 2014-15. The approach in 2013-14 includes running a reduced sample face to face survey (1,250 per quarter, 5,000 in 2013-14 survey year) alongside a web survey (2,000 per quarter, 8,000 in the 2013-14 survey year). Given the feedback received in previous consultations, the survey results will be published on an annual basis. The findings will provide information needed to assess the viability of the web survey and to understand the differences that may occur in data collected through different modes as well as providing robust datasets for analysis.

Future approach (2014-15)

Given budget constraints and a drive for efficiency, our proposed approach is move to a web survey (with postal surveys available at request) in 2014-15, incorporating learning from the testing in 2012-13 and 2013-14. This approach will allow larger sample sizes within a set budget and therefore a greater ability to complete more detailed breakdowns compared to a survey using face to face interviews. A sample size of 8,000 per year has been proposed and given feedback from previous consultations, moving to reporting on an annual basis has been suggested.

Development work – Changing content

Following consultation, the Cabinet Office added a number of key measures and topics to increase the value of the dataset for users. The main measures added in 2012-13 and 2013-14 include:

- Internet use
- Social capital – capacity of social networks and loneliness
- Neighbourly interactions
- Social action – people coming together on an unpaid basis to take part in a project or event
- Satisfaction with local amenities
- Barriers to volunteering and reasons for stopping
- Charitable giving – local vs. national

Please see Annex A for the Quarter 1 2013-14 questionnaire.

Development work – Web test findings

The key findings from the development work, conducted alongside the face to face survey in 2012-13, are listed below and further detail is included in Annex B.

Overall: The findings from the web development work were encouraging, but do indicate that if the proposed approach of switching to a web survey goes ahead, there will be a break in the time series and a new baseline will be established, as mode differences will not allow data users to directly compare web collected data to data collected through face to face interviews.

Incentives and response rate: Incentives were found to increase the response rate to just over 20%, but not to the levels of face to face methodologies (60% achieved in 2012-13 Community Life Survey). Response rates increased to nearly 40% when a postal questionnaire was included, but a shorter questionnaire is needed for postal surveys and so data collection is limited.

Profile of respondents: Adding a postal questionnaire increased the response rate but actually makes the survey less representative of the general population in terms of profile. There are a number of demographic biases in the web only sample including bias towards those who are white, degree educated, working, home-owning and childfree. Similar biases are found in the face to face interview sample. Demographic biases can be eliminated by weighting, but sample bias will remain.

Data quality: There was no evidence to suggest people were rushing the questionnaire and evidence suggested people used the same level of care to complete the questions in the face to face interviews. More negative findings include: a higher dropout rate, a quarter of

respondents appearing to be the wrong individual for the sample and more 'don't know' and refusal answers. The Cabinet Office are working with the contractor to attempt to address the negative effects on data quality associated with this mode through further testing in 2013-14, with the help of methodological experts.

Comparison of findings with face to face data : A subset of variables from the full face to face Community Life Survey were used in the testing process. Out of the variables used, only a third of web only estimates differed significantly from face to face estimates (using a £10 conditional incentive). Weighting the data and the increased response rate of including the postal questionnaire makes little difference to estimates. It has been suggested that, due to social desirability, more accurate estimates could potentially be recorded through online methodologies where the respondents answer questions without the pressure of an interviewer. However, it must be noted that differences in responses between web and face to face methods will cause a disruption to the current time series for all survey measures with the adoption of a web only (with postal request) methodology. Running the two surveys in parallel this year will provide more information on the nature of the differences between modes.

Preliminary conclusions: The experiment showed that online methodologies are a viable approach, but more testing would be needed to understand issues associated with a change in mode. It was therefore necessary to continue testing the approach in 2013-14, to inform future survey years if commissioned.

Consultation on future approach

The Cabinet Office invite views on the proposed future approach, including content and outputs of the survey, how often reporting should take place (quarterly, annually, biannually), the online methodology and the opportunities and implications a potential change in methodology might have, given the results from the development work. The results of this consultation will influence future waves of the Community Life Survey (beyond 2013-14 if commissioned) and all responses will be considered in light of the intended aims and objectives of the survey, financial budget, budgeted questionnaire length, timing and coherence constraints. A response to this consultation will be issued in due course.

Deadline for Response: Friday 14th February 2014

How to respond: Please send responses (preferably by email) to: communitylife@cabinet-office.gsi.gov.uk. Please make reference to the consultation questions below in your response.

The Community Life Survey Team, Cabinet Office, 4th Floor Blue zone, 1 Horse Guards Road, London, SW1A 2HQ.

Consultation questions

1. **Content** (questionnaire in Annex A)

- 1a. Which question sets are of most and least value to your organisation and which sets do you rely on?
- 1b. Are there any questions sets that you believe need further development and in what way?
- 1c. What are the survey results used for within your organisation?
- 1d. What kinds of breakdowns do you find useful within the data (e.g. level of area or demographic breakdown) and what are these measures and breakdowns used for?
- 1e. To what extent do you conduct longitudinal analysis using timelines compared to exploratory, in-year analysis?

2. **Outputs**

- 2a. Do you use the outputs produced by the Cabinet Office (topics reports, posters etc) or do you prefer to conduct your own analysis once the data is archived?
- 2b. What format would be most useful for survey outputs? (E.g. posters, in-depth topic reports, infographics, shorter reports) and which have you used the most when looking at 2012-13 data?
- 2c. Would an annual reporting cycle meet your analytical needs?

3. **Methodology**

- 3a. What advantages are there to your organisation in keeping the sample size at 8,000?
- 3b. What impact will changing methodology for data collection, and the subsequent break in time series, have for your organisation (if any)?
- 3c. Do you have any specific concerns around the online methodology and is there any further information or testing that could take place to help reassure you?
- 3d. What support and technical advice may help you adapt to any change in methodology?
- 3e. Are you aware of other organisations/teams working on switching to online methodologies? If so could you provide contact information?