
Chair of the UK Statistics Authority, Sir Michael Scholar KCB

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Dear Mr Swinney

STATISTICAL EXPENDITURE REPORT: SCOTTISH POPULATION SURVEYS

Please find enclosed a report by the UK Statistics Authority reviewing the Scottish Government's decision to make a number of changes to Scottish population surveys.

The Statistics Authority concludes that the Scottish Government has adopted a systematic approach to planning changes to its population surveys. It has also taken steps to ensure that it has a good understanding of users' needs and priorities for these statistics. Nevertheless, the Statistics Authority believes that it would be helpful to users of Scottish population statistics, and consistent with the Code of Practice for Official Statistics, if the Scottish Government were to publish an accessible summary of the changes that have been made, and the effects that these changes are expected to have on users.

We hope that you find our report useful, and we would welcome your thoughts on our conclusions.

Yours sincerely



Sir Michael Scholar KCB

UK STATISTICS AUTHORITY

Statistical Expenditure Report 5: Scottish Population Surveys

Statistical Expenditure Reports review significant changes to UK official statistics. This report has been prepared and issued independently by the UK Statistics Authority.

In January 2011 the Scottish Government announced its decision to make a number of changes to its population surveys. The Scottish House Condition Survey will be incorporated into the Scottish Household Survey, and the sample size of the expanded survey will be reduced. The sample size of the Scottish Health Survey and the Scottish Crime and Justice Survey will be reduced by around a third and a fifth, respectively, and the Scottish Crime and Justice Survey will be carried out biennially rather than annually. From 2012 the surveys will be sampled in a co-ordinated way and will ask the same set of core questions, allowing more detailed information at a smaller geography level than was previously available.

The Statistics Authority has concluded that it would be helpful to users, and consistent with the Code of Practice for Official Statistics, if the Scottish Government were to publish an accessible summary of the main changes that have been made to these statistics, and the impact that these changes are expected to have on users.

The statistics covered

These surveys provide data which cover various aspects of national policy.

- The *Scottish Household Survey* aims to provide accurate, up-to-date information about the characteristics, attitudes and behaviour of Scottish households and individuals. The survey covers a wide range of issues, including housing, economic activity, finance, childcare, education, transport, internet use, health, local services, volunteering, culture and sport.
- The *Scottish Health Survey* collects lifestyle and clinical data from adults and children across Scotland. It provides data on public health practices of the Scottish population including smoking, drinking, physical exercise and diet, together with linked data on general health, cardiovascular disease, respiratory diseases, dental health, sexual health and parental health.
- The *Scottish Crime and Justice Survey* provides information about people's experiences of, and attitudes to, a range of crime and justice-related issues. It also presents trends in the level and nature of crime in Scotland, and information on how the risk of crime varies for different groups of people.
- The *Scottish House Condition Survey* links data on the quality of houses with social and economic data on the people who live in them to provide information about fuel poverty and housing quality.

The statistics compiled from these surveys are presented in a range of outputs, including 'main findings' reports and technical reports. The Scottish Government also uses the results from the Scottish Household Survey and Scottish Crime and Justice Survey to produce various topic-specific publications – for example, reports on culture, sport and transport from

the Scottish Household Survey, and reports on partner abuse and drug use from the Scottish Crime and Justice Survey.

The data from these surveys are used to measure progress against relevant indicators in the Scottish Government's National Performance Framework¹. The results are also used to monitor and inform separate policy areas – for example:

- i. the Scottish Government and NHS Scotland use the Scottish Health Survey to identify gaps in health service provision and to investigate the epidemiology of major chronic diseases and causes of death in Scotland;
- ii. transport organisations use the transport module from the Scottish Household Survey to help their planning and policy development, to monitor travel patterns and to inform campaigns for 'greener' transport;
- iii. providers of cultural services (such as arts councils, museums and libraries) use the data from the culture module of the Scottish Household Survey to assess which sections of the Scottish population take part in cultural activities with a view to making these services more accessible;
- iv. the Scottish Government and police forces use the Scottish Crime and Justice Survey to make policy decisions, and the survey results help to inform the Scottish Parliament's scrutiny of these policies;
- v. energy-related companies, the construction industry and voluntary sector organisations use results from the Scottish House Condition Survey to investigate: the uptake of energy efficiency measures; the use of traditional building materials in Scottish homes; and the living conditions of vulnerable groups, such as the elderly; and
- vi. academics use results of the various surveys for education and research purposes.

The statistics are produced by the Scottish Government, although it contracts the data collection for each survey to social research companies. All four surveys were assessed² by the UK Statistics Authority in autumn 2009 which resulted in their subsequent designation as National Statistics. Each survey has its own steering group or user consultation arrangements via the Scotstat³ network.

During our assessment of these statistics, the Scottish Government informed us that the annual cost of each of these surveys in 2009 was around £1.5 million.

Government proposals

In June 2009 the Scottish Government published its Long Term Strategy⁴ (LTS) for Population Surveys in Scotland from 2009-2019 and the following month published its Delivery Plan⁵ for this strategy. The strategy has two aims:

¹ <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/About/scotPerforms>

² <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/assessment/assessment/assessment-reports>

³ ScotStat is a network for users and providers of Scottish Official Statistics:
<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Statistics/scotstat>

⁴ <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Statistics/About/SurveyStrategy>

⁵ <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Statistics/About/DeliveryPlan>

- To ensure that the Scottish Government's population surveys meet key information needs while maximising the analytical potential of the data they generate, the precision of estimates and value for money.
- 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.

The Scottish Population Surveys Co-ordinating Committee⁶ (SPSCC) is responsible for implementing the strategy. The Committee is chaired by the Scottish Government's Chief Statistician and its membership includes representatives from the NHS, local government, academia and ONS. The Scottish Government published the Committee's remit and membership⁷ on its website and publishes the papers and minutes from SPSCC meetings. A separate Scottish Population Surveys Working Group⁸ is responsible for delivering components of the LTS and reporting progress to the SPSCC.

At a conference on Scottish surveys in March 2010 a Scottish Government statistician delivered a presentation⁹ on the LTS. The presentation explained that the surveys were in need of review for reasons that included the increasingly limited resources available for survey work and the need for a more harmonised approach, including the use of a single set of 'core' questions in all surveys. The Scottish Government published a copy of the presentation but did not publish any details about delegates' subsequent discussions.

In October 2010 the SPSCC discussed a paper¹⁰ that described the need for the LTS to shift its focus from identifying enhancements in efficiency and value for money, to exploring options for savings. At its Annual Statistics Stakeholder Conference in November 2010, the Scottish Government presented options¹¹ for developing its population surveys that reflected the need to make savings. These included: using alternative data sources; merging surveys; and reducing the sample sizes and the implications of any such reductions on precision, users' capacity to 'drill into' the data, and frequency of reporting. The Scottish Government published this presentation and notes¹² from the delegates' subsequent discussions about their priorities, their views on alternative modes (such as phone surveys), the use of pooled data, and various other issues.

In January 2011 the Scottish Government contacted Scotstat members to announce its decision to make certain changes to Scottish Government surveys. The Scottish Government has since published information about these changes¹³, which notes that these decisions were made in the context of public sector financial pressures. The main changes are as follows:

⁶ <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Statistics/scotstat/SPSCC>

⁷ <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Statistics/scotstat/SPSCC/Meetings>

⁸ <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Statistics/scotstat/SPSCC/SPSWG>

⁹ <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Statistics/scotstat/analystsnetwork/longtermsurveypres>

¹⁰ <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Statistics/scotstat/SPSCC/SPSCC1014>

¹¹ <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Statistics/scotstat/StatConf2010Surveys>

¹² <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Statistics/scotstat/StatCon10LSS>

¹³ <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Statistics/About/Surveys>

- The Scottish House Condition Survey will become a module of the Scottish Household Survey which will become fully modularised. According to the Scottish Government, this will provide a more efficient design. There will also be an overall reduction to the sample size, which will result in some reduction of precision to the survey results at a Scotland level.
- The sample size for the Scottish Health Survey will reduce by a third from around 8,500 to around 5,800, resulting in a lower level of precision to the survey results for all of Scotland and for individual Health Boards. The survey will no longer include a nurse's visit. The Scottish Government has indicated that these measurements will be incorporated into the main survey interview, although it is not clear what information will be lost.
- The Scottish Government will carry out the Scottish Crime and Justice Survey every two years rather than annually and the survey results will only be published every two years. The sample size will also reduce by around a fifth from 16,000 to 13,000 adults per sweep, reducing the precision of the estimates.
- From 2012, all survey sampling will be co-ordinated and all the surveys will ask the same set of core questions. The Scottish Government will then pool these core data to provide more detailed information at a smaller level of detail than previously available. The first pooled data will be available in 2013.

In June 2011 the Scottish Government published a report¹⁴ on the decisions and calculations it made in designing the samples for the three remaining population surveys from 2012 to 2015. The Scottish Government told us that it already had a good understanding of user needs and priorities, and that it took this information into account in deciding to make these changes to the population surveys.

Statistics Authority view

The Statistics Authority concludes that the Scottish Government has adopted a systematic approach to planning changes to its population surveys. It has also taken steps to ensure that it has a good understanding of users' needs and priorities for these statistics. The Scottish Government has published a range of documents – including its long-term strategy, minutes of relevant meetings, conference presentations and the methods for designing sample surveys. This flow of information helped to keep users informed about Scottish Government's evolving plans for the surveys, through to the summer of 2010.

The Scottish Government discussed a range of options with the co-ordinating committee for the surveys, and at its stakeholder conference in autumn 2010, although only limited information about each option was provided. It would have been useful if the Scottish Government had published more detailed information about its preferred options, in the context of the need to make cost savings, and invited users' views on these options, before taking any final decisions.

The Scottish Government has only published limited information about the impact that the planned changes will have on users, and no information about the scale of expected savings, though we believe these to be substantial. The Scottish Government told us that it would not be appropriate to publish information about survey costs and cost savings in the run-up to competitive tendering exercises for survey work. The Scottish Government's report on the methods it used to design the survey samples discusses various issues and

¹⁴ <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Statistics/About/SurveyDesigns201215>

assumptions underpinning the changes. However, the report contains a lot of technical language which non-expert users may find difficult to follow.

The Statistics Authority has concluded that it would be helpful to users, and consistent with the Code of Practice for Official Statistics, if the Scottish Government were to publish an accessible summary of the changes, and their impacts, including information about:

- the rationale for changing the survey samples and different options that were considered;
- the main changes to the survey sample sizes, how these will affect the reliability of the estimates for different geographies, and the impact that this will have on users; and
- the main changes to the frequency of the surveys, and the impact that this will have on users.