



Department  
for Transport

# Response to statistical consultation on the collection of short walk data in the National Travel Survey

December 2014

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# Executive summary

1. Following the public consultation on the collection of short walk data in the National Travel Survey, the Department for Transport has concluded that the current short walk day 7 collection methodology will be retained in the 2015 survey.
2. In 2013, an experiment was conducted to test whether there is a difference in recording short walks on day 1 of the travel diary instead of day 7. This experiment showed that short walks were under-reported when collected on day 7 instead of day 1.
3. The Department for Transport accepts the results of the short walk experiment but on balance believe the risk of disruption from making an immediate change to the travel diary without further research outweighs the short-term gains from improvements to data quality from switching to day 1 collection.
4. To address the weaknesses in data collection highlighted by the short walk experiment additional research, covering three areas, will be conducted in 2015.
5. First, NTS data will be compared with other comparable travel surveys. Second, further experiments will be run in 2015 with the aim of understanding more about the collection of short walks data in the NTS. Third, we will seek advice from Office for National Statistics methodological service on the additional research planned for 2015.
6. A review, incorporating the results of the additional research, will be published in autumn 2015 and will set out the short walk collection method for NTS 2016.

# 1. Introduction

## Purpose of this document

- 1.1** The public consultation on the collection of short walk data in the National Travel Survey ran from 24 July 2014 to 4 September 2014. This document summarises the responses received to that consultation and sets out the response and next steps from the Department for Transport.

## Consultation overview

- 1.2** The National Travel Survey (NTS) is a primary evidence source for forming policy within the Department for Transport (DfT).
- 1.3** NTS walking data is collected from respondents using a seven-day travel diary. Short walks are currently collected on day 7 of the seven-day travel diary<sup>1</sup>.
- 1.4** In 2013, the NTS team carried out an experiment looking at the timing for collection of short walk data in the seven-day travel diary. The aim of the experiment was to test whether there is a difference in recording short walks on day 1 of the travel diary instead of day 7.
- 1.5** The experiment showed that short walks were under-reported when recorded on day 7 of the travel diary instead of day 1. When reporting on day 1, 31% of respondents recorded a short walk compared with 23% of respondents on day 7.
- 1.6** This single experiment was carried out at one point in time but we have no reason to reject the notion that the NTS has historically under-reported short walks and as a result the total number of walks.
- 1.7** The consultation detailed options for changing the collection of short walks data in the NTS.

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<sup>1</sup> Short walks: walks 50 yards or more and under one mile.

**1.8** The consultation document is available at:  
[https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/336429/short-walks-consultation.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/336429/short-walks-consultation.pdf)

## 2. Summary of responses to the consultation

- 2.1 The department is very grateful to those that took the time to respond to this consultation. The considered manner of the responses will ensure that DfT continues to maintain the statistical quality of its official statistics.
- 2.2 A total of 17 responses to this consultation were received, the majority from transport consultants and academics. A list of respondents can be found in annex A.
- 2.3 The summary of responses is structured according to the three consultation questions.

### **Question 1: what use do you make of the walking data in the NTS at present?**

- 2.4 Nearly all respondents said they used NTS walking data to analyse trends in personal travel behaviour in terms of the number of trips, distance travelled and time spent travelling. Those respondents that did not use walking data directly used the data indirectly as part of mode share analysis.
- 2.5 The majority of consultation respondents were transport consultants and this came through in the reported uses of walking data in the NTS.
- 2.6 Transport consultants used walking data extensively as part of their work on transport modelling, demand forecasting and appraisal. Even where the focus of transport planning was on a different mode of travel, for example public transport, walking data was still crucial to the analysis as the first stage in a public transport trip.
- 2.7 For local government, walking data was used in annual budget calculations and bids to DfT's Local Sustainable Transport Fund. One respondent noted the growing importance of walking data because of the increased emphasis on sustainable travel.

- 2.8 One respondent also highlighted the importance of NTS data for formulating a local area walking strategy and policies to support improvements to the local walking environment.
- 2.9 Wider uses of walking data by local government such as transport scheme forecasting were similar to transport consultants.
- 2.10 Outside of general transport research, academics used walking data for monitoring trends in active travel and wider public health issues including analysis of injury and fatality data.
- 2.11 The last group of respondents was charities supporting sustainable travel. These respondents used NTS walking data to inform policy development, develop campaigns and provide evidence for funding bids.
- 2.12 One respondent noted that NTS walking data in its current form was not being used because certain types of walking trips were outside the scope of the survey. However, they would make more use of the NTS walking data if the coverage of walking trips in the survey was widened.

**Question 2: Which, if any, of the proposed options presented do you think is the best for the NTS to implement from 2015 and why?**

- 2.13 The majority of respondents supported option 4, which proposed changing to day 1 collection of short walks from the start of the 2015 survey year and the calculation of a weight to uplift historic results (see table 2.1).
- 2.14 Option 3 received the second highest support and also proposed a change to day 1 collection but no calculation of a weight to uplift historic results (leading to a discontinuity in the time series from 2015).
- 2.15 Responses to question 1 of the consultation showed the importance to users of walking data in the NTS. As such there was a broad recognition that short walks data should continue to be collected in the NTS with no respondent supporting option 5.



**Table 2.1: Responses by option**

<b>Option 1a:</b> retain current day 7 collection methodology and re-run experiment in five years	0
<b>Option 1b:</b> retain current day 7 collection methodology and re-run experiment in the 2015 survey	1
<b>Option 2:</b> Retain current day 7 collection methodology but develop weighting to correct for under-reporting	0
<b>Option 3:</b> Change to a day 1 collection methodology	4
<b>Option 4:</b> Change to a day 1 collection methodology and calculate a weight to uplift historic results	8
<b>Option 5:</b> Do not collect short walks on any day, i.e. stop day 7 collection	0
No preferred option indicated	4
<b>Total responses</b>	<b>17</b>

- 2.16** Taking the support for option 3 and option 4 together, the majority of respondents supported an immediate change to day 1 collection of short walks.
- 2.17** Respondents stated that only these two options acknowledged the problem of short walk under-reporting on day 7 and took steps to correct the collection methodology by changing the recording day to day 1.
- 2.18** Respondents who supported option 3 or option 4 did so as it was not viable to persist with a day 7 collection method that had been found to under-report short walks. Respondents felt that there was no need to delay a necessary change in the face of convincing experiment results.
- 2.19** Option 4 received wider support than option 3 because not only did it acknowledge and change the collection day for future surveys but it also looked at correcting historical estimates.
- 2.20** Respondents stated the benefits from correcting historical estimates but also noted the success of such an exercise would be reliant on calculating an accurate weight, which would have its own challenges and resource implications.
- 2.21** Respondents who supported option 3 appreciated the added value from applying a weight to uplift historic results. Three respondents stated that the benefits derived from changes to

the time series would not be sufficient to warrant the additional expenditure and resources needed to create a weight with an acceptable level of uncertainty. Two respondents who supported option 4 also acknowledged the challenges in calculating a weight to uplift historic results.

- 2.22** One respondent who supported option 3 stated that a discontinuity in the time series was preferable to the uncertainty around uplifting historic results.
- 2.23** Option 1b proposed retaining the current day 7 collection methodology and re-running the short walks experiment in 2015. One respondent supported option 1b although two other respondents that did not indicate a preferred option expressed concern about making changes to the NTS based on a one-off experiment.
- 2.24** The respondents that did not support an immediate change called for further research. This research would be conducted with the aim of understanding more about the collection of short walks data in the NTS before any final decision was made on changes to the travel diary.
- 2.25** These respondents provided examples of additional research that included a repeat of the short walk experiment, research on walking in general, research on the causes of under-reporting in travel diaries and collecting short walk data on all days of the travel week.

**Question 3: Do you have any other suggestions on how to improve the collection of short walk data in the NTS?**

- 2.26** The majority of respondents provided suggestions to improve the collection of short walk data and many provided suggestions to improve the NTS in general.
- 2.27** Two respondents suggested the use of technology such as pedometers and GPS devices to improve the collection of short walk data. The devices would be used in parallel with the travel diaries and act as a memory aid for respondents. They could also be used as an additional validation check against data recorded in the travel diary.
- 2.28** One respondent had experience of running a travel survey where travel diaries were used in conjunction with a limited number of GPS devices, specifically to address the under-reporting of short trips.

- 2.29** Their findings showed that there was an increase in the average number of trips when using the GPS device compared with the travel diary, in particular for walking trips of less than five minutes. The respondent concluded that the under-reporting of short trips could point to a more fundamental problem with using travel diaries as a method of data collection.
- 2.30** Three respondents suggested using external data sources to compare with the NTS. Possible external data sources included the Scottish Household Survey and the London Travel Demand Survey as well as using data from mobile phone companies.
- 2.31** A number of respondents suggested changes to the collection of walking data in general. These changes included removing the current 50-yard threshold and widening the scope of the survey to include walking trips that are off the public highway.

## 3. Department for Transport's response

- 3.1** The Department for Transport accepts the results of the short walk experiment showing an under-reporting of short walks when collected on day 7 instead of day 1.
- 3.2** Option 3 and option 4 both proposed an immediate change to the day of collection for short walks from day 7 to day 1, which would be implemented at the start of the 2015 survey year. These two options received the most support amongst respondents and we agree that the experiment has clearly highlighted the need to change the design of the NTS in regard to the collection of short walks data.
- 3.3** A feature of the NTS that is highly valued by users is the availability of long-term time series data<sup>2</sup>. There is a balance between making an immediate change to the NTS and the risk of unintended disruption to the survey from making such a change based on a single experiment.
- 3.4** In 2007, the travel diary was redesigned with the aims of making it easier for respondents to complete and to improve data quality<sup>3</sup>.
- 3.5** NTS results for 2007 showed a reduction in the number of trips reported, which was not expected. The redesign of the travel diary was put forward as the most likely cause of the unexpected fall in trip rates in 2007.
- 3.6** Therefore, there is a precedent in the NTS of making changes to the travel diary, which subsequently has led to unexpected results and disruption to the time series.
- 3.7** The consistency of the NTS time series must be considered alongside the responsibility on the department as producers of

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<sup>2</sup> The National Travel Survey has run continuously since 1988, following ad-hoc surveys since the mid-1960s.

<sup>3</sup> For more information see National Travel Survey 2008 Technical Report, NatCen Social Research. Available from:

<http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20091203140650/http://www.dft.gov.uk/adobepdf/162469/221412/221531/223980/224028/2240481/ntstechrep2008>

official statistics to maintain a level of quality that continues to meet users' needs.

- 3.8** On balance, we believe the risk of disruption to the NTS time series from making an immediate change to the travel diary without further research outweighs the short-term gains from improvements to data quality from switching to day 1 collection. The current short walk day 7 collection methodology will be retained in the 2015 survey.
- 3.9** This is not to ignore the weaknesses in NTS data collection. Additional research, covering three areas, will be conducted in 2015 to address the data quality issues highlighted by the short walk experiment.
- 3.10** First, NTS data will be compared with other comparable travel surveys such as the London Travel Demand Survey to see if a degree of coherence can be observed.
- 3.11** Second, further experiments will be run in 2015, which could look at repeating the short walks experiment, recording short walks on all days of the travel week and a cognitive experiment looking at how respondents complete the travel diary. These investigations will try to understand the drop-off in short walks reporting.
- 3.12** Third, DfT will seek advice from Office for National Statistics methodological service about calculating a weight to uplift historic results and the design of further experiments outlined above.
- 3.13** Consultation respondents were asked for other suggestions on how to improve the collection of short walk data in the NTS. These suggestions will be considered as part of the additional research into short walks under-reporting during 2015.
- 3.14** Other suggestions relating to the NTS in general will be considered as part of our constant efforts to achieve continuous improvement in NTS statistical processes.

## 4. Next steps

- 4.1** The 2015 NTS survey will continue to collect short walks data on day 7.
- 4.2** DfT will work with the contractor for the NTS, NatCen Social Research (NatCen), to carry out further research in 2015 into short walk under-reporting. The single experiment carried out in 2013 has showed that we need to improve the collection of short walk data in the NTS, of which further and wider research is the first step.
- 4.3** When publishing NTS 2014 results in July 2015, a section outlining the findings of the 2013 experiment will be included in the accompanying statistical release. In addition, all tables will include a note notifying users of short walk under-reporting in the NTS.
- 4.4** Although no change in the short walk collection methodology will be implemented for the start of the 2015 survey year, a review will be published in autumn 2015. This review will incorporate the results of the additional research and set out the short walk collection method for NTS 2016.

# Annex A: List of respondents

AECOM

Centro

Centre for Transport Studies, Imperial College London

Centre for Transport Studies, University College London

Cumbria County Council

Department of Planning and Transport, University of Westminster

Heathrow Express

HS2 Limited

Living Streets

Luton Borough Council

Research Department of Epidemiology and Public Health, University College London

Staffordshire County Council

Sustrans

Transport Studies Unit, University of Oxford

Walk21

Wedderburn Transport Planning

In addition we received one response from a private individual.