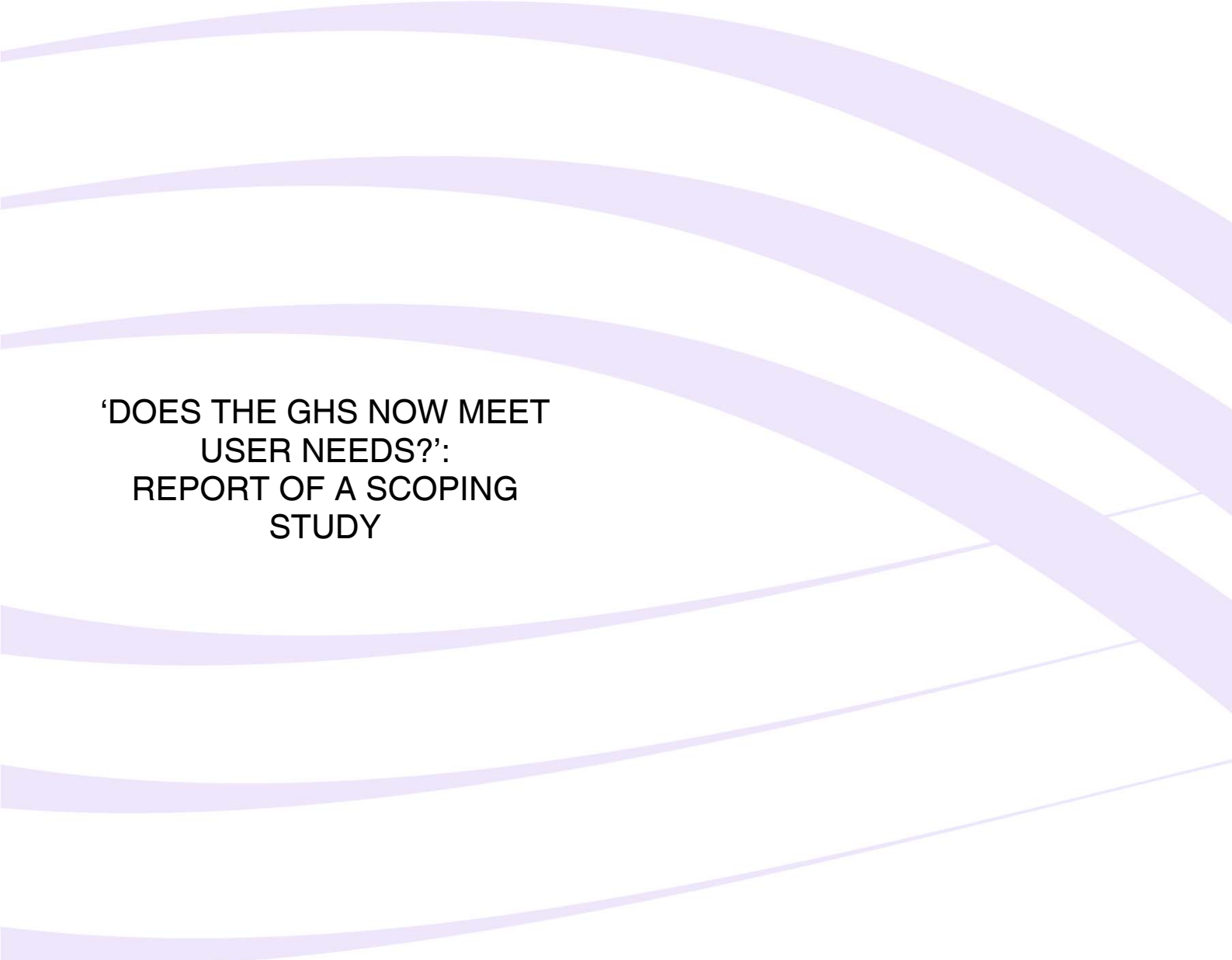


Statistics Commission



**'DOES THE GHS NOW MEET
USER NEEDS?':
REPORT OF A SCOPING
STUDY**

**Statistics Commission Report No. 8
June 2002**

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‘Does the GHS Now Meet User Needs?’: Report of a Scoping Study

**Prepared for the Commission by
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Introduction

1. This paper reports the conclusions of a small scoping study to establish whether it was appropriate to launch more substantive work on the question 'does the General Household Survey now meet users' needs?'
2. The Statistics Commission had originally planned to undertake or commission a study of the extent to which the GHS met users needs for two reasons:
 - the symbolic importance of the survey to many users following the cancellation of the 1997 GHS;
 - ONS itself had noted that the GHS was a good survey to review because it was leading the way in terms of dissemination for other surveys.
 - However, initial work to prepare for this study indicated that 2002 might be too early to undertake a substantive work and so this shorter study was undertaken to establish what the appropriate timing might be.

Background

4. The GHS is a continuous household survey in Great Britain using a stratified design in which individuals in the selected sample households are interviewed face-to-face. The annual achieved sample size is around 8,500 households; the main results of the survey are produced for financial years and published by ONS in reports entitled *Living in Britain*.
5. A range of demographic, social and socio-economic topics are covered by core questions included in the GHS. In addition, the survey has been used to collect information, with a frequency of 1 to 5 years, about a wide range of subjects including: health and related topics; use of social services by the elderly; participation in sports and leisure activities; and informal carers.
6. The GHS was suspended in 1997 – the reaction of users to the suspension confirmed the importance of the GHS and how highly it was regarded amongst those that used it.
7. The ONS subsequently decided that a major review of all the government funded multi-purpose social surveys (GHS, LFS, FES and IPS) was required to ensure that the needs for social survey data are met as cost effectively as possible. A summary of this review (released in July 1997), highlighting those views relating to the GHS, is presented in Appendix B.
8. The ONS undertook some development work after this review. They looked at sample design, data collection, questionnaire content and data processing. A summary of their work is presented in Appendix C.
9. The 2000/1 GHS saw the introduction of many enhancements to the methodology of the GHS and a basic change to the way in which the survey is planned and run. These improvements were all designed within the basic proviso that there should be no loss to the sets of time series data, which have built up since the inception of the survey.

Method of working

10. The study was carried out in house. There were three elements to the study:
 - seek the views of the GHS user group, which is based at the Data Archive in the University of Essex. We asked if there had been any discussion or research on the changes that were made to the GHS in terms of sample design, data collection, questionnaire content etc, in fact anything that could have had an impact on user requirements from the GHS. *Views were received in December 2001 from Louise Corti who runs the group. The full reply is in Appendix D.*
 - meet with the ONS to request supporting documentation, particularly the report on the review of ONS multi-purpose surveys, which was conducted in 1997. This is a lengthy document, which looked at the Labour Force Survey, the Family Expenditure Survey, the International Passenger Survey as well as the GHS. Following this, a paper was produced which set out proposals for the new continuous General Household Survey. The paper included an Annex – ‘Specification of requirements’ which has been updated over time. *The meeting was held in December 2001 and the documentation was received at the end of January 2002. Examine user comments, from the documentation received, against the new release of the GHS as published on the ONS website.*
 - identify other users of the GHS and seek their views – those who don't belong to the User Group and didn't take part in the ONS review.

Findings

Views from the GHS User Group

11. Louise Corti, who runs the GHS User Group, mentioned that the only issue they had was about the information available on how to use weights. The ONS have fed this into their current output – as she said they would. Every table in the 'Living in Britain' website (www.statistics.gov.uk/lib/index.html) includes the weighted base and the unweighted sample.
12. Trend tables show unweighted and weighted figures for 1998 making it a 'bridging year'. The ONS have told users (on the website) that care should be taken when interpreting trend data or individual tables compared with other years as part of a time series.
13. The website has a detailed chapter on weighting and grossing. It explains how and why weights have been used, the disadvantages and advantages of the various methods they've used and the effects of weighting on the data. The language used should be easily understood by most ordinary end users. There are detailed tables of weights for more technical users.
14. The data from the 2000 GHS had been released on the 'Living in Britain' website before any printed version. According to Louise Corti, this isn't a problem for any of users who make up the user group but there could be

issues of access and exclusion for other end users such as students – there is now a printed version available for purchase.

15. Louise Corti, in replying to the question of whether another review was needed, said that members of the user group were rather 'consulted out' at the moment. This is understandable as consultation on the changes was only completed in the middle of 2001.

The main messages from the ONS documentation

16. Only two sections have had substantial changes. The family information section has been expanded to include new questions on cohabitation histories.
17. The questions on education were revised; because of its larger sample size, the LFS is the main source of estimates on education. The educational measures needed by GHS customers are: respondents' highest educational qualification, the age at which they finished their full-time education, and whether or not they are currently a full-time student. Prior to 2000, the GHS asked respondents for details of all their qualifications, and used the resulting information to calculate their highest qualification. A different approach has been introduced from 2000, aimed at producing the same output, but by asking fewer questions – this is explained more fully in Annex A.
18. Only minor changes have been made to most other sections of the GHS questionnaire. For example, the questions on second jobs have been removed as the Labour Force Survey (LFS) is the main source of data on this topic. Questions on Personal Equity Plans (PEPs) were deleted as PEPs are no longer available. New questions have been added asking about access to the Internet and visits to practice nurses in GP surgeries.
19. Appendix B highlights user comments during the 97/98 review. The comments received covered a variety of issues and most of them seem to have been taken on board by the ONS – the fact that changes (highlighted above) have been kept to a minimum backs this up.

Views from other users

20. There was limited contact made with other users (who were not members of the GHS user group). The few comments that were received suggested that they had not yet made much use of the new GHS but plan to do so. The 'Living in Britain' website only came on-line in December 2001 and a printed version was only available after this.

Conclusion

21. The findings above indicate that:
 - the ONS has taken on board most user comments made in the course of the review;
 - the GHS user group is happy with the changes made;

- limited contact with other users (ie not members of the GHS user group) suggests that they have not yet made much use of the new GHS but plan to do so;
 - since consultation on the changes was only completed in the middle of 2001 there is a risk of 'consultation fatigue' among the relevant parts of the user community.
22. Overall the changes made in GHS 2000/01, including in the format of the report need time to 'bed down' before users can sensibly comment on them.
23. This report recommends therefore that the Commission should not undertake further work in this area at present but should return to the issue in summer 2003 to consider whether a study would then be helpful.

Lovedeep Vaid
Statistics Commission
June 2002

Appendix A:

Background to the General Household Survey (GHS)

1. The GHS is unique in providing a continuous and flexible source of information about a wide range of social fields and their inter-relationships, eg employment, education and earnings; family formation and housing; health, use of services and income. It also helps to fill in some of the gaps in information about social changes between the decennial population censuses.
2. The survey is sponsored by the Office for National Statistics and by several other Government Departments including:
 - the Department for Transport, Local Government and the Regions;
 - the Department of Health;
 - the Department for Culture, Media and Sport;
 - the Department for Education and Skills;
 - the Inland Revenue; and
 - the Department for Work and Pensions.
3. The information is used by the sponsoring Departments for planning, policy and monitoring purposes, and to present a picture of households, families and people in Great Britain.
4. A dual weighting scheme has been introduced for the 2000/01 GHS. First, weighting to compensate for non-response in the sample, based on known under-coverage in the Census-linked study of non-response. Second, the (weighted) sample has been weighted (grossed) up to match known population distributions (as used in the LFS).
5. The GHS 2000/01 'Living in Britain' report is the first major ONS report to be published as a web-designed publication. The 'Living in Britain' report of the 2000/1 survey was selected as a prototype for the development of a content management system suitable for use across the entire National Statistics website. This is the first major ONS report to be published first as a web document and second in paper.
6. Only two sections have had substantial changes in 2000/01. The family information section has been expanded to include new questions on cohabitation histories developed through a programme of cognitive and pilot testing.
7. The questions on education were also revised. Educational data are used primarily as analysis variables by the GHS; because of its larger sample size, the LFS is the main source of estimates on education. The educational measures needed by GHS customers are: respondents' highest educational qualification, the age at which they finished their full-time education, and whether or not they are currently a full-time student.
8. Prior to 2000, the GHS asked respondents for details of all their qualifications, and used the resulting information to calculate their highest qualification. A different approach has been introduced from 2000, aimed at producing the same output, but by asking fewer questions. Respondents are first asked if they have any qualifications. Those who do are shown a card with a list of qualifications and asked to name all the qualifications they have. They are

then asked the minimum number of questions needed to establish their highest qualification. Thus, for example, a respondent who says he or she has a degree is asked whether they have a higher degree and, if they do, whether it is a doctorate, a masters or some other higher degree. The respondent needs to be asked no further questions about their qualifications, as they will be coded as 'Degree or equivalent'. Slightly more questions are required for respondents who have a range of vocational qualifications, as these can be at a variety of levels. Thus, for example, a respondent who has both a BTEC and an RSA qualification is asked about both in order to establish which is at the higher level.

Appendix B: Review of ONS Multi-Purpose Surveys, July 1997

Summarised from the document *Review of ONS multi-purpose surveys* supplied by the Office for National Statistics

1. The public expenditure provision for the ONS in 1997/98 was insufficient to maintain the Labour Force Survey, the Family Expenditure Survey, the International Passenger Survey and the GHS at previous levels. The GSS Committee on Social Statistics (GSS(S)) considered that across the board cuts in sample size would have been inappropriate as this would have put at risk the quality of the wide range of social and socio-economic statistics collected in these surveys. The view of ONS was that the least damaging way of reducing expenditure in 1997/98 was to suspend the GHS field-work for this financial year pending the outcome of the review. This decision was announced on 16 January 1997.
2. A major consultation exercise was undertaken with data users both inside and outside government. An initial paper was circulated on 18 February 1997 with a further supplementary paper being circulated following an RSS meeting entitled 'Do We Still Need the GHS? Alternative Sources of Multi- Purpose Household Survey Data'. Some 23 replies were received from Government Departments (representing 14 Departments) and 74 received from outside users.
3. The review concluded that there was a continuing need for the GHS, but that the survey should be redesigned to ensure that it was being carried out in the most efficient and cost-effective way. GHS fieldwork was suspended for the 1999-2000 financial year while development work was carried out in preparation for the relaunch of the survey. A summary of this development work is presented in Appendix C.

Issues Considered

4. A number of general issues which may affect the data sources people chose to use were raised in the consultation documents that were circulated and throughout the consultation process. Many comments were received on these issues and they are summarised in this section.

Geographical coverage of alternative sources

5. The GHS yields data for Great Britain only. Some of the main alternative sources for the GHS, for example only cover smaller areas e.g. the Survey of English Housing - England only; the Health Survey for England - England only; the British Crime Survey - England and Wales. Although, in some circumstances similar surveys are conducted in the 'missing' areas eg health surveys are also carried out in Scotland and Wales, there is little or no coordination between the surveys and thus it is difficult to merge the results.
6. This was cited in a great number of cases (particularly by those using the health data from the GHS wishing to get a national picture) as a reason for using the GHS as opposed to an alternative source.

Frequency of Surveys

7. This was a more complex issue with views differing greatly. For those using ONS data as input to the production of key statistical series e.g. the GHS inputs to the national population projections; there is a natural resistance to a decrease in the frequency of data supply. This was also the case for those using GHS data for long term trend analyses, where it was argued, that annual data were required to adequately monitor trends and to evaluate the reliability of data. Conversely for those using GHS data for investigative work on, say the characteristics of a specific group of the population, this was not such an important issue, except where data had to be pooled over a number of years to achieve an adequate sample size.

Survey Reports and Access to data

8. There is a general demand for some sort of written report - views vary on the value of commentary, but the arguments put forward for producing full reports such as *Living in Britain* are sound - certainly changes should not be made without careful consideration and review. It was felt that the need for a GHS report with its wide range of data of interest to a diverse group of organisations and individuals was particularly strong. Some of the comments were as follows:
9. *Department of Health*: Essential results of surveys disseminated effectively and widely - same medium not most effective for all users - written report essential part of making data accessible to a range of users who may not have the time or expertise to use raw data. DH has in the past funded separate written reports for GHS topics eg Informal Carers, as they regard them of importance in ensuring the information is available to inform policy development.
10. *ONS: Demography and Health Division*: Regular publication of tables is welcomed - could live without the commentary. Much more important is a user friendly, accessible database of accumulating data for secondary analysis (*talking of GHS*). Accept report with graphics and commentary useful for customers in policy, charity, educational etc. areas who do not want to do secondary analysis. GHS under-exploited - a variety of products could be produced.
11. *Ceridwen Roberts* argued at the RSS seminar that it is only by these means that large categories of people and organisations who both need and wish to use the results of the GHS (and other surveys of comparable weight and authority) can access them readily, even though they may lack the time and the skills to analyse the case-level data for themselves.
12. *SS*: (Talking of ways to improve the GHS): ‘So as to improve recognition of data sources, ONS might consider a more differentiated marketing and dissemination strategy, focused on distinct groups of users and purposes. Examples that have been suggested include:
 - issuing headline social indicators sooner after fieldwork than at present, but largely;
 - based on 2-3 year rolling averages;
 - more emphasis on “plain English” topic reports;

- main report to contain less commentary (by use of cross-references to topic reports) and to be available on paper and on Internet;
 - consider issuing the GHS on CD ROM (comprising topic reports, commentary, main report tables and methodology for all years).'
13. *Faculty of Public Health Medicine:* Most LHAs use the published annual reports - existence of well produced reports is one of the reasons for the widespread use of the GHS.

Sample Design (in order to pool data across years):

14. Many users of GHS data pool data over a number of years in order to obtain a viable sample size for the group under consideration. Both the reduction in frequency of a survey and in the sample size of a survey would affect the value of pooled data sets.
15. To quote an example: *Department of Health:* Pool GHS data across years - a biennial GHS would not meet the needs of researchers who are already combining two or more years data to look at particular sub-groups of the population.

Government needs for the GHS

16. In addition to specific survey requirements, some general comments were received which needed to be considered when deciding future options:
17. Department of National Heritage: Some departments are not resourced to collect information they require through dedicated surveys. Use of ONS surveys (eg sponsoring questions on the GHS or Omnibus Survey) provides a cost effective way of meeting many statistical needs.
18. Government Actuary's Department: There are an enormous number and variety of users of national population projections. They are, in turn, the starting point for a number of more specialised projections made elsewhere in government e.g. sub-national, labour force and household projections. The producers of these projections are all in complete agreement on the value and importance of GHS data to the production of these data.
19. The GHS provides two main areas of data for governmental use: demographic/household information and health related information:
20. The GHS is considered to be an unrivalled source of data for demographic purposes by departments such as GAD and ONS (Demography and Health Division) and has been the key data source in developing household projection techniques for DoE. This is because of the wide range of data collected, the ability to cross-analyse demographic and socio-economic data, the 'demographic focus' of the survey, its relatively large sample size, high response rate and proven data quality.
21. The GHS provides a unique source of data which combines information on households' health, use of health and other services and socio-economic characteristics. The survey has been heavily used by the Department of Health (and outside health/PSS researchers) for several different purposes

connected with the efficient and equitable spending of over £35 billion of public expenditure. It is currently used to measure a number of Health of the Nation Targets.

The wider needs for the GHS

22. RSS: 'The RSS meeting, held on 5 March 1997, highlighted the wide-ranging value of the GHS. It is used by academics whose work is of value to government, the voluntary sector, pressure groups and journalists. It is used by organisations such as the Family Policy Studies Centre, which reach groups and institutions which, indirectly, benefit very greatly from the information contained in the GHS. Thus the GHS and ONS social surveys more generally, have a role that goes far beyond the immediate use of the commissioned data.'
23. Enfield and Haringey Health Authority: Multi-dimensionality of GHS is a key asset for NHS users as it allows them to test hypotheses about the correlation between health measures and factors that may affect health status or use of health services on a national basis.
24. Kingston and Richmond Health Authority: The GHS is a starting point when assessing local health needs by giving an indication of the picture at the national level. Of particular value: smoking, alcohol consumption, contraception and accidents and the relationship of these with socio-economic variables.
25. Health Education Authority: Advises government and undertakes research consultation and policy development in support of national and local health promotion activity. GHS -invaluable data on health perception and use of health services and health related behaviours such as smoking, alcohol consumption, contraceptive use, physical activity, leisure and accidents. In addition a wealth of information about social, economic and family circumstances and their impact on health. Proposed government White Paper on measures to reduce tobacco consumption for which GHS will be crucial in formulating and monitoring policy.
26. National Perinatal Epidemiology Unit: Funded by DH. Associations can be examined using data items within person based records rather than simply comparing aggregated data. GHS is only source for national data on Birth Control changes over time.

Overlaps between surveys – possible alternative sources

27. Some topic sections that appear regularly or periodically on the GHS are or could be included in other surveys. In particular the Health Survey for England covers some of the health topics. Sponsoring departments were asked to indicate whether they could use alternative sources. The Omnibus survey was often quoted as a possible alternative. In summary, although the Omnibus survey could be used for some topics, many others commented on its high cost compared to the GHS.

28. *General Household Survey with the Health Survey for England*: Many of the health topics on the GHS are also covered by the HSfE. However the Department of Health, who commission the HSfE do not consider this an unnecessary overlap:
- ‘...the much newer HSfE contains more information on specific health conditions than the GHS but currently no information on general use of services and less information on respondents’ wider education, employment, housing and other socio-economic circumstances. While it is proposed that the Health Survey should contain more information in future on general use of services it is not envisaged that it could ever adequately replace the GHS entirely.
- ‘The Department believes the two surveys as entirely complementary rather than unnecessarily duplicating each other, the focus of the GHS being on users of Health and Personal Social Services and the wider welfare state whilst the Health Survey focuses on health status.’
29. The HSfE, only covers England - similar surveys for Scotland and Wales are not necessarily consistent.
30. Since a large number of overlaps occurred between the GHS and another survey it seemed valuable to also consider for what topics on the GHS was required that cross-analysis was possible. Nearly all respondents who use the GHS cited its value due to the range of variables it carries which can be analysed together. Many examples stated wanted specific topics cross-analysed with core data. As examples, a few specific examples have been taken from the responses received to the review:
31. DH: Health topics with ‘wider education, employment, housing and other socio-economic circumstances’.
32. Faculty of Public Health Medicine: Health, lifestyle and use of services.
33. EOC: Carers/Elderly/Pensions and Childcare in combination with individual, household and employment data.

Cost drivers

34. The annual cost savings of reducing the sample size by half would be in the region of 25 per cent; for the full sample size but every two years the annual saving would be around 40 per cent; a reduction in the length of the questionnaire by five minutes per person (about one sixth) would yield just a one per cent cost saving. The bulk of the fieldwork costs are interviewers’ time (both for carrying out interviews and travelling to, from and within the area) and mileage expenses. It is estimated that the GHS would have to be cut by over 50 per cent before significant cost savings could be made; a cut of this size would reduce the average number of days an interviewer would spend travelling to, from and within a sampled area.

Possible options

35. During the course of the review a number of different options had been considered, some more viable than others. The preferred option with the majority of customers was to re-introduce the GHS pretty much the same as before- although there were some, particularly those who use local area data who could see more benefits in a merged data collection approach, or requested a larger sample survey. The GHS has major policy uses, and many arguments were put forward against either reducing the sample size or the frequency of the survey, although it was felt that further consideration could probably be given to both of these, but that these would take some time to consider.
36. The main conclusion drawn was that the GHS should be re-instated and remain for the future until a suitable alternative medium for collecting the data has been identified.

Appendix C:

Development work for the new continuous element of the GHS

Summarised from a document *The New Continuous General Household Survey* supplied by the Office for National Statistics

1. As part of the preparation for the re-introduction of the GHS in 2000, Social Survey Division's Methodology Unit undertook a review of the sample design. A set of 15 variables was agreed with GHS customers:
 - the proportion of adults who are heavy drinkers;
 - the proportion of households with an elderly person/people;
 - the proportion of respondents who have consulted a GP in the last 2 weeks;
 - households with a divorced Head Of Household;
 - households with an ethnic minority;
 - households that are owner occupied;
 - respondents who were an inpatient in the last year;
 - respondents who have a limiting longstanding illness;
 - households that are single person households;
 - employed with a pension scheme;
 - adults who are current smokers;
 - families with dependent children that are headed by a single parent;
 - children that are stepchildren;
 - households below bedroom standard;
 - and adults who cohabit.

2. Analysis by the Social Survey Methodology Unit showed that precision would be increased for all these variables by using different stratifiers to those used before the review. The sample stratifiers used were:
 - Government Office Region with a metropolitan split and London divided into eight areas (four in inner and four in outer London);
 - the proportion of households with no car;
 - the proportion of households with a head of household in socio-economic groups 1-5 and 13;
 - and the proportion of persons who are pensioners.

3. The Social Survey Division also reviewed the methods of data collection. The review showed little scope for doing more interviewing on first contact or reducing the number of interviewer visits without increasing the number of proxy interviews. There was also little scope for cost savings by using alternative methods of data collection. Small changes have been made - particularly the use of telephone interviews in certain circumstances.

4. On the basis of SSD's investigation, the Steering Group concluded that the GHS should use the following methods of data collection from April 2000. Interviewers will continue to try to gather all adults together before interviewing. Paper questionnaires will be used for the self-completion sections of the interview. If any household members have still not been contacted or agreed to take part once interviewing has started, interviewers will make as many additional visits as they can within the fieldwork period before taking proxy interviews. They will seek permission from respondents

interviewed by proxy to be contacted by SSD's Telephone Interviewing Unit, who will then try to carry out a full interview.

5. The ONS also consulted GHS customers and data users about the questionnaire content. Only minor changes were made to most sections of the GHS questionnaire, some new questions were included and there was some harmonisation of definitions with other surveys. Questionnaire content:
6. The GHS will use the new Household Reference Person (HRP) definition instead of the current Head of Household definition from April 2000. The survey will also include a new question on ethnicity which is harmonised with the Census. In common with other government surveys, the GHS will use the new National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification (NSSEC) from April 2001. The questions on second jobs have been removed, as the Labour Force Survey (LFS) is the main source of data on this topic. Questions on Personal Equity Plans (PEPs) were deleted as PEPs are no longer available. New questions have been added asking about access to the Internet and visits to practice nurses in GP surgeries. More substantial changes have been made to the education questions, and SSD has carried out a programme of cognitive and other testing to develop new questions on cohabitation histories.
7. Data processing was also reviewed, with the aim of developing a more streamlined system which will maintain the same level of quality. The ONS plans to speed up the timetable for release of data, to have simpler databases, to reduce the number of derived variables from 750 or so to a core of 250 and to improve the documentation for data users.
8. Unpublished GHS data will be made available to researchers, for a charge, if resources are available and provided that confidentiality of informants is preserved.

**Appendix D:
Reply from the GHS User Group**

From: Corti, Louise
Sent: Tuesday, December 11, 2001
Subject: Review of GHS?

We have been running the GHS user group for some time now. The group meets about once a year. We have had 2 meetings to discuss the design and dissemination of the most recent GHS. Any specific feedback, if any, was actually directed to ONS. I have enclosed the links to our web pages for the last meeting in May 2001.

As far as we are aware most of the GHS users (150ish per year) are really happy with the data and output from the GHS. The biggest issue is information on how to use weights for the survey, which ONS are well aware of and are feeding this into the current output. I would have expected the major review of and consultation for the GHS that has taken place over the past 2 years would have gathered plenty of feedback that you could draw on. Do you really need another review? To be quite frank, I think the user community may be feeling rather 'consulted out' on this matter!

I hope this information helps. If I manage to glean any more info then I'll get back to you.

Louise Corti
Director, User Services and Qualitative Data Service, UK Data Archive
University of Essex
Colchester CO4 3SQ

Appendix E: References

1. *A Review of ONS Multi-Purpose Surveys*, Office for National Statistics, July 1997.
2. *The New Continuous General Household Survey, (GSS (S) 98 6)*, Office for National Statistics, Socio-Economic Division, February 1998.
3. *General Household Survey 2000-2004, Updated - Annex A Specification of Requirements*, Office for National Statistics, Socio-Economic Division, July 2000.
4. *Living in Britain*, Office for National Statistics website document, <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/lib/index.html>.