



Consultation response

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

Summary

The Cabinet Office conducted a consultation on the future of the Community Life Survey from November 2013 to February 2014. As part of the current drive for cost savings, as well as our 'digital by default' approach, we have been investigating a switch to an online survey. Nine responses were received, and as this was a technical consultation, they were all from current survey users.

Respondents acknowledged that an online survey would lead to substantial cost savings, allowing for a larger sample size and thereby improving the value of the data. However, they expressed concerns about a break in the time series which users rely upon to conduct longitudinal analysis. There were also concerns about whether an online sample would be representative. Following the Department's consideration of these responses, we decided to adopt the following approach:

- To further test the online survey, including investigating any issues of sample bias. This will allow us to make an informed decision about the future of the survey.
- To archive our experimental online data. This will allow users to conduct their own analyses and draw further conclusions on the viability of this approach.
- To continue with a face-to-face survey until full evidence about the online survey has been considered by users in a future consultation. The need to make reductions in public spending has led to a decrease in sample size in 2014/15. An online survey would allow us to obtain a much larger sample size for the same costs, which could be an acceptable trade-off vs. the loss of the time series.

Introduction

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.

In addition to commissioning the face-to-face survey in 2012-13, the Cabinet Office sought to develop the content and methodology in order to maximise cost effectiveness and value by developing a random probability web survey. Results from this test were broadly positive but further exploration was needed to understand the differences that mode of data collection can make. Further testing was therefore carried out in 2013-14. Full background to the development work can be found in Annex B, and details of the initial results can be found here:

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/325872/Annex_B_-_Summary_of_web_experiment_findings_2012-13.pdf

This consultation invited views on the future approach, such as content, outputs and the opportunities and implications a potential methodology may have.

Questions

In order to understand how best to deliver the survey in the future, responses to the following questions were sought:

1. Content

- 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?

Summary of responses

In total, 9 written responses were received, from government departments, charities and academia. Since this was a technical consultation, all responses came from existing survey data users. A full list of respondents can be found in Annex A.

1. Content

1a. Respondents valued different question sets, and each set was mentioned in more than one response. The question set that was referenced the most was the Community set (six times), while Identity and Social Networks was mentioned the least (twice).

1b. Both NCVO and DCLG suggested further questioning on social action, although Civil Exchange felt that the term was confusing. NCVO was also interested in further questioning on volunteering, including employer supported volunteering and international volunteering, while DCLG were interested in further exploring decisions about what is built in people's local area. One respondent from the UK Longitudinal Studies Centre also suggested further measures such as tolerance towards different community groups.

In terms of analysis, DCLG were keen to break down the data by housing tenure. Also, a respondent from the UK Longitudinal Studies Centre questioned the response options for two measures (MARS and SID).

Response: We are keen to continue optimising the question sets, and value the suggestions put forward here. While the survey cost and length largely restrict the addition of extra questions, it is more straightforward to develop the response options. We therefore welcome the NCVO's suggestion to discuss future questions further. Also to note that we monitor 'other' responses from the survey in case they reveal options we have not previously considered.

With regards to the phrasing of the MARS and SID measures, these are ONS harmonised questions, and we are therefore unable to modify them but happy to highlight these issues.

1c. The results are predominantly used to inform policy; NCVO and Civil Exchange stated how vital the survey is to monitoring volunteering, charitable giving and the success of the Big Society initiative. Other respondents use the results for academic research and to provide context for their work.

1d. Geographic breakdowns were considered particularly useful, although granular geographical analysis is not possible due to the sample size. A range of demographics is also used to look at the profiles of people involved, including socio-economic differences.

1e. Longitudinal analysis was considered essential for informing policies, and although some users conducted in-year analysis, this was considered less informative.

Response: The dependence on longitudinal analysis will be a key consideration for the potential switch to an online survey, as we will need to consider the costs of disrupting the time series.

2. Outputs

2a. Some respondents valued the data tables and topic reports, while others preferred to undertake their own analyses. The South West Foundation and Civil Exchange both requested more reports.

Response: We are keen to continue providing as much value to users as possible, and we will aim to increase the number of outputs in 2014-15 where possible.

2b. Respondents were split on their preferred output format. NCVO valued the data tables, while the Welsh Government and Greater London Authority Intelligence Unit relied on infographics.

Response: We will continue to provide a range of outputs in order to meet all users' needs.

2c. There was little demand for quarterly reporting, with most respondents stating that annual reporting would meet their needs, although DCLG and Civil Exchange requested a 6-monthly reporting cycle to help inform policy.

3. Methodology

3a. Respondents were keen to maintain the sample size in order to allow sub-group analysis (i.e. region, ethnicity). NCVO and South West Foundation were concerned that an online survey would bias the survey sample, although a respondent from the UK Longitudinal Studies Centre argued that an online survey would allow a larger sample size to be collected for smaller costs. South West Foundation raised further concerns about the small sample sizes for regional analysis, but others felt the current sample size was sufficient.

Response: We fully appreciate concerns about a reduced sample size. Budgetary constraints mean it is not possible to maintain the current sample face-to-face size, which has been reduced to 2,000 in 2014/15, and this is the main reason we are testing the viability of a (cheaper) online survey.

3b. NCVO and DCLG were concerned about another break in time series (following the initial break post-Citizenship Survey), as this would impede tracking key policy indicators over time. However, Greater London Authority Intelligence Unit said that if the break led to a long-term improvement in the data then it might be worthwhile.

3c. Respondents had the following main concerns:

- Response rates are lower for the online survey
- In around 25% of cases, the wrong person in the household completed the survey
- Demographic bias
- Break in time series
- Postal questionnaire differs from online questionnaire due to reduced length

Overall, respondents felt it was not clear whether differences in results from the online and face-to-face survey resulted from sample or mode differences.

Response: We appreciate the concerns raised and have taken steps to try and address these. First, we have tested asking all adults within a household to complete the survey in order to avoid the wrong person responding. We are also asking previous face-to-face respondents to complete the survey online, in order to disentangle sample and mode effects.

3d. Respondents were keen to see technical reports for the online methodology, and called for the data to be archived so that users can run their own analyses. A respondent from the UK Longitudinal Studies Centre and NatCen both requested training materials on how to adjust for mode differences in the analyses. DCLG stated that this methodology would need to be independently assessed.

Response: We will shortly be archiving the 2013/14 web survey, which can be downloaded from the UK Data Service along with the technical report.

All of our online development work will continue to be independently assessed by our technical advisory group, and we are keen to implement (or join) a working group to discuss the switch to an online survey.

Outcome

In order to further investigate issues raised about the online survey, we are continuing to test it alongside the face-to-face sample. In particular, we are testing whether the differences seen between the different methodologies are due to sample or mode effects. Further testing will ensure that we make an informed decision about the future of the survey, and provide further information about sample bias concerns. Prior to choosing between online and face-to-face methodologies we will run a consultation.

Annex A

List of respondents

Name of organisation	Type of organisation
Civil Exchange	Voluntary and other organisations
Department for Communities and Local Government	Central government
Greater London Authority Intelligence Unit	Local government
NatCen	Researchers/academics
National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO)	Voluntary and other organisations
National Survey for Wales, Welsh Government	Central government
Researcher, UK Longitudinal Studies Centre	Researchers/academics
South West Foundation	Voluntary and other organisations
UK Longitudinal Studies Centre	Researchers/academics

Annex B

Background to the Community Life 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. Full details of this development work can be found here:

[https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/325872/Annex B - Summary of web experiment findings 2012-13.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/325872/Annex_B_-_Summary_of_web_experiment_findings_2012-13.pdf)

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 continued 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.