

MARP report on TLFS methods

July 2026

This report on TLFS design and methods draws on a high-level overview presented to the main MARP panel and a more detailed update considered by the specialist sub-panel. References to MARP below include both the panel and the sub-panel.

MARP is assured that the statistical methods planned for TLFS are based on robust and well-established survey design and weighting approaches, supported by appropriate methodological assurance. Members would nevertheless like continued assurance that the combination of bias-adjustment weighting methods remains proportionate and does not lead to unintended over-adjustment, together with further evidence about the interaction of the various methodological components.

Although the methods are sound, they have so far only had limited success in addressing the low overall response rate, especially the attrition in the panel element of the core TLFS. MARP encourages further work to improve and sustain response and retention rates, in support of outputs that can achieve the desired measures of quality and success in the longer term. Behavioural adaptive interventions and more targeted response follow-up, including “knock to nudge”, need further development to ensure that the sample remains representative of the target population.

MARP also supports the planned approach to methods development, including the methods freeze and the minimisation of further survey-design changes, which should provide the stability needed for analysis, assessment and decision-making. Even with the freeze, considerable work remains to deliver the weighting approaches required for the full range of outputs. The full effects of the TS11 changes will take time to feed through into survey estimates, and methods currently under development cannot be fully optimised until sufficient data are available.

Transition before optimisation is likely to result in further changes to the estimates as methods continue to evolve, making it difficult to provide users with a single coherent set of adjusted back series. MARP would therefore prefer the decision to transition to be taken only once the methodological approach has been optimised and fully assured. MARP nevertheless recognises that, in practice, the timing of transition will require a balance between timeliness and methodological quality.

MARP agrees that further methodological improvements using administrative data should be introduced after transition, once the methods have been fully developed and assured. This would preserve stability ahead of transition and allow resources to remain focused on assuring the current methodology. There is, however, no reason not to make greater immediate use of administrative data to diagnose problems with TLFS, particularly related to non-response bias.

MARP welcomes the quality improvements in the TLFS, although, of course, the scale of the eventual improvement remains uncertain.