

# Background Quality Report – Cost to Business of Completing Statistical Surveys issued by Northern Ireland Departments

This report provides information on the quality of the data used to produce the official statistics: [Cost to Business of Completing Statistical Surveys issued by Northern Ireland Departments](#). It informs users about the quality of the information upon which they may be drawing conclusions and making decisions.

The report is structured around the five quality dimensions for statistical outputs (from the [European Statistics Code of Practice, PDF \(458 KB\)](#)). The UK Statistics Authority's [Code of Practice for Statistics](#) requires that:

**Q3.3** *The quality of the statistics and data, including their accuracy and reliability, coherence and comparability, and timeliness and punctuality, should be monitored and reported regularly.*

## Introduction

The annual 'Cost to Business of Completing Statistical Surveys issued by Northern Ireland Departments' report, produced by Survey Control Unit (SCU) within Statistical Support Branch (SSB), Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) details the cost to business of complying with statutory and voluntary government statistical surveys in Northern Ireland.

The report provides information on the number of surveys carried out by each government department (including arm's length bodies), number of responses to these surveys and the estimated compliance cost to business. Findings are presented split by statutory and voluntary surveys; and by surveys which contribute to official statistics and those which don't. The report also provides an analysis by data collection method (both the primary data collection method and all methods used in the survey). Information on the number of surveys contributing to each of the 2016-2021 Programme for Government (PfG) outcomes has been included since 2018/19.

The report also examines change over time. A detailed explanation of the annual change in compliance costs, number of surveys and number of responses is provided, for each government department. Information on the measures being taken to reduce compliance costs, and examples of how these surveys are used both within government and to produce official statistics are included within the report.

Each year, data are requested from each Northern Ireland department, as well as from officials in arm's length bodies (ALBs). Each NISRA branch has a Survey Control Liaison Officer (SCLO) who co-ordinates the response for their department, ALB or for their branch within the Department of Finance (DoF). The departmental SCLO liaises with any ALBs that do not have a NISRA branch.

Information is provided on all statistical surveys commissioned, or carried out, by the department (including ALBs) within the financial year. General information is returned for the survey (name, purpose, frequency, data collection methods) as well as specific information on the number of respondents, the median completion time for the survey, estimated hourly pay rate of the person completing the survey (based on a supplied set of hourly pay rates) and any external costs incurred by the business. SCLOs are provided with detailed guidance notes and training, enabling them to determine what government surveys should be included and how to calculate or estimate the various metrics.

## Key definitions

### **Compliance Cost**

The compliance cost of a survey is defined as the financial cost incurred by the business in responding to the survey. This includes the cost of any time spent answering validation queries (re-contact burden). Only those completing the survey are included; non-response is assumed to place no burden on respondents. Any time spent establishing eligibility for businesses that are subsequently deemed out of scope is included.

### **Statistical Survey**

A statistical survey is any structured inquiry designed to obtain aggregated data (which may be qualitative or quantitative) where the individual or corporate identities of the respondents are in themselves of little significance.

This includes both regular and ad hoc surveys; both voluntary and statutory surveys that may be required to determine, evaluate or monitor policy and/or action, provide social or economic indicators or measure customer satisfaction. Statistical surveys conducted by, or on behalf of, non-departmental public bodies are also covered. Arm's length bodies are included under their parent departments.

Statistical surveys in scope are not limited to those conducted by statistics branches and include all modes of data collection. Surveys that contribute to official statistics and those that do not are both in the scope of survey control.

The following are examples of surveys **excluded** from survey control:

- Surveys where there is no direct approach made and where respondents clearly select themselves (e.g. web sites, readership surveys, some types of consultation exercises where there is an invitation to comment);
- Where information is required as an integral part of the operational management of a public service. Such returns will often be regulated under specific departmental controls;
- Surveys relating to the contractual obligations of potential respondents to the department or agency concerned;
- Surveys to respondents in central government and its agencies.

Where part of a survey falls outside scope, the part of the survey within scope has been included where possible.

### **Business**

For Survey Control purposes, businesses include commercial businesses (including self-employed persons surveyed in the context of their business), schools, universities, colleges, voluntary organisations, non-profit bodies, mutual associations etc. Surveys of local councils are also included under surveys to businesses.

The burden on business due to government statistical surveys in Northern Ireland has been estimated using the existing methodology since 2012/13. A [methodology note](#) outlines the difference between this methodology and the previous methodology.

Detailed definitions of all terms used in the reports and additional information on the survey burden methodology can be found in the Appendix to the publication. This information includes how compliance costs are calculated and the hourly pay rates used. Information on the rationale for the publication, data quality (including any discontinuities in the time series), the main uses of the statistics and user engagement is also included.

These official statistics are used by the public, business and industry and the government to monitor the burden on businesses due to government surveys. The [Code of Practice for Statistics](#) states that

*V5.5 Statistics producers should be transparent in their approach to monitoring and reducing the burden on those providing their information.*

The [Statistics Advisory Committee \(SAC\)](#) also monitors burden on business due to government surveys. Under the [Statistics of Trade and Employment \(NI\) Order 1988, PDF \(229 KB\)](#), a Northern Ireland Department is required to consult SAC before carrying out any new statutory survey of businesses.

Annual reports from 2012/13 are available on the [NI Statistical Surveys – Assessment of burden on businesses, households and individuals page](#) of the NISRA website. Earlier reports are available on request from NISRA Statistical Support Branch (contact details can be found in the latest report).

## Relevance

The degree to which the statistical product meets user needs in both coverage and content.

The collection of data by government departments and their arm's length bodies (ALBs) causes a burden on data suppliers. It is important to keep this burden to a minimum and hence the practice of survey control has been developed and practiced within Northern Ireland since the 1980s.

The [Code of Practice for Statistics](#) recognises the importance of monitoring and reducing respondent burden, balanced with the need to produce official statistics that are fundamental to good government and provide a good evidence base to inform public policy. It emphasises the importance of **transparency**, ensuring respondent **burden is proportionate to benefits** and making **use of existing data** before undertaking a new data collection:

*V5.5 Statistics producers should be transparent in their approach to monitoring and reducing the burden on those providing their information, and on those involved in collecting, recording and supplying data. The burden imposed should be proportionate to the benefits arising from the use of the statistics.*

*V5.3 The suitability of existing data, including administrative, open and privately-held data, should be assessed before undertaking a new data collection.*

*V5.1 Opportunities for data sharing, data linkage, cross-analysis of sources, and the reuse of data should be taken wherever feasible. Recognised standards, classifications, definitions, and methods should be applied to data wherever possible.*

*V5.6 Statistics producers should analyse the impact of new data requirements or extending existing collections on those involved in the collection, recording and supply of data, against the potential value of the statistics in serving the public good.*

*V5.4 Voluntary participation in statistical data collection should be sought, rather than using statutory powers, wherever possible.*

The burden to businesses due to statutory Government Statistical Surveys is also monitored by the [Statistics Advisory Committee \(SAC\)](#). Under the [Statistics of Trade and Employment \(NI\) Order 1988, PDF \(229 KB\)](#), a Northern Ireland Department is required to consult this committee before carrying out a statutory survey of businesses. NISRA also consults SAC before carrying out voluntary surveys of businesses. This publication is provided to SAC

annually and provides an overview of the overall cost to businesses due to NI Government Statistical Surveys<sup>1</sup>.

Feedback from SAC has indicated that the report meets their needs both in terms of coverage and content. The feedback identified that the breakdown of survey costs for statutory and voluntary surveys was particularly useful, as was the information on practical measures taken to reduce compliance burden. In response to feedback from SAC, additional information on how selected surveys of businesses are used has been included in the report to better highlight the benefits of carrying out these surveys. Information on the purpose of each survey has also been added to the downloadable data.

Information on the Programme for Government (PfG) Outcomes to which surveys contribute was added to the report in 2018/19, in response to feedback from NISRA's Agency Board. This provides additional context for users.

These official statistics are also used by business and industry, by the media and by the general public. Recent feedback from the Federation of Small Businesses (FSB) highlighted the value of the statistics:

*At the Federation of Small Businesses, we always like to have good data and facts on which to base our arguments and lobbying. The work and engagement that you and your team at NISRA undertake is of huge value, and very much appreciated. Thank you.*

Statistics from these publications have previously been used to respond to MLA questions; and to provide briefing for the Minister of Finance. The publication and accompanying data have also been used by NISRA branches to investigate the compliance burden on subgroups of businesses, to estimate the compliance costs associated with new surveys and to assess the impact of alternative methods of data collection on the compliance burden resulting from their surveys.

The statistical product includes a publication, open data version of the tables and charts (with the underlying data) and downloadable dataset in open data format. This allows users to carry out additional analysis on subgroups of interest. As well as the information used in the analysis, links and contact details are provided for each individual survey. The dataset also includes additional information on the purpose of the survey, branch or ALB carrying out the survey, frequency of the survey, issued and achieved sample, median completion time and median re-contact time and priority of the data collection methods.

With regard to coverage, the publication and accompanying dataset include all statistical surveys of businesses carried out by, or commissioned NI departments or their ALBs, not just those relating to official statistics. This provides a comprehensive picture of the burden imposed on businesses. In addition, surveys of NI businesses carried out by GB departments, on behalf to NI Departments, to produce UK statistics or where the data are used directly by NI departments are included.

A separate publication is produced for surveys to households and individuals [Burden to Households and Individuals of Completing Statistical Surveys issued by Northern Ireland Departments](#) and is published alongside this publication.

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<sup>1</sup> Under this Order, a business is defined as any person(s) carrying out an undertaking by way of trade or business, whether or not the trade or business is carried on for profit; and any other undertaking providing employment in respect of which Class 1 contributions are payable under the Social Security (Northern Ireland) Act 1975.

## Accuracy and Reliability

The proximity between an estimate and the unknown true value.

### Data collection

Data are requested from Survey Control Liaison Officers (SCLOs) in Northern Ireland departments, as well as from arm's length bodies (ALBs). Each NISRA branch has a SCLO who coordinates the response for their department, ALB or branch (in DoF). The departmental SCLO liaises with any ALBs that do not have a NISRA branch.

SCLOs are provided with detailed guidance notes and annual training, enabling them to determine what government surveys are in scope and how to calculate or estimate the various metrics. Each year the guidance is updated to address any issues which have arisen the previous year. Frequently Asked Questions are included to answer common queries. SCLOs are actively encouraged to contact Survey Control Unit (SCU) if they are unsure whether to include a survey or what to return in a particular cell.

Each year, SCLOs are asked to provide details of all government statistical surveys carried out by, or on behalf of, their department, ALB or branch in the preceding financial year. Information is also collected on new surveys introduced or proposed after the end of the financial year and surveys which were discontinued or not run in the year. A template is provided which includes detailed guidance on what surveys to include and what should be recorded under each variable. Where possible, values are selected from drop-down menus, limiting the scope for error and pre-coding responses. Validation checks are built into the template.

SCLOs are expected to carry out quality assurance checks before submitting their return. This includes answering the following questions:

- Are any surveys from the previous year missing? Should these be included?
- Are any biennial, triennial, quadrennial, quinquennial or decennial surveys missing?
- Are any 'new surveys' notified in the previous year's return missing? Should these be included?
- Have all the Department's ALBs been covered? What about any surveys carried out by non-NISRA branches?
- Is there any information missing or incomplete?
- If you have taken steps to reduce burden, have you explained what these steps were?
- Are any of the data inconsistent with previous years? (e.g. completion times/ sample sizes/ recontact numbers/ staff grade)
- Have all the relevant worksheets been fully completed?

Explanations should be included within the return, where appropriate.

### Calculation of compliance costs

Where the actual or estimated completion time is not available for each business, an overall completion time for the survey is estimated using the median time to complete the survey. The median time to complete the survey is estimated based on: information from the survey, paradata, historical data (within the last five years), a pilot survey, reviews or survey manager expertise. Only those completing the survey are included; nonresponse is assumed to place no burden on respondents. Any time spent establishing eligibility for businesses that are subsequently deemed out of scope is included.

Where a business survey uses a number of different form types, or data collection methods e.g. electronic/postal, and these vary in terms of completion time then the calculations may be conducted separately for each form type/ data collection method and summed for an overall

compliance cost. Similarly, if there are different types of businesses with different completion times then the calculations for each type of business may be carried out separately and summed.

Validation procedures may require a re-contact with the business. The burden due to re-contact is also calculated. If actual or estimated re-contact times are not available then the median time taken to complete the full questionnaire may be substituted on the assumption that a respondent may need to review the entire questionnaire.

SCLOs are provided with a choice of five rates of pay taken from the Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings (ASHE). SCLOs must select the most appropriate rate of pay for the person most likely to have completed the survey. The rates of pay used in compliance cost calculations are the UK median hourly pay (excluding overtime)<sup>2</sup> for the following grades:

Grade	ASHE Code
Chief Executive and Senior Officials	1115
Managers and Senior Officials	1
Professional Occupations	2
Associate Professional and Technical Occupations	3
Administrative and Secretarial Occupations	4

Any external costs incurred by businesses (e.g. accountant's fees) when complying with government survey requests are also included in the calculation of compliance cost. The Compliance Cost (£) is a simple **addition** of Response Cost (£), Re-contact Cost (£) and External Cost (£), which are calculated as:

*Response Cost (£) = No. of responses x Median time (hrs) x Hourly rate (£/hr)*

*Re-contact Cost (£) = No. re-contacted x Median time (hrs) x Hourly rate (£/hr)*

*External Cost (£) = No. with external cost x Median external cost (£)*

If a survey is carried out on behalf of a number of government departments, then each government department will only include the compliance costs for the questions/ modules commissioned by them<sup>3</sup>.

## Data processing

The quality assurance checks carried out by SCU focus on ensuring that the data returned are complete and internally consistent for the current year, and also consistent with returns from previous years. Where data are missing or there are large changes or inconsistencies, explanations are sought from the data supplier, and if necessary the data are re-supplied.

## Discontinuities in the time series

### *Improved coverage*

The application of the survey control methodology was reviewed prior to the 2016/17 data collection and improved guidance was produced. This has resulted in a discontinuity in the time series as some surveys, and types of surveys, which were excluded prior to 2016/17 are

<sup>2</sup> Table 15.6a: Earnings and hours worked, region by occupation by four-digit SOC: Hourly pay - Excluding overtime 2018

<sup>3</sup> The number of forms however will be the same as for the complete survey, which means that these forms and surveys will be counted more than once in aggregated figures.

now included; specifically surveys carried out by Arm's Length Bodies (ALBs), and some participant evaluation surveys, customer surveys and surveys which have a secondary operational purpose.

Due to these coverage changes, from 2016/17 there is an increase in the total number of surveys, forms and compliance costs. For DE and DfE, there is also an impact from 2017/18. For DE, the impact from 2017/18 is a decrease which offsets some of the increase in 2016/17.

### ***Change in Methodology used by ONS***

The Office for National Statistics (ONS) also carried out a review of its methodology in 2016/17, with further improvements in 2017/18 and 2018/19. This resulted in a substantial increase in the estimated compliance costs for some surveys carried out by ONS on behalf of Economic and Labour Market Statistics (ELMS), DoF in 2016/17, a smaller decrease for 2017/18 offsetting some of the 2016/17 increase, and a relatively small increase for 2018/19. This change in methodology impacts the compliance costs but not the number of surveys or number of responses.

- In 2016/17, ONS moved away from calculating stratified compliance costs based on business size; included an estimate of re-contact burden and reviewed median completion times in conjunction with survey managers.
- In 2017/18, median completion times were reviewed for a further ten surveys and median re-contact times (which had been assumed to be equal to median completion times) were revised. This assumption, while allowable under the survey control methodology, inflated the compliance cost estimates for these surveys in 2016/17.
- In 2018/19, ONS revisited the staff costs used in calculating compliance burden and moved away from a single occupation code applied to all surveys (ASHE Code 1) to a weighted calculation based on the breakdown of the profession of respondents obtained from survey compliance reviews<sup>4</sup>

### ***Assessment of impact***

#### ***2016/17 coverage changes***

In 2016/17, including those surveys and types of surveys that were not previously included potentially increased the number of surveys by 46, the number of forms by around 17,000 and the overall compliance burden by around £61,000.

The impact was most notable for DE where this potentially increased the number of surveys by 41, the number of forms by around 8,000 and the compliance burden by around £47,000. DfC was the next most affected department overall, where including these surveys potentially increased the number of surveys by one, the number of returns by 6,300 and the compliance burden by almost £12,000. There was also an impact in DfE, increasing the number of surveys by three. However, these were very small surveys with few returns and low levels of compliance burden.

While these figures gives an indication of the potential size of the discontinuity, it is difficult to say with certainty what surveys would have been included had the guidance not been reviewed and additional training provided.

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<sup>4</sup> Compliance reviews of ONS surveys are carried out every three or five years (depending on the frequency of the survey). A subsample is sent a separate survey, asking questions to more accurately calculate respondent burden. Questions are also added to the end of a new surveys or survey with substantial changes to allow ONS to assess the impact.

### ***2017/18 coverage changes***

In 2017/18, surveys of teachers which had been incorrectly included in the 2016/17 data for DE were removed<sup>5</sup>. These surveys were mostly ad-hoc training or event evaluation surveys, carried out by CCEA (Council for Curriculum, Examinations & Assessments), and accounted for 18 of the additional 41 DE surveys in 2016/17, around 1300 of the additional forms and £2,100 of the increase in compliance costs<sup>6</sup>.

For DfE, surveys carried out by the Construction Industry Training Board NI (CITB NI) and Insolvency Service, were included for the first time in 2017/18. CITB NI conducted 13 surveys of businesses in 2017/18 which accounted for 235 forms and compliance costs of £1,600; the Insolvency Service conducted a single survey which had 5 responses with a compliance cost of less than £1.

### ***2016/17 ONS methodology changes***

The change to the methodology used by ONS in 2016/17 resulted in a large increase in the compliance costs for surveys carried out by ONS on behalf of ELMS. While the total number of responses remained approximately constant, at around 12,000, for the 27 surveys carried out by ONS that were common to both 2015/16 and 2016/17, the compliance costs increased by 61% (from £213,100 to £342,600). Salary costs based on ASHE Code 1 (used for ONS surveys) increased by 1.5% between 2015/16 and 2016/17. It is not possible to say what proportion of the change is due to what part of the change in methodology.

### ***2017/18 ONS methodology changes***

The impact of the change in the methodology used by ONS in 2017/18 has been assessed by applying the revised median completion times, and revised median re-contact times to the 2016/17 data and re-calculating the compliance costs for those surveys where comparable information is available for both years. Applying the revised median re-contact times to the 2016/17 data, reduces the compliance costs by £81,900; this equates to 62% of the increase observed between 2015/16 and 2016/17 for these 22 surveys. Although this does not cover all surveys, it provides an indication of how much of the change between 2015/16 and 2016/17 may have been due to the use of the median completion time as a proxy for the median re-contact time. This over-estimation is only present in the 2016/17 data. The review of median completion times affected ten surveys in 2017/18. Applying the revised medians to the 2016/17 data would have reduced the compliance costs by £57,500 and reduced the compliance costs in 2017/18 by £59,300.

### ***2018/19 ONS methodology changes***

The change in the methodology used by ONS to estimate staff costs has resulted in an increase of £16,700 in the estimated compliance costs for 2018/19. This has been assessed by comparing compliance costs for ONS surveys calculated using the revised approach (a weighted calculation based on all five ASHE Codes) with compliance costs calculated using the previous approach (a single ASHE Code 1).

## **Improvements and limitations**

Although the compliance cost is an estimate, the quality of the underlying data has improved greatly since the pre-2016/17 review, and is now considered to be of a good standard. These improvements include:

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<sup>5</sup> Surveys of teachers are excluded from survey control as the majority of teachers are employees of the Education Authority (EA) or the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) which are both ALBs of the Department of Education and surveys of government employees are excluded from survey control.

<sup>6</sup> This has been estimated based on the information returned for CCEA (and other DE) surveys in 2016/17.

- Improved coverage of non-NISRA branches within Departments; and improved coverage of ALBs.
- Better application of the criteria to determine whether surveys should be included or excluded from the return.
- Better estimation of median completion times, re-contacts and median re-contact times.
- More use of separate calculations for different subgroups where the compliance costs vary across different modes of data collection and/or type of business.
- Improved quality assurance, with the introduction of local quality assurance by SCLOs.

There have also been improvements in the coherence and comparability of the returned data, both within and between departments, due to improved and expanded SCLO guidance, annual training for SCLOs and an improved data collection workbook, including standardised options for e.g. data collection methods; automatic calculation of compliance costs; built-in guidance and basic validation checks. These changes will result in improved comparability over time.

The data collection process means that individual SCLOs are the key decision makers in terms of including or excluding surveys from the returns. While there is communication between SCLOs and NISRA Survey Control Unit to clarify any queries, there is the potential for individual interpretations of the inclusion and exclusion criteria to lead to small inconsistencies in individual returns.

Changes in the methodology used by ONS - as well as the data quality improvements - have also resulted in discontinuities in the time series.

### **Consistent methodology**

The methodology used by NISRA has been aligned with the [survey burden methodology recommended by the Government Statistical Service \(GSS\)](#). This means that compliance costs for business surveys carried out by, or on behalf of, government departments in Northern Ireland can be compared with compliance costs for business surveys carried out by GB departments where the other department also follows the recommended GSS methodology and similar assumptions have been made with regard to the pay rate of the person completing the survey.

### **Timeliness and Punctuality**

[Timeliness refers to the time gap between publication and the reference period. Punctuality refers to the gap between planned and actual publication dates.](#)

The 'Cost to Business of Completing Statistical Surveys issued by Northern Ireland Departments' report is normally published 15 months after the end of the reference year.

The delay in recent years has been primarily due to quality assurance and resourcing issues, along with late receipt of source data. The 2016/17 report was delayed due to the review of the methodology which took place between September and December 2017. Due to the small size of the branch, there is a knock-on impact from one year to the next. Moving forward, the plan is to publish within 12 months of the end of the reference period. The primary constraints on improving timeliness further are anticipated to be the availability of source data and time taken to resolve quality assurance queries.

Publication dates are pre-announced at least four weeks in advance in the official statistics publication calendar on [GOV.UK](#) and also on the ['NI Statistical Surveys – Assessment of burden on businesses, households and individuals' page](#) on the NISRA website.

The 2015/16 and 2017/18 reports were delayed by approximately two weeks (to 9 May and 28 June respectively) due to quality assurance issues. The 2018/19 report was delayed by two months (to 30 July) due to resourcing issues as resources were diverted to higher priority COVID-19 official statistics support.

## Accessibility and Clarity

Accessibility is the ease with which users are able to access the data, also reflecting the format in which the data are available and the availability of supporting information. Clarity refers to the quality and sufficiency of the metadata, illustrations and accompanying advice.

The release can be accessed from the [‘NI Statistical Surveys – Assessment of burden on businesses, households and individuals’ page](#) on the NISRA website, which is the same page as previous releases. It can also be accessed through the [official statistics publication calendar on gov.uk](#).

The release date is pre-announced on gov.uk and on the NISRA website page. Key users and SCLOs are advised of the release date in advance of publication.

On the day of release, posts are issued from NISRA’s main social media accounts (Facebook and Twitter) outlining some key findings from the publication, and linking to the report and the data. Key users and SCLOs are made aware of the release and provided with a link to access the report and share further with potential users.

The statistical product includes a publication, an open data version of the tables and charts (including the underlying data) and a downloadable dataset in open data format. All outputs are available to download free of charge.

This publication is published in PDF format and is compliant with the AA standard under the [Web Content Accessibility Guidelines \(WCAG\) 2.1](#). The report includes detailed commentary alongside relevant tables and charts. All tables and charts have appropriate titles and labels, and explanatory footnotes where required. Key definitions and relevant caveats are included throughout the text to improve clarity and understanding. Footnotes provide additional contextual information and clarification.

Methodology and quality information, including definitions of key terms and information on the discontinuity in the time series (with an assessment of impact) is provided in Appendix A. Information on the rationale for the publication, main uses and user engagement is also included. Appendix C contains further information on the Programme for Government (PfG) outcomes. Appendix E provides information on, and links to, the downloadable data and other relevant publications.

The contact details for the responsible statistician are included within the publication.

The publication is accompanied by an ODS (Open Document Spreadsheet) version of the tables and charts included in the publication (and the data used in the charts). These adhere to accessibility guidelines.

Survey level data is also available to download in ODS (Open Document Spreadsheet) format. This allows users to carry out additional analysis on subgroups or topics of interest and extract the data for individual surveys. The downloadable data includes the department, branch/ALB, name of the survey, purpose, frequency, statutory/voluntary status, official statistics status, relevant PfG outcome, data collection methods (primary, secondary etc.), issued sample, achieved sample, median completion time, median re-contact time, number of re-contacts and compliance cost. A link to the published statistics (or survey) and contact for the survey is also

included. To aid comparability over time the variable names are kept consistent with previous years.

## Coherence and Comparability

Coherence is the degree to which data that are derived from different sources or methods, but refer to the same topic, are similar. Comparability is the degree to which data can be compared over time and domain.

There are no alternative sources of information on the cost to business of complying with government statistical surveys conducted in Northern Ireland.

The methodology used to calculate compliance costs has remained constant since 2012/13. A [methodology note](#) outlines the difference between this methodology and the previous methodology. All reports available on the NISRA website use the current methodology.

The application of the survey control methodology was reviewed prior to the 2016/17 data collection and improved guidance was produced. This has resulted in a discontinuity in the time series as some surveys, and types of surveys, which were excluded prior to 2016/17 are now included; specifically surveys carried out by Arm's Length Bodies (ALBs), and some participant evaluation surveys, customer surveys and surveys which have a secondary operational purpose. Further information is provided under the [Accuracy and Reliability section of this report](#) (including an assessment of the impact of the changes).

As a result of the pre-2016/17 data collection review, there have been improvements in the coherence and comparability of the returned data, both within and between departments. This is due to improved and expanded SCLO guidance, annual training for SCLOs and an improved data collection workbook (including standardised options; built-in guidance and basic validation checks). These changes have resulted in improved comparability over time and between departments - apart from DoF where the time series is distorted due to the change in the ONS methodology described below. This change in methodology also impacts the overall burden.

The Office for National Statistics (ONS) also carried out a review of its methodology in 2016/17, with further improvements in 2017/18 and 2018/19. This resulted in a substantial increase in the estimated compliance costs for some surveys carried out by ONS on behalf of Economic and Labour Market Statistics (ELMS) in 2016/17, a smaller decrease for 2017/18 offsetting some of the 2016/17 increase, and a relatively small increase for 2018/19. This affects the overall compliance costs, and the compliance costs for DoF (which includes ELMS), but not the number of surveys or number of responses. Further information and an assessment of impact can be found in the [Accuracy and Reliability section of this report](#).

These discontinuities are noted in the publication when presenting between year comparisons and examining the trend over time.

When examining the trend over time, the change in the overall compliance burden is compared using both raw or current prices (i.e. in terms of staff costs at the time of the survey without allowing for the effects of changes to levels of pay) and constant prices (i.e. after wage growth has been taken into account by recalculating the compliance costs based on staff costs for the latest year). The publication includes details of the staff costs used in each year.

The analysis contained within the publication has remained fairly constant since 2012/13, allowing comparisons to be made over time. A breakdown by data collection method was introduced in 2013/14. This was expanded in 2015/16 to look at both the primary data collection method and the different method combinations. In 2018/19, an analysis of the

change in the number of surveys using each primary data collection method and the associated compliance burden was introduced.

Prior to 2016/17 SCLOs were asked to write-in the data collection method(s) used for each survey. This meant that there was substantial variation in the descriptions used and it was not always easy to identify the primary data collection method. In 2016/17, this was replaced with a drop-down menu (Paper questionnaire; Paper diary<sup>7</sup>; Telephone interview; Face-to-face interview; Email data collection; Online questionnaire/ data collection; Online/electronic diary<sup>7</sup>; Telephone data entry; and Digital Voice Recognition Survey). SCLOs are asked to identify the primary, secondary, tertiary, etc. method of data collection. As a result, groupings and analysis from 2016/17 onwards will be more accurate than in previous years.

A breakdown of compliance costs, the number of responses and the number of surveys by department over time has been included since 2014/15.

A comparable report was produced by ONS for government departments in England and Wales for years up to 2014/15. This was replaced by the On-line List of Government Statistical Surveys (OLGSS) for 2015/16 and 2016/17. The OLGSS provided details of compliance costs for government statistical surveys, at individual survey level.

The ONS no longer produces a report or data for England and Wales, although some Government Departments publish information for their own department.

The methodology used by NISRA has been aligned with the [survey burden methodology recommended by the Government Statistical Service \(GSS\)](#). This means that compliance costs for surveys carried out by, or on behalf of, Northern Ireland government departments can be compared with compliance costs for surveys carried out by GB departments where the other department also follows the recommended GSS methodology and similar assumptions have been made with regard to staff costs (i.e. the pay band for the person completing the survey).

## **Trade-offs between Output Quality Components**

Trade-offs are the extent to which different aspects of quality are balanced against each other.

The main trade-off is 'timeliness and punctuality' against 'accuracy and reliability' (which also impacts 'coherence and comparability').

The value of the report is the ability to compare compliance costs over time and between areas. This allows statistics producers, government and the Statistics Advisory Committee to monitor the burden on business over time and identify areas where this can be reduced. It also allows those commissioning or carrying out government surveys to compare the impact of changes in methodology and different approaches and sample sizes. In order to do so it is important to have reasonably accurate and reliable data. As a consequence, the focus is on the 'accuracy and reliability' and 'comparability and coherence' aspects of quality at the expense of 'timeliness and punctuality'.

The report is currently published in June, almost 15 months after the end of the reference year – although the 2018/19 report was delayed to July due to COVID-19 pressures and the

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<sup>7</sup> These options were first introduced in 2017/18. As paper diaries usually accompany face-to-face interviews, these have been grouped with face-to-face interviews. This maintains consistency with what was done in 2016/17 and earlier years. Online/electronic diaries have been grouped with online questionnaire/data collection.

2019/20 report was delayed to August to allow data suppliers additional time to collate the data taking account of COVID-19 and the challenges of remote working. Moving forward, the plan is to publish within 12 months of the end of the reference period. The main constraints on improving timeliness further are likely to be the availability of source data and time taken to resolve quality assurance queries.

The nature of the data collection exercise means that returns are received from around 30 separate SCLOs, many of which coordinate returns for up to a dozen (or more) ALBs and divisions within their departments. While there is communication between SCLOs and SCU to clarify any queries, and comprehensive guidance and training available, there can be a lack of consistency in the returns submitted. This may reflect different levels of knowledge (among SCLOs and data suppliers), different interpretations of the guidance and also restrictions on the time available for the collation and quality assurance of the information. As a result, while the quality of the returns has improved greatly in recent years, substantial time is still required for quality assurance.

There is also a time lag between the reference date and the availability of compliance burden data from ONS (which is not available until the beginning of quarter three of the financial year). While this time lag doesn't currently impact the timeliness, it could be a constraint moving forward.

## **Assessment of User Needs and Perceptions**

The processes for finding out about users and uses, and their views on the statistical products.

User engagement is carried out regularly with the Statistics and Advisory Committee (SAC) and other key users. This includes NISRA's Agency Board and a number of bodies representing Northern Ireland businesses.

An invitation to provide feedback is included on the Survey Burden page of the NISRA website, and also in the report, with users invited to provide feedback on what they use the reports for, any tables/charts or commentary they find particularly helpful and any additional analysis they would like to see.

Contact details for the responsible statistician are included on the first page of the report.

## **Performance, Cost and Respondent Burden**

The effectiveness, efficiency and economy of the statistical output.

There is a respondent burden placed upon NISRA and NICS colleagues, as well as colleagues in ALBs, who as SCLOs, complete the pro-forma. There is an additional burden on SCLOs, as well as those responsible for individual Government statistical surveys, as the focus on accuracy and reliability requires a considerable amount of contact and correspondence to verify the accuracy and reliability of the data. SCLOs act as a point of contact between the statisticians producing the report and the officials who manage surveys, relaying queries and resolutions back and forth, and representing their department, so there is burden placed upon them.

## **Confidentiality, Transparency and Security**

The procedures and policy used to ensure sound confidentiality, security and transparent practices.

All data and related correspondence are held within SSB's secure record management system (CM), with restricted access and subject to approved record retention protocols.

For the survey contact details, respondents are asked to provide a generic contact for the survey such as the customer contact for the branch, department or body running the survey and are also advised that these will be shared publically. Prior to publication, any email addresses for those departments with security restrictions are checked to ensure that personal emails have not been supplied in error.

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