

RSS-ONS-OSR Report from Roundtable on Survey Methodology

August 2025

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0 Background

The Royal Statistical Society (RSS), Office for National Statistics (ONS) and Office for Statistics Regulation (OSR) held a roundtable to discuss how the statistical system might respond to the challenge posed by declining survey response rates. The aim was to bring together experts from the RSS’s network with experts from the teams at ONS and OSR to explore whether developments in academic or commercial research methodology could usefully be deployed in the ONS’s survey programmes. This was the first in a planned series of roundtables, as part of a collaboration between the RSS, ONS and OSR, to help address statistical challenges on a range of topics for wider good.

The ONS has a vital role to play in delivering high quality economic statistics to inform decisions across government, business and wider society. Social and business surveys play a crucial role in providing the foundational data upon which economic statistics are built.

Survey response rates are declining across the world, and the problem is especially sharp [in the UK](#). In recent years, the ONS has faced significant challenges in maintaining the quality and reliability of its survey data. Since the pandemic, the long-term trend towards declining response rates to surveys has accelerated. It can be challenging to produce statistics based on surveys with low response rates, especially if the response rate varies over different parts of the population of interest.

The challenge that this trend poses for the UK statistical system has featured in three recent reviews: the [Lievesley Review of the UK Statistics Authority](#), [OSR’s Report on ONS Economic Statistics](#) and the [Devereux Review of the ONS](#). In response to the OSR review and the Devereux Review and in support of their [plan for](#)



[economic statistics](#), the ONS has recently launched a [Survey Improvement and Enhancement Plan for Economic Statistics](#) to set out its plans for increasing the reliability of its surveys.

This is an important and timely topic, and the contributing organisations are pleased to have coordinated a partnership in order to discuss how to help strengthen ONS surveys.

1 Roundtable objectives

The roundtable was held on 23 July 2025, at the ONS office at Marsham Street. There were two main objectives:

1. Set out developments in statistical methodology that could be deployed by the ONS to support their surveys and help to identify the most promising options.
2. Provide feedback on the ONS's Survey Improvement Plan and identify any ways in which it may be strengthened.

The three questions that were discussed were:

- What statistical techniques are available to help make survey responses as representative as possible?
- What statistical techniques can help draw reliable conclusions from unrepresentative survey data?
- What reflections do you have on the recent ONS Survey Improvement and Enhancement Plan?

2 Key recommendations

In this section we summarise the key recommendations that arose from the roundtable discussion in relation to the techniques available to help make survey responses as representative as possible and to help draw reliable conclusions from this data. In the following section we detail the discussion in response to each of the three questions.

2.1 *Techniques to help make survey responses representative*

- Qualitative and quantitative work should be undertaken to understand non-responders, including understanding responder and non-responder perspectives and trialling different methods to:
 - reduce response burden and fatigue – this could include a role for the ONS or for several organisations to work together collaboratively to combine and/or coordinate surveys;
 - motivate participants to respond to surveys (and to multiple surveys) by eg, highlighting the benefits of responding;
 - build trust and awareness;
 - tailor communication methods and style to increase responses; and
 - provide education on the importance of surveys, for example in schools.

It would be valuable to build an evidence base of ‘what works’ (eg, via randomised controlled trials), by survey organisations working together to design and implement investigations into what is effective that can deliver widely applicable results.

- Methods to increase the effectiveness of the workforce should be explored, so that interviewers are best equipped to engage and collect responses (eg, career pathways, recognising interviewing as a profession and raising skills).
- The potential of ONS data should be leveraged to aid sampling and to look at differences between responders and non-responders.
- Novel statistical approaches to enhance representativeness (detailed in [section 4.1 on page 5](#)) should be trialled.
- The cost of securing participation in surveys should be recognised, and coordination across surveys should ensure that offering financial incentives for some surveys does not negatively impact others.

2.2 *Statistical techniques to help draw reliable conclusions from unrepresentative survey data*

The group highlighted that statistical techniques cannot fix a broken system or inadequate data collection. Key recommendations included:

- continuing work on exploring alternative data sources (eg, administrative data);
- continuing work on improving data collection and analysis processes;
- focussing efforts on incorporating additional data sources, eg, for more refined weighting.

3 Overview of suggestions and discussion points

In this section we overview the roundtable discussion in response to each of the three questions.

3.1 *What statistical techniques are available to help make survey responses as representative as possible?*

The groups discussed both statistical and more general techniques to aid survey response representativeness. Discussion around more non-statistical techniques focussed on understanding how best to communicate with people to increase response rates and included:

- **Addressing response fatigue and reducing response burden** – for example by:
 - **Coordinating** surveys across different organisations or by combining surveys, to reduce competition for attention – this could be a role for the ONS, or several different organisations could be brought together to address the challenges collaboratively.

- **Indicating importance and shortening:** it could also be helpful to find a way to indicate the relative importance of different surveys – though we acknowledge that there will be different perspectives on this – and to shorten surveys. This will require working with users (including survey commissioners) to clarify the balance between inclusion of more questions and resulting data quantity and quality. It will be important to ask questions including which data is crucial and which data survey commissioners can live without, as the cost of collection at required quality level can be considerable.
- **Splitting questionnaires:** one option to reduce response burden is to split the questionnaire and ask different questions to different groups – mass imputation could then be carried out, or a proportion of the group could be invited back to answer the full set and responses from the first part of the survey could be used to weight non-responses in the second part.
- **Exploring motivation:** it would be helpful to explore how to motivate individuals to take part in multiple surveys, for example showcasing how different data sources can help provide greater insight on a topic and helping users understand why data is collected in different places.
- **Emphasising the benefit that participants would receive** by taking part in surveys and highlighting this reciprocal arrangement – for example highlighting how responses benefit society and shape the future, and highlighting specific aspects, eg, how data would feed in to decisions about local bus provision or the setting of national minimum wage. Work exploring how best to emphasise the benefit, and the impact of emphasising these benefits, would be valuable. These are essentially philanthropic arguments, but it is also worth considering any feedback that could be given directly to respondents.
- **Considering how to build trust and awareness**, for example building on ONS brand recognition and association; trialling different communication styles and channels and seeing what is effective in building trust; and ensuring that data privacy and protection are explained, including explaining that the government does not already hold this data. Advertising and working with campaigners and influencers could help – during the Covid-19 lockdown, TV adverts about the census led to an uptick in census responses. Blanket advertising would not be appropriate for sample surveys and budget would have to be considered, but publicity of some type could be a helpful tool.
- **Considering communication style and methods in order to motivate participants** – for example using a gentle, motivating tone for reminder letters rather than a disciplinary tone (as is used for overdue bill payments); sending out explanatory pre-survey letters; and streamlining touchpoints to have one point of contact rather than many. It may also be worthwhile considering how to build trust via methods of contact, for example using logos or known area codes when calling. It may also be worth considering alternative forms of contact as people are increasingly less likely to open letters or answer phones. Bespoke methods will likely be needed for different groups.

- **Education** – educating children so that in the shorter-term they can influence their parents to complete surveys eg the census, and in the longer-term so that they understand the importance of surveys themselves and respond to them themselves.
- **Workforce** – considering how to optimise the interviewer workforce, particularly given the challenges of engaging non-responsive households. One approach could be to professionalise the role, aligning it more closely with sales or outreach positions to better reflect the skills required. It would also be worthwhile considering how to create a path for career development and progression.

Discussion around statistical techniques to help make survey responses as representative as possible included:

- **Using ONS information to aid sampling** – eg to put together UK-wide information to aid commercial survey sampling, or to identify areas where under-represented groups are over-represented, which would be of use to many organisations trying to sample these groups.
- **Looking at differences between responders and non-responders** – eg via a non-response survey and looking at paradata (data that tells you about how the data was collected) on non-responders. The group acknowledged the challenges in recruiting non-responders to discuss their survey experiences, but highlighted that it can be valuable to collect data on reasons for not taking part, to understand where further investigation/efforts should be focused.
- **Ensuring that under-represented groups are recruited**, for example by cluster sampling and targeting certain groups more.
- **Considering adaptive survey design**, adjusting the design based on initial responses. One of the key aims of this would be to shift the focus away from maximising response rates to placing more attention on trying to get responses from seldom heard respondents in latter stages of the survey process, which would help to mitigate non-response bias.
- **Considering quota sampling** of different demographic groups – though the group acknowledged that nonprobability-based sample approaches can provide unreliable estimates.
- **Using Bayesian approaches to estimation**, including incorporating additional data.
- **Considering collecting non-representative data and then applying techniques** to make it representative (eg [Statistics Canada](#) work on crowdsourcing and [inverse probability weighting](#)).

3.2 ***What statistical techniques can help draw reliable conclusions from unrepresentative survey data?***

Discussion around statistical techniques to help draw reliable conclusions from unrepresentative data included:

- **Acknowledging that statistical techniques cannot fix** a broken statistical system or inadequate data collection, and that weighting is not a panacea.

- **Investing in continued work** on exploring alternative data sources and methods to improve survey data collection and analysis processes.
- **Considering use of ONS data** to combine data sources and allow more fine-grained weighting.
- **Exploration of different weighting techniques**, including weighting for **additional factors** (as well as demographics, eg voting behaviour), and using additional data sources for weighting (**auxiliary weighting**).
- **Composite estimation** – combining data from other or previous surveys, could be explored.
- **Use of paradata** and/or **imputation**.
- **Considering developing a synthetic population**, involving feeding datasets into an AI model and seeing if it could estimate, eg, the 2031 Census.
- **Consideration of the technology** that is now in place that can help, eg with data analysis and AI transcription to capture information.
- **Consideration of communication** and how use of advanced statistical techniques would need to be explained externally.
- **Consideration of statistician involvement from the start** – including involvement in system and data collection design, not just analysis.
- **Considering what the data is needed for** to assess fitness for purpose – for example needs from longitudinal data are different to needs from cross-sectional data.
- **Ensuring that in using certain techniques components and constructs that would be valuable for a broader range of users** (eg, third sector) **would not be lost**.

3.3 *What reflections do you have on the recent [ONS Survey Improvement and Enhancement Plan](#)?*

The group discussed and reflected on the plan. The transparency and openness was welcomed, and the many good ideas in the plan were appreciated. There were concerns that the plans were similar to previous plans and that they will be a challenge to implement. The main areas discussed with respect to challenges were:

- **Communication and citizen engagement** is a main barrier and should be invested in – especially in the current political context and with the lowering of voting ages (as proposed by the current government, as there will be a new cohort of young people who become part of the electorate and surveys will be helpful in finding out more about this group). It may be worth **building** on the census brand, ensuring that **people** recognise it (census recall has reduced since the pandemic, when statistics and the ONS were front-and-centre and people had more time to watch census advertising on TV and fill out surveys, but people still recognise the brand).
- **Audience research** is needed to learn about why people – and specific demographic groups (eg young people and specifically young males) – do not want to take part, and how adaptations to survey



questions/communications impact data quality and whether they are cost-effective. Ongoing studies could seek to address these issues.

- Operationalisation will need appropriate **risk assessment and realistic mitigation strategies**.
- **Technology** – does ONS have the technology to resource the plans?
- **Balancing ambitious plans with ensuring that early work is built upon and finalised** – for example, an early ‘minimum viable product’ may be rolled out and it is important that early products are refined and improved rather than moving onto another area.
- **Incentives** – there was concern that financial incentives for the Labour Force Survey (£50) could be an issue for other surveys without incentives or with lower incentives; there is a need to coordinate surveys with an overarching plan.
- **A proposal to make key surveys mandatory** was discussed and the group agreed that this should be considered. There are downsides as the practice could reduce the quality of data and it is hard to mandate unless the government is willing to enforce this (via court). It could have a detrimental impact on response rates to voluntary surveys.

4 OSR reflections

We welcome this initiative to bring together experts for this roundtable discussion. We noted in our recent [State of the Statistical System Report 2025](#) that while many statistics across the system are produced to a high quality and meet the needs of users, declining responses to statistics household surveys are negatively affecting the quality of key UK statistics. Long-standing challenges with household survey response rates have become critical, particularly in some ONS surveys. Statisticians are having to take additional actions to ensure that statistics can be maintained at the quality that is needed. It is becoming critical that the factors which affect variations in response rates to statistical surveys across the UK and topic areas are better understood by the whole statistical system.

The recently published ONS plans for economic statistics and underpinning surveys provide the foundations to restore confidence. They also represent a very ambitious programme of work, and the system will need to work with partners across the sector to ensure delivery. We consider that it is now essential that the statistical system proactively researches, develops and works to implement system-wide solutions. We see this joint venture as a significant step forward to achieve such solutions.

5 ONS reflections

ONS welcomed the opportunity to participate in this session and the ability to engage with experts from across the sector on this subject. It was especially timely given the recent publication of our

[Enhancement Plan for Economic Statistics](#) and the high importance of this subject to ONS and our users. This workshop has helped validate and indeed further inform our detailed planning in particular the emphasis on:

- Addressing response fatigue and reducing response burden – specifically, working with other data collection agencies and data users looking at how we might shorten questionnaires.
- Using data ONS already has access to – specifically alternative data sources (administrative data and paradata such as census response patterns) to help improve representation, weighting and operations management.
- Engaging with the citizen and businesses – including the need to build trust between ONS and respondents, emphasising the benefits of participating in surveys, considering different communication styles to improve motivation to participate, use of advertising campaigns and influencers, use of cluster sampling, naming conventions of surveys and reviewing survey naming conventions to include the purpose of the survey.

As we move forward with our survey improvement work, we will continue to engage with external experts, including those that attended this session, to quality assure and improve our work.

We welcome any feedback to policy@rss.org.uk.

6 Appendix – relevant materials and roundtable attendee list

6.1 *Relevant materials*

In this section we share relevant materials suggested by roundtable participants.

- [Survey Futures project](#) (funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, aiming to deliver a step change in approaches to collecting population survey data in the UK) and Survey Futures [Position Statement on Response Rates](#).
- [Improving Surveys with Paradata: Analytic Uses of Process Information: Analytic Uses of Process Information](#), Franke Kreuter (2013)
- [Interview: Courtney Kennedy](#), Significance Magazine (2025)
- [Real people, real experiences: Patient and public involvement and engagement in statistical methodology](#), Molly Wells et al., Significance Magazine (2025)
- [Statistics Canada](#) work on crowdsourcing and [inverse probability weighting](#).

6.2 Attendees

Paul Allin	RSS (Honorary Officer for Public Statistics)
Karl Ashworth	Chair of RSS Social Statistics Section
Penny Babb	OSR
Michael Baxter	RSS Social Statistics Section
David Bharier	British Chamber of Commerce
Sarah Cumbers	RSS
Kate Davies	ONS
Tricia Dodd	RSS (Honorary Officer for EDI)
Ed Dunn	Social Research Association / Verian
Jonathan Everett	RSS
Deniz Gursul	RSS

Ben Humberstone	Verian
Ed Humpherson	OSR
David Hussey	National Centre for Social Research
Rob Kent Smith	OSR
Olga Maslovskaya	University of Southampton, Survey Futures
Tej Nathwani	HESA
Ian O'Sullivan	ONS
Peter Smith	University of Southampton
Sarah Southerton	ONS
Neil Townsend	ONS
Gosia Turner	HESA

