

Results of the consultation on the Long Term Strategy for Population Surveys in Scotland 2009 – 2019

1. This paper sets out the issues raised by stakeholders during the consultation on the Long Term Strategy for Population Surveys in Scotland ('the strategy').
2. The consultation ran from 13th March 2009 until 30th April 2009 and 9 responses were received from a range of stakeholders, including survey managers, survey contractors and data users.
3. The Strategy has since been revised to take account of consultation responses.
4. During the consultation, stakeholders were asked to respond to three questions
 - 4.1. Are the key background and contextual issues in which to take forward the Long Term Strategy correctly identified?
 - 4.2. Are the two strategic aims of the strategy the right ones?
 - 4.3. Are the four strands of the strategy (harmonised core questions; centralised data management; dissemination; and the Scottish Household Survey) the right areas for focus?
5. The responses to these three questions are discussed in detail below.

Are the key background and contextual issues in which to take forward the Long Term Strategy correctly identified?

6. There was general feeling the background reflected the current situation. Some respondents raise other issues that could be included in the background:
 - 6.1. Several respondents expressed concern over falling response rates, and the rising costs associated with maintaining response rates, and felt this should be recognised in the background of the strategy.
 - 6.2. Some felt the background needed to better reflect the anticipated tightening of budgets across all Government departments over coming years.
 - 6.3. There were concerns about field capacity, particularly if more surveys are commissioned or current sample sizes are increased.
7. We agree these issues are important and have integrated them into the background.
8. There was some concern that the section on longitudinal research did not provide enough detail. We have asked for input from the Chief Researcher to allow us to expand the longitudinal section.

Are the two strategic aims of the strategy the right ones?

The Long Term Strategy for Population Surveys in Scotland

9. The two strategic aims set out in the consultation were:
 - 9.1. To ensure that the Scottish Government's population surveys meet priority information needs while maximising the analytical potential of the data they generate, the precision of estimates and the value for money
 - 9.2. To give full consideration to issues of survey participation, respondent burden, data quality, and data security and to make recommendations that align survey practice across Government and promote good practice to other public bodies.
10. Most respondents supported these two aims. However there was some concern that the word 'priority' was used in the first aim. Some respondents felt this implied the strategy would concentrate specifically on providing data to meet the 'immediate requirements of policy customers' rather than planning for the long term information needs of government. We do not agree that 'priority' means meeting immediate requirements at the cost of long term considerations. 'Priority information needs' covers the information government needs to effectively and efficiently plan, implement and evaluate policy and public services. We have therefore chosen to retain the word 'priority'.
11. There was also concern expressed that the strategy concentrated too much on the National Performance Framework (NPF) when the NPF runs until 2017 but the strategy runs until 2019. However, over the lifetime of the strategy, the NPF will use considerable amounts of survey data, both in assessment and providing a wider context. We feel it is appropriate for the NPF to be given the prominence it has but have made it clearer that the strategy is about meeting long term data needs.
12. There was some concern that the second aim was too detailed to be a 'strategic' aim and that it was very much 'subordinate' to the first aim. While we agree that the second aim is subordinate to the first we feel it is important that the issues it details are included as part of the strategic aims. The first aim of the strategy could be achieved without any consideration to the issues detailed in the second aim and this could be damaging. We therefore feel the second aim is appropriate to be identified as a strategic aim.

Are the four strands of the strategy the right areas for focus? – Harmonised core questions

13. There was considerable support for the concept of harmonised questions.
14. There was a desire for more research to be done into different modes and the context in which harmonised questions were asked. There was also support for other Scottish Government surveys, such as the GP Access Survey, being brought into the process and adopting the harmonised core.

The Long Term Strategy for Population Surveys in Scotland

15. One respondent expressed concern over harmonisation for harmonisations sake and the need for agreed questions to be appropriately tested.
16. One respondent asked for the core to be expanded to include sexual identity.
17. While these points are all valid we feel they are more appropriate for use when designing the work plan to take the strategy forward rather than be included in the strategy.
18. Some respondents felt that the purpose of individual surveys should be recognised and take precedence over the harmonised questions and that the harmonisation agenda should be more about agreeing concepts and definitions rather than prescribing the wording of questions. We agree that the harmonisation agenda should recognise the different survey purposes and needs and that harmonised questions should fit the context of different surveys.
19. There was broad agreed that harmonised consent forms would be beneficial, particularly for data linkage work, but that it was essential for research practitioners to be involved in the design of consent forms.

Are the four strands of the strategy the right areas for focus? – Centralised data management

20. There was concern that the wording of this section suggested a decision to move to centralised data management had already been made. This is not the case and the work around this part of the strategy will involve assessing the costs and benefits of centralised data management before a decision can be made. We have therefore changed the wording of this section to make this clearer.
21. There was widespread support for the aim of pooling samples to provide robust estimate for smaller areas and groups.
22. One respondent, while recognising that unclustered sampling is in theory the best method, suggested it does not always represent value for money. In particular, there was concern a move towards centralised sampling would automatically lead to unclustered sampling regardless of cost. The work to look into centralised sampling will consider cost and methodology implications.
23. The respondent also disagreed with the statement that unclustering makes analysis more straightforward. We agree this statement over simplifies the analysis of data and have reworded the paragraph on clustering.
24. There was concern that centralised data management was being proposed as an alternative to data being deposited at the UK Data Archive. This is not the case – data will continue to be deposited at the UK Data Archive.

The Long Term Strategy for Population Surveys in Scotland

25. Some respondents went into great detail arguing for and against centralised data management and sampling. We do not think these points should be incorporated into the strategy, which does not make a judgement on whether centralised management and sampling should be introduced. However, the comments will be extremely helpful when assessing the costs and benefits of centralised data management and sampling.

Are the four strands of the strategy the right areas for focus? – Dissemination

26. Dissemination was widely recognised as an important part of the strategy. Some respondents felt it would be good for the major surveys to have harmonised dissemination and access procedures but there was some concern that there should not be uniform processes adopted across all Scottish Government surveys, ignoring the needs of specific user groups. We agree that any harmonised dissemination procedures should be about agreeing a common set of principles rather than prescribing dissemination processes in detail.
27. Many respondents discussed the need to promote analysis of data, both cross sectional and longitudinal, and felt that promoting analysis was not recognised appropriately in the strategy. We agree promoting analysis is important and have expanded this strand to cover both dissemination and analysis.

Are the four strands of the strategy the right areas for focus? – Scottish Household Survey (SHS)

28. There was concern over the use of the term ‘omnibus’, particularly with the omnibus surveys used in market research. We have removed the term ‘omnibus’ to avoid confusion.
29. Some respondents felt the strategy over simplified the possibility of the SHS moving to a core and modular structure and the creation of new modules. We have changed the language to reflect this.
30. Many of the respondents provided detailed comments on the SHS, which, while being very useful, we felt were too detailed to introduce to a high level strategy. We will forward comments about the SHS to the appropriate team within the Scottish Government to feed into the SHS review.

Other issues

31. Many of those that responded expressed concern over falling response rates and the associated rising costs and that these issues should be a key element of the strategy. We have therefore introduced a fifth strand to the strategy called ‘Respondent Burden and Response Rates’ and we will examine the reasons behind falling response rates.

The Long Term Strategy for Population Surveys in Scotland

32. We will also consider respondent burden under this strand. One respondent did not consider respondent burden to be an issue and that it should not be given prominence in the strategy. However, as a key element of the new National Statistics Code of Practice, we consider minimising respondent burden to be essential to the strategy.
33. There was concern that the Strategy currently focuses narrowly on harmonisation and design issues, and that it should also consider other areas such as resources and data access. We disagree that this is the case and that harmonisation is about much more than question alignment and that other elements of survey work are reflected in the strategy. However, we have changed some of the wording in the strategy to make this clearer.

Alex Stannard
Office of the Chief Statistician
May 2009