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Response to Consultation on the ONS Statistical Work Programme 2011/12 to 2014/15

From the British Society for Population Studies

BSPS officers have participated with ONS and the Statistics Users Forum to elicit attitudes and needs in relation to the ONS work programme, specifically in the 30th November public consultation meeting at the Royal Statistical Society. In addition, BSPS has carried out an online survey of its members more generally on the likely impact on demographic statistics of reductions in public expenditure. Two of the BSPS survey questions directly asked for responses related to the ONS consultation on its work programme. The sixteen responses to these two questions, from many of the most experienced of users of ONS statistics and summarised in an appendix, are used here along with BSPS officers' understanding of the wider societal needs.

General strategy

ONS' proposed strategy for dealing with a reduction in budget of over 15% in the next three financial years is one of not compromising quality, protecting statutory including EU requirements, protecting information technology infrastructure in order to ensure delivery of statistics now and in the future, and then to prioritise according to user needs in order to reduce costs.

No respondents to the BSPS user survey disagreed with these priorities, but half had some doubts about the ability of general aims to deal with particular details of budget proposals. In particular, some detailed and basic datasets may be perceived as low need by many users if they are used outside ONS to inform secondary analysis, but their eventual impact may nonetheless be high. Dissemination ('delivery of statistics' in ONS priorities) was a priority but not necessarily to the detriment of the range of statistics able to be delivered.

Specific themes

The primacy of the Census for understanding of social trends in the UK has been once again stressed by BSPS members. There is a clear demand to maintain continuity of output in the 2011 Census including its small area data and its microdata (SARs and LS). Additionally the 'Beyond 2011' investigation of alternatives to the census of 2021 should carefully assess alternatives against the 2011 Census, without an assumption that the known difficulties of administrative and survey alternatives can be overcome.

Great advances have been made by ONS in the past decade in provision of small area statistics, especially for areas as small as 1500 population (LSOAs) and 200 population (OAs). BSPS recognises the value of these population estimates and other neighbourhood statistics for independent research in local government, academia and business. This and previous governments' emphasis on local responsibility - localism and the big society - demands a base of detailed sub-national intelligence which is impossible to provide in an impartial way without the lead role that government has provided through ONS.

The availability of robust small area statistics will become vital to deliver the increased local powers being devolved through localism, moves towards greater local commissioning rather than simply delivery of national services, and the greater involvement in delivery of voluntary organisations. The provision of reliable and robust data produced by ONS will be essential to each of these initiatives and to allow communities to challenge the priorities and the performance of the public services.

In some cases the quality of detailed data may not be high, for example population estimates with detailed geography and age, but are essential to allow independent users to aggregate these data to reliable statistics for larger sub-national areas representing service users, client groups or populations vulnerable to disease or hardship.

Many of ONS outputs are not directly aimed at specific policies but are essential for academic and other fundamental investigations. Members valued the availability of survey microdata and detailed sub-national statistics for these reasons.

Appendix

BSPS members' survey – summary of answers to the two questions directly addressing the ONS work programme.

Question 1.

Having read the ONS Statistical Work Programme (<http://www.ons.gov.uk/about/consultations/work-programme-consultation/index.html>) what is your view of their overall strategy of not compromising quality, protecting statutory including EU requirements, protecting information technology infrastructure in order to ensure delivery of statistics now and in the future, and then to prioritise according to user needs in order to reduce costs?

Responses:

Support: 9.

Some doubts: 7

Disagree: 0

Doubts summarised:

- Politically debateable series may be high quality but not worth continuing (HBAI). Demand may appear to be low but impact may be high – basic survey data.
- Devil is in detail – general aims may not cover each case.
- Budget constraint may not allow these aims to be fulfilled.

- Enhancing dissemination at the cost of a reduction of information to disseminate could be a poor 'bargain'. The strategy of prioritising according to user needs could also involve a risk of over-emphasising the needs of vocal and/or powerful users.
- Too vague. New website must live up to its promise, or current is a joke.
- New website cannot be justified given cuts
- Timeliness needs to be stressed as part of quality and user need.

Question 2.

Which ONS outputs would you be most concerned about losing, other than those that are protected by the strategy proposed by ONS? Please give an indication of reasons including specific items of your or colleagues' work that would be affected. Where possible please also describe the likely impacts on the life and well-being of people in the UK.

Responses

- Surveys plus long-running publications (basic data may not be easy to perceive need for, but nonetheless have high impact).
- Migration statistics; census of 2021; specialised surveys (e.g. ELSA, HSE etc)
- Family and fertility histories (as currently collected in the GHS)
- A broad range of health, and the non-statutory births and deaths data.
- Basic demographic data, which forms the basis for many other datasets and government information. The Census (2021)
- I am concerned at the risk to data sources which are used for 'basic' research in academic contexts which may not always be reflected in current policy concerns.
- I would be concerned about losing small area data, the ABI data, population estimates
- ONS LS - 40 years after the 2011 census link. (two mentions)
- ONS General Household Survey - fertility intentions, hard to move to another survey whose different style will cause discontinuity.
- Population Trends Social Trends Regional Trends
- regular updating of analysis of national fertility trends: even if not used for ONS projections, these are essential for other analysts' local demographic models
- quarterly reporting of internal and international migration for local social and economic monitoring
- local detailed estimates, though two years' updates at once, each two years, would be acceptable.
- Ethnic estimates: two years' updates at once, each two years, would be acceptable.
- Census small area statistics;
- Digital Boundary Data as attached to census
- Population estimates and projections for national and sub-national areas.
- The estimates for very small areas (postcodes to allow re-aggregation, single years of age to allow re-aggregation) irreplaceable by others' research even.
- Small area Birth, Population, Migration, Dwelling Numbers (VOA Sourced)
- Life expectancy calculations - NHS targets based on these.
- Small area population estimates.
- Ethnicity estimates as these are valuable to look at changes in the whole population.
- Sub-national data to LSOAs have become basic to local information systems, required by localism. OA also important.