

Social Survey Strategic Forum Terms of Reference

[Last updated: 10 March 2026]

1. Introduction

The Social Survey Strategic Forum was established in Spring 2026. It provides an open and transparent forum for survey organisations, UK government departments, and devolved governments to discuss sector-wide challenges, align collective efforts and foster a culture of collaboration across the social survey sector.

2. Purpose

The Forum was established following a discussion between the National Statistician, Director of Social Surveys (ONS), Director of Social, Local and Census Statistics Directorate (ONS), and the Chief Executive of the National Centre for Social Research (NatGen). It addresses the growing need for key survey organisations to collaborate regularly on shared challenges and explore collective solutions within the social survey landscape.

Across the UK survey sector, all organisations are facing similar and persistent challenges: declining response rates, rising operational costs, and increasing difficulty in engaging diverse populations. These issues are not isolated. They affect the entire sector and require a collective response. Simultaneously, opportunities such as technological innovation and the integration of administrative and digital data demand coordinated approaches to ensure quality and trust. By coming together through the Social Survey Strategic Forum, organisations can share expertise, align strategies, and work collaboratively to solve problems and overcome challenges as one unified sector.

3. Objectives

- Share insights on emerging challenges and opportunities across the Survey Sector
- Promote best practice and innovation in survey design and delivery
- Strengthen collaboration between organisations to improve survey quality and efficiency

4. Scope of Discussion

The Forum will provide a strategic platform for top leaders across government and the wider survey sector to examine the current and future challenges that the social survey system must address. Suggested discussion points will include:

- The future sustainability of voluntary social surveys and the implications for government data collection.
- How government bodies and the wider data-collection sector can build a shared understanding of future challenges and opportunities, including how

research on alternative data sources and non-response bias can inform good practice and improve overall data quality.

- The role and reputation of the survey sector in an era of declining public trust, and how the sector positions itself to remain credible, trustworthy, and relevant.
- Improving the overall quality and robustness of social survey data, including sector-wide survey capability, respondent engagement, and survey coverage.
- Future skills and capabilities needed across the survey landscape to meet emerging strategic demands.

The Forum will not cover any commercially sensitive topics, such as:

- Specific surveys, contracts, procurement activities, or planned new work.
- Specific survey topics, themes, or requirements that could influence competitive positioning.
- Decisions or agreements relating to future research commissioning, joint projects, or collaborative bidding.
- Specific details of organisations operational processes.

5. Chair, Membership and Role of Members

This is an open invitation group aimed at top strategic leaders across the survey sector. While we encourage teams to support engagement, only a single attendee per organisation is requested. To ensure fairness of opportunity, organisations with more than one member will be encouraged to rotate attendance.

Invitation details will be shared openly via the UK Statistics Authority (UKSA) website and through correspondence where appropriate. ONS reserves the right to confirm membership based on the following criteria:

1. Invitees are a top strategic leader within their organisation
2. Invitees demonstrate strong expertise and experience in the survey sector
3. There is equal representation of attendees across organisations

Membership will be reviewed annually and shared openly on the UKSA website.

All members must complete a conflict-of-interest form, which will be stored and reviewed regularly by the Commercial Team within ONS.

The Forum will be chaired by the National Statistician, with the ONS Director of Social Surveys serving as Interim Chair.

Secretariat will be provided by ONS.

Membership of the Social Survey Strategic Forum will be confirmed in April 2026, following Expressions of Interest via the Open Invitation hosted on the UKSA website.

Delegates must be pre-approved by the Chair and meet membership criteria.

We expect membership to consist of around 12 organisations.

6. Meetings

The first meeting will be held on 22 April 2026. The frequency of subsequent meetings will be agreed by members within that meeting.

The secretariat will coordinate timing and location of all meetings. The chair may convene additional meetings as deemed necessary.

The Chair may invite other relevant experts as appropriate to support meetings agendas or actions.

Agendas and papers will be circulated at least 7 days before meetings.

Final decision of agenda items will be made by the Chair.

7. Reporting

The Secretariat will send meeting minutes to all members no later than 14 days following a meeting.

Final minutes will be published on the UKSA website no later than six weeks following the meeting.

8. Transparency and confidentiality

The Social Survey Strategic Forum will operate transparently. All meeting agendas, papers, and minutes will be published shortly after each meeting. Panel members will have the opportunity to comment on minutes before their publication, on issues of accuracy. The Chair will have final approval of minutes.

9. Other Information

Effectiveness of meetings and its terms of reference will be reviewed annually.