



Consultation Response

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

Summary

The Cabinet Office conducted a second consultation¹ on the future of the Community Life survey in October 2015. We have been investigating the feasibility of a switch from a cost and resource intensive face-to-face approach, to an online/postal survey methodology, to drive cost savings, considering the significant appetite for the survey data.

Ten responses were received in total and respondents included Local and Central government, third sector and independent consultants (see Annex A).

Respondents acknowledged the substantial testing that has been conducted and that an online/postal survey method would be feasible. They recognised that this would lead to substantial cost savings, allowing for larger sample sizes and deeper sub-group analysis, thereby improving the value of the data, as well as embracing technology. However, some concerns were raised over the break in the time series, as many respondents rely on this to conduct longitudinal analysis. There were also concerns over the lowered response rate compared to the face-to-face survey, and the impact this has on non-response bias and overall representativeness of the survey sample.

Following the department's consideration of all responses, along with the collated findings from the online/postal survey testing, we have decided from 2016-17, we will move to an online and postal mixed methods approach, with an end to the current face-to-face method. There will be one more publication using the face-to-face methodology in summer 2016, following 2015-16 fieldwork. This decision is based on the following rationale:

- The need to make reductions in public spending has led to a substantial decrease in sample size since the 2010/11 Citizenship Survey, but a move to online would allow us to obtain a much larger sample size for the same costs, increasing survey abilities.
- Substantial testing has been conducted to date, with the results giving us confidence in the new approach. However, we will continue to refine the methodology in 2016-17 with additional testing, such as exploring further options to increase the response rate and sample representativeness and exploring the possibility of utilising existing online data to create a new time series.

¹ For further information on the initial consultation ran in 2013 see:

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/406811/Community_Life_Survey_consultation_-_February_14.pdf

Introduction

The Survey

The Community Life Survey (CLS) is an Official Statistic, providing robust, nationally representative data to track the latest trends and developments across areas that are key to encouraging social action and empowering communities, such as volunteering, charitable giving, community cohesion and civic engagement. It was commissioned by the Cabinet Office in Summer 2012, following the end of the Citizenship Survey, and incorporated many of the same measures to continue the time series.

Currently, the survey uses a face-to-face methodology, and whilst this is effective in providing robust and nationally representative data, it still remains an expensive and resource intensive undertaking. Recognising the importance of the survey data to users, coupled with the drive for cost savings, the Cabinet Office sought to test the potential of delivering the survey through an online/postal methodology.

Initial results were broadly positive and highlighted that an online method would be feasible, providing cost savings and embracing digital technology. However, following an initial consultation, additional testing was conducted to further understand the differences that the mode can make on data collection, and to ensure the methodology was robust. Full background to the development, including overall results, can be found here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/community-life-survey-experimental-online-survey-findings>

This consultation invited views on the future approach, such as content, outputs and the implications a potential methodological change may have for users.

Questions

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

- a) What are your organisation's current uses of the survey?
 - i. The topic areas you find most useful?
 - ii. The analysis you need to undertake, and the purpose for which you currently use the Community Life Survey data?
 - iii. The current frequency of the Survey and your need for time series?
 - iv. The sample sizes you require, both overall and for subgroups, to effectively utilise the survey data?
 - v. The sample boosts you require (if any)?
 - vi. The outputs you find most useful, and why?

- b) What would be the implications of stopping the Community Life Survey, for your organisation?

- c) What impact will changing to an online methodology for data collection, and the subsequent change in time series, have for your organisation (if any)?
- d) What, if any, specific concerns do you and your organisation have around the online methodology and is there any further information that could help reassure you?
- e) What support and technical advice may help you adapt to any change in methodology?
- f) Are you aware of other organisations/teams working on switching to online methodologies? If so could you provide contact information?
- g) Any further comments?

Summary of responses

In total, 10 written responses were received, from central and local Government, third sector organisations and independent consultants. The majority of responses came from existing survey data users, with the others from a third sector organisation that would be interested in utilising the survey data, and an independent consultant. A full list of respondents can be found in Annex A.

a. What are your organisation's current uses of the survey?

i. The topic areas you find most useful

Respondents valued different topics within the survey, with most sections mentioned more than once. The question set that was referenced the most was volunteering, referenced in seven of the responses.

ii. The analysis you need to undertake, and the purpose for which you currently use the Community Life Survey data?

Respondents highlighted that the CLS supports a wide range of purposes, with results predominantly used to inform policy and/or used for benchmarking and to help set targets.

With regards to analyses requirements, three respondents primarily undertake analysis to monitor volunteering and charitable giving trends over multiple years, whilst four respondents undertake analysis to understand impact locally. Another also highlighted the importance of the CLS data in building the Social Capital evidence base.

Response: We are keen to ensure the survey is meeting user needs. We will continue optimising the survey questions and subsequent data by engaging with users and adapting question sets to meet key demands.

iii. The current frequency of the Survey and your need for time series?

Five responses expressed a specific preference for the current frequency of annual publications and that this was timely for their needs. Two respondents state that annual publication ensures that evidence is used accurately and timely, and adequately informs policy.

Trend and time-series analysis was highlighted as a priority for five of the respondents, providing comparable, trackable data. Two respondents highlighted their concerns that we would lose 15 years worth of investment in survey data collection. Alternatively, two other respondents have a preference for within-year headline analysis, and would be less impacted by a loss in time series.

The two respondents concerned with loss of time-series propose running the survey bi-annually, providing adequate timely data over a 2 year fieldwork period rather than annual data collection. This is proposed as a method to prevent the loss of the face-to-face methodology and subsequent time series, whilst making cost savings.

Response: The importance of time-series data was a key consideration when developing the online/postal method, and we recognise the concerns over losing this. However, having carefully considered all the alternative approaches suggested, on balance we consider that the annual online/postal methodology will provide the best balance of frequency and sample size in order to meet the varied uses of the data set.

Further, in 2016/17, we will have 4 years worth of online data, and are exploring the ability to create a new time series with this data, to ensure that trend analysis is still applicable.

iv. The sample sizes you require, both overall and for subgroups, to effectively utilise the survey data?

Three respondents state that the current sample size is sufficient for the analysis they require, however, noting that any further reductions would render sub-group analysis insufficient.

The majority of the respondents would require a sufficient sample size to generate reasonable confidence intervals, with five respondents having a preference for an increased sample size to allow for lower level analysis, including those subgroups of interest, such as BAME breakdowns.

Three respondents would also ideally prefer a sample size sufficient enough to allow for Local Authority geographical breakdowns.

Response: We fully appreciate concerns raised over the reduction in sample size. Due to budgetary constraints, it is not possible for us to increase the sample size with a face-to-face methodology. This was a main reason for testing the capabilities of an online/postal method. Testing has highlighted the significant cost savings with a move to an online survey, therefore the sample size increases by 10,000 when compared with face-to-face, for the same cost. This would allow robust sub-group analysis, as highlighted in many responses.

Due to budget restrictions we will not be able to gather a sample larger enough to allow geographical analysis at Local Authority Level, and the survey is not designed to be used this way. However, the larger sample possibilities with an online methodology should allow other lower level geographical outputs to be published.

v. The sample boosts you require (if any)?

Some respondents would benefit from BME and minority faith sample boosts, however, one organisation did raise concerns over how effectively we would be able to sample such a group through a web only survey. LGBT boost was also identified as useful.

vi. The outputs you find most useful, and why?

Respondents were split on their preferred output format, with the main outputs identified as valuable being the excel datasets (including the ready reckoner to assess statistical significance) and the full annual data sets, although two respondents would value these being archived as quickly as possible so they can be used in a timely manner.

Additionally, some respondents have found previous, more in-depth reports (such as the giving of time and money report, 2013), on top of the annual bulletin publication useful and insightful, providing more detailed analysis in an accessible manner.

Response: A move to an online/postal survey would reduce cost sufficiently that we will be able to include a sample boost within the allocated budget. We are currently developing the methodological requirements of conducting BAME boosts for an online survey. This should also increase the representativeness of the online sample profile.

Regarding outputs, we are keen to continue providing outputs to meet all user needs, and we will aim to amend the outputs where possible to provide user value, and provide alternative and accessible data resources, other than the annual bulletin.

We currently aim to publish the full datasets within 2 months of the annual announcement, but will explore how we can publish these sooner, to ensure users have timely access.

b. What would be the implications of stopping the Community Life Survey, for your organisation?

The majority of respondents commented on the impact of stopping the CLS with regards to the loss of volunteering data. Two respondents highlight that there would be adverse implications for volunteering evidence, and added that this would also impact our volunteering intelligence internationally, as the volunteering data we collect is often more robust than other Countries. A further two respondents also comment that it could limit their ability to estimate volunteering locally.

Two comments highlighted that although other surveys do include similar measures (such as taking part and understanding society), the depth of those measures do

not allow for such detailed analysis (such as comparing different types of volunteering).

Response: We understand the impact that discontinuing the Community Life Survey could have on organisations' ability to robustly assess volunteering rates, both locally and internationally and that other comparable surveys do not provide the same level of detail. This is a main reason why we are continuing to explore an alternative online survey methodology, to ensure we are able to make cost savings whilst retaining the important data that is so strongly relied upon.

c. What impact will changing to an online methodology for data collection, and the subsequent change in time series, have for your organisation (if any)?

All respondents identify that a move to online would be valid, providing substantial cost savings, and enable increased sample size and survey functions. Three respondents highlight that although it would be a shame to lose the time series, they would not be significantly impacted with a move to an online methodology.

However, as mentioned previously, some respondents have raised concerns that with a move to an online survey, the time series and the continuity of indicators would be broken and this would impact their ability to track complex trends and understand comparisons across years.

d. What, if any, specific concerns do you and your organisation have around the online methodology and is there any further information that could help reassure you?

Three respondents have no specific concerns over the switch to an online / postal methodology, and their main concern is to ensure that the sample size is sufficient for sub-group analysis.

Although respondents appreciated the thorough experimental work that had been conducted to date, specifically the sampling methods, two main concerns were raised regarding the Cabinet Office's proposed online methodology; the loss of time series and the lowered response rate.

In addition to the loss of time series, the online survey also provides a significantly lowered response rate in comparison to the face-to-face methodology (circa. 28% to 60% respectively), and this raises concerns regarding response bias and sample representativeness. Four responses highlighted concerns that with a lowered response rate, the sample profile will not be representative of the population, and certain individuals, such as non-internet users, will not be proportionately represented. Another respondent had further concerns for non-English speakers, advising that alternative language options could help prevent underrepresentation

within these communities. One respondent would appreciate further explanation regarding the response rates of the online methodology.

Queries were also raised regarding the potential simplification of survey questions to suit an online methodology, and the risk of losing clarity on certain complex questions, such as volunteering.

Finally, two organisations identified the possibility of 'fraudulent' completions with an all-adults sampling design and would appreciate further clarity on the effectiveness of the proposed fraud deterrents.

Response: We fully appreciate the concerns raised over the lowered response rate and will continue to investigate ways in which this can be increased, including additional postal questionnaires targeted at those communities less represented (preliminary results from testing across 15/16 indicate this method can increase the response rate up to an additional 5%). With the introduction of a BAME sample boost within the core sample, this should also increase the sample representativeness.

However, from the testing conducted, we have no significant concerns regarding data quality due to the lowered response rate, and although the sample is more biased towards those who are higher earners and better educated, this is not much more so than face-to-face.

As previously mentioned in question iii, we are currently exploring the ability to create a new time series with the online data, to ensure that trend analysis, highly valued by users, is still applicable.

The online survey questions have been thoroughly tested to align as closely with the face-to-face questionnaire as possible, and although we appreciate that there will not be an interviewer present to clarify questions, results of the testing do not identify significant concerns regarding respondents understanding. We will continue to test and explore options to ensure questions are clear, such as usability testing.

We are currently testing our fraud deterrents across 2015/16, with results to date being positive.

We will continue to update users of any further testing and methodological changes made to the survey.

e. What support and technical advice may help you adapt to any change in methodology?

The majority of respondents do not feel they require any specific technical support or advice to be able to adapt to any changes in methodology. Transparency is the key item, with respondents appreciating further clarity on online response rates,

which measures and responses are significantly different from face-to-face, and further understanding of how respondents interact with the online survey.

f. Are you aware of other organisations/teams working on switching to online methodologies? If so could you provide contact information?

Four respondents were not aware of any other organisations working on switching surveys to an online methodology.

One respondent highlighted ONS' development work for trialling online methods and another mentioned the ESRC-funded Understanding Society Survey, a longitudinal survey that was conducted online following initial face-to-face interviews.

g. Any further comments?

One respondent state that they currently do most of their surveys online and see moving to an online survey as a forward step to improve sample size and make cost efficiencies.

One respondent would appreciate further disaggregation of results and another advises that we continue to explore alternative options for increasing the response rate and communicate further the impacts a change in methodology would have on the data quality.

Response: We will continue to provide clear, transparent and timely information regarding results from additional testing, including exploring options to increase response rate and consider what further disaggregation of results is possible.

We will continue to work closely with key stakeholders and are grateful for respondents' valuable input into this process.

Outcome

In light of the positive investigative work that the Cabinet Office and TNS-BMRB have conducted to explore an online survey methodology, continued budget constraints and taking into account consultation responses, we will be moving the Community Life Survey to a mixed methods approach of online and postal in 2016/17. This will provide substantial cost savings, whilst aligning with digital advancements and increasing survey abilities, such as sub group analysis through increased sample sizes.

However, we appreciate the concerns that have been raised over the loss of the time-series and the lowered response rate, and will be conduct further testing to allow for a new time-series, starting from 2013/14, conducting sample boosts to increase sample representativeness and testing additional ways in which the response rate can be increased further, such as targeted postal questionnaires.

Annex A

List of respondents

Name of organisation	Type of organisation
Office for National Statistics (Social Capital and Wellbeing team)	Central Government
Department for Communities and Local Government	Central government
Oxfordshire County Council	Local government
Plymouth County Council	Researchers/academics
National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO)	Voluntary and other organisations
Department for Culture, Media and Sport	Central government
North Yorkshire County Council	Local Government
Local Giving	Voluntary and other organisations
Rob Jackson Consulting Ltd.	Voluntary and other organisations
N/A	Independent consultant