

Title: Social Survey Response: Issues and Solutions

Categorisation
BUS Field - Response

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1. Background:

Social survey response rates are at their lowest level ever. Of particular concern is the response rate for the LFS Wave 1, which is the highest priority Social Survey. There was a step change in response in April 2006 that exacerbated a general downward trend evident over the previous decade.

This paper outlines the issues contributing to declining response and the steps taken to improve the situation. It should be noted that declining participation in social surveys is a feature of most comparable survey taking countries, however this paper concentrates on ONS specific issues.

2. Issues:

The following issues are all contributory factors towards the drop in response rates since April 2006. The recruitment, retention and capacity issues have always been an issue, but have been exacerbated by the addition of the Wealth and Assets Survey and the CPM in the first quarter of 2007.

- **Recruitment:** It has proved difficult to recruit staff in areas such as London, where the cost of living is high and the labour market is competitive. The complicated contract, terms and conditions and relative low pay (compared with jobs with similar entrance criteria) are all contributory factors.
- **Retention:** Field Force Interviewer turnover is 30%. This increases recruitment and training pressures. Turnover is highest in areas where recruitment and gaining response to Social Surveys is most difficult (cities and major conurbations). Turnover is concentrated among new and inexperienced interviewers.
- **New/inexperienced interviewers:** Increasing turnover results in an increase in the proportion of new/inexperienced interviewers. This is concentrated in areas where response rates are lowest. Analysis confirms that interviewer response rates increase with experience. On average interviewers with five years or more experience have response rates that are 7 percentage points higher.
- **Field Force Capacity:** Field Interviewer vacancy rates have been running at around 10% since the build up and introduction of the Wealth and Assets Survey (May/June 2006). This is higher than anticipated.
- **Abstraction:** In addition there have been higher than usual abstraction rates from the field with increased briefings (for integration), new surveys (Child Psych and Morbidity, Census Test Evaluation) and pilots (IHS).
- **Wealth and Assets:** This is a large and complex survey, with a very variable interview length. Not knowing whether the interview will take 88 minutes (average) or 4 hours (max) has made it difficult both for interviewers to plan their work and for them to gain agreement from subjects to participate in the survey.
- **Field Force Integration:** The integration of Field Managers and the Field Interviewers has been a significant change. When the Field Managers integrated (April 2006) all FMs had to learn a range of new surveys. In addition former GFF FMs had to start allocating LFS work in the Field for the first time.
- **SCMS/Management Information:** Integrating the FMs and Field Force without SCMS has proved

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incredibly difficult. SCMS would have provided managers with the tool to keep on top of allocation and respond to changes in the Field quickly and efficiently. There has been significant HQ abstraction for a range of staff in the Survey Management/Development and Business Development Teams for longer than anticipated to work on the delivery of SCMS.

- **Management/other priorities:** Field management has been stretched. a significant period of change has involved managing BAU in addition to delivering change and development work on significant Odyssey projects (IHS and SCMS) contributing towards bids for new survey work (EHS, WAS) and managing the issues outlined above. In June and July the CTES and the IHS pilot will be in the field in addition to our usual survey workload.

3. Current Initiatives:

There are several key general initiatives that Field Branch has undertaken to improve response and address the issues outlined below. Many of these initiatives will deliver in the medium/longer term.

- **Recruitment:** Locally targetted recruitment has been pursued over the first quarter of this year in addition to the regular national campaigns. This has been an expensive initiative but has doubled the usual number of applicants attending Field Interviewer Training (FIT) in February and March of this year. On-line recruitment has also been developed. The Interviewer contract has been simplified and terms and conditions significantly improved to try and attract and retain applicants.
- **Retention:** Improved recruitment packs have been developed to try and ensure that we get the right applicants. This should reduce short term turnover. Assessment centres and the FIT have been developed at the advice of Barkers (recruitment consultants). Their advice was that demonstrating investment and commitment to prospective interviewers through a professional recruitment service encourages the view that the organisation values the roles that they are being recruited to. Mentors have been formally introduced to the Field to support new interviewers, although this has had a slight impact on interviewer availability.
- **Capacity Management:** Work is ongoing to develop robust figures for survey demand in hours by region. This will be combined with a workforce planning model to identify and predict vacancies and recruitment requirements.
- **Management Information:** A project has been set up to identify what information is required for effective management of the Field Force and to put in place interim measures and KPIs prior to the introduction of SCMS.
- **Allocation:** This has been moved to the Field. FMs now are able to plan the workload for all their interviewers across all surveys.
- **Performance Management:** Field Interviewers now have the same Performance Management System as HQ. In addition lists of interviewers whose performance has declined over the first quarter of this year or based on comparative poor performance by interviewer/area are being produced. FMs/RMs will be challenged to let HQ management know how this is being addressed. RMs have been set targets for Regional response, these are currently being reviewed.
- **Field Briefings:** Survey briefings are being moved to the Field and delivered by Field Trainers. This is reducing the time taken to address identified training needs in the Field.

4. Proposed Short Term Initiatives:

The following actions have been proposed to address the challenge of significantly improving LFS Wave 1 response rates over the next few months.

- **Unconditional incentive:** An unconditional incentive is introduced. This is an incentive that is sent with the advance letter and encourages response through a feeling of goodwill/obligation. It is an accepted practice in social surveys and was successfully employed in December, when the expected drop in response was lower than anticipated. The cost is around £10k per month and the expected improvement in response would be 1-2 percentage points.
- **London travel allowance:** Pay interviewers that work in London at London rates to encourage Interviewers from the surrounding areas to work in London. This could improve response in the Capital by 2-3 percentage points. The costs have yet to be established.
- **Contact rate bonus:** Pay a bonus to interviewers achieving contact rates in excess of 90%. This proposal needs work on costs, impact, feasibility and acceptability.
- **Prioritise experienced interviewers for the LFS:** This would have a negative effect on other surveys, but improve LFS response by around 1 percentage point.
- **Remove new interviewers from W 1 LFS:** Where possible/practical allocate new interviewers

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W2-5 and non-LFS work. This should improve W1 LFS response by up to 2 percentage points, but may impact on W2-5 response (although it is expected that this effect would be small).

- **Mobile Team:** Dedicating the mobile team the LFS. This will have a slight impact on other surveys (notably EHCS and WAS). There are no additional costs. This will consolidate LFS response and reduce a drop over June and July (with CTES and IHS).
- **Letter:** A letter from the National Statistician to all interviewers covering the importance of the work that they do (IPS, FIF and TU) and the current pressures on response rates.
- **Support Group Meetings:** SDCAS management should attend all Support Group Meetings for the next few months to stress the message on response rates. This will raise the issue of calling patterns and reinforce the need to call when most likely to find the subjects in, not when it is convenient to the interviewer. This will have a negligible cost, but may improve response by around 1 percentage point. This action will be pursued in the medium to long term.

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