



Longitudinal Small Business Survey: call for COVID-19 related questions for the 2020 questionnaire

25 June 2020

- BEIS is inviting users to suggest questions for the Longitudinal Small Business Survey (LSBS) questionnaire relating to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- The survey is expected to start interviews with businesses in September 2020 and continue to April 2021.
- The LSBS is a large-scale telephone survey of UK Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs), which is designed to be representative of all private-sector SMEs in the UK. The 2020 survey is expected to achieve 12,000 responses.
- The survey began in its current form in 2015 and there have been five annual waves so far. Just over 1,800 businesses have taken part in all five waves but 33,800 businesses have taken part in at least one wave.
- Given the unique nature of the LSBS dataset it is likely that the survey is well-suited to be used to answer research questions that are difficult or impossible for other surveys to answer, including brand-new surveys. We are inviting users to suggest new questions or other changes to the questionnaire in order to make the most of the opportunity.
- This document describes the LSBS and the nature of the dataset it has resulted in so far and explains what we are asking interested users to provide for us. **The deadline for responses is 10 July 2020**, to give us sufficient time to test new questions and pilot the new questionnaire, all in time to start fieldwork by September 2020.

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Introduction

The Longitudinal Small Business Survey (LSBS) is a large-scale telephone (CATI¹) survey of owner/proprietors, Managing Directors or other senior directors of UK Small and Medium Enterprises² (SMEs), commissioned by the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS).

The survey began in its current form in 2015 and has been conducted annually since then. The survey has achieved sample sizes ranging from 6,600 to 15,500, with a substantial boost in 2018.

Table 1: Achieved sample sizes for the LSBS

Survey year	Achieved sample size
2015	15,502
2016	9,248
2017	6,619
2018	15,105
2019	11,002

The survey has a longitudinal tracking element, establishing a ‘panel’ of businesses for re-surveying in subsequent years, enabling a detailed analysis of how combinations of factors affect business performance through time.

More information on the number of respondents each year and the balance between previous respondents and new ‘top-ups’ can be found in the [technical reports](#) that BEIS publishes each year.

The main aim of the survey is to collect a range of information on SMEs. The survey measures:

- recent turnover and employment growth
- capabilities (in terms of their ability to innovate, export, train staff, and so on)
- experience of accessing finance
- use of business support
- expectations of growing turnover and employment
- the major obstacles that prevent SMEs fulfilling their potential

¹ Computer Assisted Telephone Interviews.

² Defined here as having fewer than 250 employees.

- the characteristics of SMEs such as the number of sites they occupy, the number of owners, whether they have separate business premises, and so on
- the characteristics of their owners and leaders

There are three main reports based on the 2019 LSBS:

- a [cross-sectional report](#) based on **SME employers**. A cross-sectional report is a snapshot of the state of SMEs at any particular stage in time
- a [cross-sectional report](#) based on businesses with **no employees**
- a [longitudinal report](#) based on those businesses that responded in all five years of the survey. This looks at the main changes that apply to the 'panellists' from year to year, and what appears to influence these changes

As well as publishing these reports, BEIS publishes data tables that give the estimated proportions of SME giving the various responses to each question. These tables include breakdowns by different business sizes, different UK nations and different industries. BEIS also makes the survey microdata available to approved researchers by depositing it with the Office for National Statistics' [Secure Research Service](#) and with the [UK Data Service](#). The dataset includes all the responses since 2015 and includes weights for cross-sectional and longitudinal analyses – although of course researchers are free to derive their own weights according to their analytical needs.

Why are we asking for questions?

The longitudinal nature of the LSBS means that we do not usually make large changes to the questionnaire each year, although it has evolved over time. We know that researchers think it is valuable to have a survey that asks the same questions every year, and tries to ask them of the same business. Our annual review of the questionnaire is usually focussed on government 'owners' of the various policy areas; although we have regular contact with the academic and research community, and with other users, this is usually in the context of questions that have already been asked and analysis that can be done with the data that has already been collected.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a hugely disruptive impact on UK SMEs which will be long-lasting and BEIS would like the 2020 survey to give users the chance to investigate and understand some of these impacts. So we are asking users now to obtain a good range of questions.

It is important that any changes we make to the questionnaire make the most of the unique qualities of the LSBS. There are now many surveys taking place or planned to take place in 2020 which will investigate various aspects of COVID-19 and its impact on businesses. Some of these are designed to elicit up-to-date information as quickly as possible so that, for example, policy makers can make decisions with good data as close to 'real time' as possible. Results from the 2020 LSBS are unlikely to be available to users before Autumn 2021 so the greatest value from the results is going to come from the additional insights obtained from asking about COVID-19 and using the other data from the survey – data from the 2020 fieldwork but also, potentially, data from previous waves of the survey too.

What are the features of the LSBS to be aware of when suggesting COVID-19 related questions?

Study population

The LSBS is a general survey of private-sector SMEs in the UK. It covers all four UK countries, all industries and the full range of SME sizes, from medium-sized businesses down to unregistered businesses with no employees. Questions which are only relevant to a particular industry will not be accepted. We will consider questions that apply to Great Britain only, for example, or just to a single country. We will consider questions that apply to certain subpopulations such as SME employers only. Look at the questionnaires from previous waves to see which population bases we have used in the past (questionnaires are published in the [technical reports](#) each year).

Topics

The survey covers a wide range of topics and this will continue to be the case in 2020. The 2019 questionnaire is included as an appendix to the [2019 technical report](#) so you can see what topics were covered last year. This means that it would be possible to explore connections between some of these topics and the COVID-related questions – and for past respondents that take part in 2020, responses from previous years will be available for analysis too.

Past respondents

We are currently planning to complete 12,000 interviews. This will be a mixture of past respondents and new respondents. To get a sense of the mix that we might get, consider the following information about the data collected by the LSBS in its first five years.

There have been nearly 34,000 businesses that have taken part at least once. In 2019 there were 11,000 respondents, of whom over 7,000 had taken part before and under 4,000 were new to the survey. A little under 2,000 businesses had taken part in all five waves of the survey, and many businesses have taken part just once: for the 34,000 businesses that have taken part at all, the mean number of waves they have taken part in is 1.7, and for the 2019 respondents the mean was 2.3 waves per respondent.

Interviews

The questionnaire is asked using telephone interviewing. In 2019 the average (mean) interview length was 19 minutes for past respondents and over 25 minutes for new respondents – we do not wish the average to extend much past this. New questions might have to displace current

questions, and questions (or sets of questions) that take, say, two minutes of interviewing time are unlikely to be accepted – this would be something like 10% of the interviewing time.

We secure interviews with owner/proprietors, Managing Directors or other senior directors. They should be able to speak about the strategic direction of the firm and about the firm's performance over the previous 12 months – we do not expect our respondents to break off in the middle of interviews to look up records or ask colleagues for more information.

The fieldwork period is currently planned to last from September 2020 to the end of April 2021. It is of course possible that during this period of time there could be disruption to businesses because of COVID-19, with uncertain impacts on our ability to continue interviewing.

Other datasets

The cleaned microdata will be made available to approved researchers. BEIS will deposit it with the Office for National Statistics' [Secure Research Service](#) and the [UK Data Service](#). This means that it might be possible to link the data with other datasets hosted by these services too.

More information

For more information about the survey, users are directed to our [published methodology reports](#) and to the [documentation](#) in the UK Data Service (the latter includes a full variable list for the first four waves and the questionnaires used in those waves).

What gives my suggestion a better chance of being accepted?

Look through the [technical methodology report](#) for the 2019 survey to see how we run the survey and to see the 2019 questionnaire. This will show you the style you should adopt for any questions you propose to us.

The wording of your proposed questions needs to be appropriate as *part* of a 20-30 minute **telephone interview**.

You need to tell us the **population base** for the question: who should be asked the question? Is it all SMEs? SME employers? Businesses that exported goods in the last year? Businesses in Scotland? If we need to ask a separate question to work out if a business is in the base, then you need to include that question in your response to this consultation too.

You need to include the **response options** for the question. You need to say if the question is to be single-coded (only one response choice allowed by each business) or multi-coded (businesses can pick several responses).

If you have several connected questions, the **question logic** needs to be clear and unambiguous. For example, 'If the answer to Q1 is 1/2/3 ask Q2 and skip Q3; if the answer to Q1 is 4/5 ask Q3; if Q1 is refused or don't know then skip to next section.'

If you are suggesting a question that has been used elsewhere in **another survey** then let us know which question and which survey it is – this might make it easier to take on without extensive testing and also helps make the survey comparable with other studies.

Most importantly, you need to give the **rationale** for the proposed question – why you are asking for it. The best way to do this is to state **what is the research question** that an analyst will be able to answer as a result of us using this question in the LSBS. If this relies on other questions in the survey being asked that is fine – this makes it more likely that the LSBS is the right vehicle for your question – but we have to be aware of this so we don't drop the questions that make your proposed question worthwhile in the first place!

How do I send my suggested questions?

Send your question suggestions using the spreadsheet available with the [2019 technical report](#). Make sure to read the earlier section on what will give your suggestion a better chance of being accepted. Please email the suggestions to business.statistics@beis.gov.uk (with subject title *LSBS COVID-19 questionnaire*) by 10 July 2020.



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