

MEETING OF THE STATISTICS ADVISORY COMMITTEE
19th November 2021

In attendance

Mr Edgar Jardine	Chair	Ms Cathryn Blair	NISRA
Ms Siobhan Carey	NISRA	Mr Chris Ganley	NISRA
Dr Danielle Blaylock	Member	Ms Carole-Anne McKay	NISRA
Mr John Compton	Member	Mr Brian Green	NISRA
Mrs Sharon McNicholl	Member	Dr David Marshall	NISRA
Dr Chris Morris	Member	Dr Tracy Power	NISRA
Dr Kieran Payne	Member	Mr Daniel McConville	NISRA
Mr Richard Ramsey	Member	Ms Ruth Fulton	NISRA
Dr Bernie Stuart	Member	Mr Garbhan McKevitt	NISRA
Dr Danielle Blaylock	Member	Mr Aaron Maguire	NISRA (Secretary)
Jennifer McLoughlin	NISRA		

Item No.	Subject	Action
1.	<p>Welcome, Introductions and Apologies (11:15-11:20)</p> <p>Mr Jardine welcomed members and officials to the meeting before attendees introduced themselves.</p> <p>Apologies were received from Mrs Xenaki.</p>	
2.	<p>Minutes and Matters Arising (11:20-11:25)</p> <p>It was agreed that the minutes were an accurate account of the previous meeting (21st May 2021). These had been circulated.</p> <p>All action points arising from previous meeting were addressed.</p>	
3.	<p>Raising the profile of the ‘Cost to Business of Government Statistical Surveys’ reports (11:25-11:55)</p> <p>Ms Fulton spoke to her slides “Raising the profile of the cost to business of government statistical surveys report”. The slide pack detailed what the team do to monitor survey burden, why they monitor survey burden and how they estimate survey burden.</p> <p>Ms Fulton offered to share a more detailed presentation on the topic with attendees.</p> <p>The following points were noted:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ms Fulton provided an overview of the report content; dissemination procedures (PDF and excel formats); and user engagement (e.g. SAC and NISRA officials are made aware when the publication has gone live via email). 	<p>1. Secretary to obtain full “Monitoring and Reporting on Burden to Business due to Government Statistical Surveys” slides and circulate to attendees.</p> <p>2. Secretary to send Statistics Advisory Committee (SAC) commentary of the “Assessment of Cost Burden to Business 2016-17” press release to attendees.</p>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ms Fulton noted how they were able to incorporate the feedback on the reports they received from SAC and thanked members. • It was noted that SAC issued a press release about the reports in 2018 which was published on the survey burden webpage. <p>Ms Fulton opened up a discussion, chaired by Mr Jardine about the reports:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mr Compton discussed issues he faced when writing the 2018 press release. SAC was unable to get access until the reports were published. Therefore, by the time this press release went live, commentary had already gone out. Mr Compton noted that as a committee SAC have no authority to release anything. As a result, the only option was to publish the release on the site. • Mr Compton mentioned that he spoke with business journalists after developing the press release and found that interest in the reports was minimal – possibly due to it being too long. Ms Fulton stated that moving forward a short statistical press release may be useful. • Dr Stuart stated that SAC are interested in the reports because of how they reflect the trust in statistics. The message put out should be linked more with the trust and usefulness of statistics rather than the output; as an add on the costs should be included. • Ms Blair mentioned that as the monetary value and therefore the burden of forms increase with the more forms we receive, so too does the reliability of the statistics. • Mr Compton suggested that the press release from 2018 should have been better circulated as it focuses on the points raised by both Dr Stuart and Ms Blair. • Mrs McNicholl thanked Ms Fulton for the presentation and supported Ms Blair’s point that as the burden of forms increase, so too does the reliability of the surveys which is a good thing for NISRA. • Mrs McNicholl raised the point that the name of the survey, “burden” may create a certain impression of the report and that the communications and language used around the survey might be important. <p>Ms Fulton responded to discussion points:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The purpose of the report, i.e. the burden of official statistics, was emphasised. Ms Fulton did question the requirement of the full report in favour of a summary. However, it is unlikely the report could be repackaged as “the usefulness of statistics”. • Mr Compton agreed with Ms Fulton and stated the report is valuable. However, the question of what we do with the data and how it is presented remains. • Mr Jardine spoke about pre-release access for SAC members. 	<p>3. A review on responses to questions posed to the business and household burden survey team was requested for the next SAC meeting.</p>
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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ms Fulton stated that it is possible to apply for exceptional pre-release access, however there is an issue with eligible recipients, i.e. for someone who could make a statement on the statistics. Mr Ramsey made the point that the report is linked closely with survey response rates. In terms of narrative and collaboration with the media, the message that a higher burden is related to better quality statistics should be communicated. Mr Jardine closed the discussion and asked Ms Fulton to return at the next meeting to review points made. 	
4.	<p>Census Presentation – Update on progress and the ongoing outputs consultation (11:55-12:25)</p> <p>Dr Marshall introduced the presentation “2021 Census Update” with Mr McConville speaking to the slides.</p> <p>The following points were noted:</p> <p>Census timeline:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mr McConville provided an overview of Census 2021 activities and processes from 2015 to 2024. Key metrics: Mr McConville provided an overview of how things were planned to go and presented some key facts. Mr McConville discussed recent census employment activities. Live operations summary: Mr McConville discussed how most forms were completed online, noting how data quality is better from online returns. Mr McConville gave an overview of the Census Coverage Survey (CCS) which has had a response rate of around 89%. He mentioned that the team are currently working through whether or not they need to do any coverage adjustment based on the CCS. Both the census and the CCS received higher response rates than 2011. <p>Next steps:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mr McConville informed attendees that the Census Quality Survey is currently in the field and while the current response rate is lower than expected, this should improve as there is still time left to respond. Mr McConville noted that there is still a lot of work to be done in data processing and quality assurance and that while the release schedule and prospectus are still to be finalised, the first outputs are due summer 2022. Mr McConville went into further detail and provided an overview of the full release schedule. Mr McConville informed attendees that there is an outputs consultation underway to help identify new or changed data needs. <p>Variable changes and new proposals:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mr McConville outlined plans for new questions and how best to present the results to users. He also laid out proposals for new derived variables. Mr McConville spoke of the potential impacts of the census being carried out during a period of change (COVID-19 and Brexit). Mr McConville discussed how the census geography will change based on a number of factors, for example changes in local government boundaries. 	<p>4. Secretary to send a link to the video showcasing the new “build your own table” system to attendees.</p> <p>5. An update on census analysis was requested for the next SAC meeting.</p>

	<p>Methods of dissemination:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mr McConville discussed the new output system which will allow for an element of flexibility when breaking down the census data. Specifically, the census team is working with ONS on a new “build your own table” system which will allow users to define their own tables. Mr McConville clarified that there would be no disclosure risk associated with these tables. It is hoped that user dissemination will be switched to these tables at the end of 2022/early 2023. • Mr Jardine thanked Dr Marshall and Mr McConville for the presentation and asked what the method of data collection for CCS was. Mr McConville confirmed it was door to door. • Mr Compton asked if there have been any issues surrounding cyber security. Dr Marshall confirmed that paper forms have digital copies and that all paper versions have been shredded. Furthermore, census employees are aware that there are systems and services in place to prevent any misuse of the data. • Ms Carey commended the census team for their work. • Dr Morris also commended the team and asked when users are making the tables using the new flexible system, will they be able to see the perturbations? Mr McConville confirmed that they will not be able to and that the tables are first being trialled with ONS before moving to NISRA. • Mr Jardine requested an update on the 2021 census at the next SAC meeting. 	
<p>5.</p>	<p>Economic and Labour Market Statistics Branch Update (12:25-12:45)</p> <p>Ms Blair provided an overview of key points within the ELMSB update paper.</p> <p>The following points were noted:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ms Blair discussed the 2021 business survey updates. • Ms Blair noted the electronic data response rate and provided comparisons across the branch. Survey response rates have generally improved since 2020 but remain below 2019 in most cases. • Ms Blair mentioned that there is a large piece of work underway in the branch to replace the IBSS. The go live date for this new system will be June 2023. <p>Prosecution processes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • These have been paused in both 2020 and 2021, however will restart in 2022. <p>NISRA data linkage projects:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ms Blair drew attention to NISRA data linkage projects using business survey data. <p>Ms Blair then took questions related to statutory issues:</p>	<p>6. Ms Blair to follow-up with Mr Ramsey on potential engagement with Construction and Manufacturing sectors.</p> <p>7. It was requested that a consensus letter confirming SAC members support Option 1 for publication times moving forward is developed and signed. Option 1: Maintains the standard release time of 9.30am but enables alternative release times to be granted where the Director General for Regulation agrees</p>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mr Compton queried if there was any particular sectors that are under-reporting and whether or not this is impacting data quality. • Ms Blair clarified that there are lower response rates than usual within the QBS survey, namely in the IOP and QCE surveys. Furthermore, some of the issues with response rates for these surveys are “time related”, i.e. where the survey window falls in the quarter. • Mr Compton discussed the Economic Accounts project, noting member’s awareness of the current review of tax policy happening in NI. He mentioned how when working on the review of tax policy in Scotland he worked closely with Independent Fiscal Council (IFC) to inform tax modelling, and wondered whether there would be consultation from the IFC for NI? • Mr Green stated that they have met with the IFC recently. There has been no engagement yet on specifics and there have been no requests for information. However, should the IFC come back to the branch with the need for specific information then the branch can explore what it has that may be of use and consider & advise on any potential resource implications. • Dr Stuart drew upon the point that online and electronic forms are on the rise. She questioned if there are plans to capture the new found desire to complete forms online and increase response rates overall. • Ms Blair confirmed that the proportion of forms completed electronically in the last year has impacted the overall response rates positively. For example, the ASHE team carried out a project to gather email addresses to increase their online response rate and in turn the total response. • Ms Blair spoke about the desire to improve the first interaction ELMS has with new businesses via their first survey (IDBR Business Proving Form). • Mr Green continued Ms Blair’s point, stating that the branch can learn from the success of the ASHE online response project. As the branch moves to the new IBSS system a main focus will be on how to move more data collection processes online. Work is already being done for example to streamline the ABI processes from 30 iterations of the form to 18. • Ms Blair then moved on to non-statutory issues: • The Labour Market User Group event was discussed and its success highlighted. Mr Jardine also commended the event. • Ms Blair discussed how OSR have an ongoing consultation regarding the release time of statistics (highlighting that the labour market team currently publish at 7:00am, rather than the standard 9:30am). <p>Ms Blair took questions related to non-statutory issues:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mr Ramsey raised the issue of response rates (with emphasis on the IOP and QCE surveys). He suggested providing businesses with simple infographics tracking their responses to encourage a return. Mr Green and Ms McKay agreed with Richard’s suggestion of improving interactions with 	<p>that it is in the public interest to do so.</p>
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the business and welcomed his thoughts on how to improve response rates among the quarterly surveys.

- Mr Ramsey also queried whether the NICEI team could give any indication in relation to quarterly GDP. Mr Ganley confirmed that there are systems set up internally which allows statisticians to produce an estimate. He also suggested there are not huge differences and trends are largely the same. The team are currently consulting with DfE and DoH to gather critical feedback on findings.
- Mr Ramsey mentioned that a Financial Times correspondent had been in touch in relation to statistical coverage gaps. Specifically they queried whether there are statistics available detailing the flow of trade to/from Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland and to/from Northern Ireland and Great Britain. The correspondent further questioned why the statistics are not more up to date at time of release. Mr Green responded by explaining the EU Exit team have been working on using quarterly HMRC data to supplement what the branch officially puts out. Mr Ganley also explained that he has received queries of a similar nature via the DfE Press Office. He stated that the team has directed the queries to the Quarterly Regional Trade Statistics at HMRC and the Monthly Euro Stat NI Trade and Goods data. Mr Ganley also stated that the team is trying both among themselves and in collaboration with DfE colleagues to get access to more data including HMRC data to fill in some of the current gaps.
- Mr Green echoed Mr Ganley's points and mentioned that representations have been made to the OSR regarding how they might assist with influencing access to key administrative datasets in this space in order to improve data coverage.
- Mr Compton added that if we as an organisation can't or don't produce data, then users will find similar statistics elsewhere. As an example, Stenna Press Office is releasing trade statistics regarding volume of trade moving between Northern Ireland and Great Britain. Mr Compton questioned how much pressure can be put on policy officials to in turn put pressure on HMRC to provide NISRA with access to data. Importantly, if we can't produce the statistics, even if it's not our fault it could be reflected that we are not producing it.
- Mr Jardine raised the point that NISRA is coming out with a desire to stick to a standard release time of 9:30am. Dr Power followed this by clarifying option 1 of the OSR consultation allows NISRA to keep to a 9:30am release time while providing exemptions where required, for example when publishing the COVID-19 dashboard. Dr Power continued, NISRA is not likely to allow departments to choose their own publication times as this may result in confusion both among users and NISRA statisticians.
- It was clarified that it is up to SAC whether or not they want to support the decision made to keep the 9:30am publication time. Ms Carey encouraged a letter of confirmation from the committee if there is consensus agreeing to a 9:30am publication time.
- Mr Ramsey raised the question of ONS having a different release time to NISRA. Ms Carey stated that if ONS publish something at 7:00am then NISRA will also have to. This will avoid people accessing NI data via ONS first.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> SAC members agreed on a consensus to recommend a 9:30am publication time with an exemption that allows for LMR to publish at 7:00am. 	
6.	<p>Official Statistics update (12:45-13:05)</p> <p>Dr Power provided an overview of the Official Statistics update paper.</p> <p>The following points were noted:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Dr Power provided an update on National Statistics assessments, with focus on Personal Independent Payment (PIP) Statistics. These statistics have been confirmed as National Statistics as of October 2021. Dr Power then provided an update on Compliance Checks and spoke to attendees in relation to the examples listed in the paper. Dr Power discussed Breaches of the Code of Practice which occurred since the last SAC update in May 2021. Particular attention was brought to example 2. DoF – SSB “Burden to Households & Individuals of Completing Statistical Surveys issued by Northern Ireland Departments, 2019-20...” where a recipient who had not been granted pre-release access had received the publication early. However, Dr Power noted that pre-release access within DoF is very minimal at present. Dr Power discussed the latest Official Statistics (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2021. This order was made in assembly in early summer where three further bodies were brought in as producers of official statistics (Education Authority, Invest NI and Labour Relations Agency). Dr Power provided a quick overview of the OSR Review of 9:30am Release Time. Dr Power then discussed the OSR Review of National Statistics Designation. The words “national statistics” are unlikely to be used moving forward due to the unique situation in Northern Ireland. However, there will still be an indication to users when statistics have met the code. Dr Power noted the increased awareness of statistics since the pandemic. It was mentioned how the media have been able to deliver the COVID message in a way that has been accurate to the statistics. Mr Jardine stated that the increased trust in NISRA and the value in which it is placed is encouraging. Mr Jardine and Mr Compton discussed how they think this could be recognised. Mr Compton noted how NISRA is quoted as an authority source in the media for both COVID-19 statistics and statistics in general. Mr Compton suggested putting one or more teams up for awards for recognition of quality of work (a list of awards was sent to Mr Jardine). Dr Power thanked Mr Compton for the list of awards and stated that teams have been nominated for analytical awards recently with the outcome pending. 	8. Secretary to obtain list of awards from chair and send to Dr Power.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ms Carey agreed with all that there should be broader recognition with awards, beyond just the analytical community. Ms Carey would be keen to look at further award categories and put teams/NISRA forward. Mr Jardine undertook to send the list of awards to Dr Power. 	
7.	<p>AOB (13:05-close)</p> <p>Mr Jardine closed the meeting and it was agreed that the next meeting should be in spring/summer 2022.</p> <p>Mr Jardine thanked members for attending, for their participation and for the work done to develop the meeting.</p> <p>Mr Jardine recommended a focus on education statistics for the next meeting.</p>	9. A briefing from Department of Education (DOE) on plans for addressing the deficit detailed within the “What has happened to the attainment gap during the pandemic?” report was requested for the next meeting.

Summary of Actions

Action	Subject
1.	Secretary to obtain full “Monitoring and Reporting on Burden to Business due to Government Statistical Surveys” slides and circulate to attendees.
2.	Secretary to send “Statistics Advisory Committee (SAC) commentary of the “Assessment of Cost Burden to Business 2016-17” press release to attendees.
3.	A review on responses to questions posed to the business and household burden survey team was requested for the next SAC meeting.
4.	Secretary to send a link to the video showcasing the new “build your own table” system to attendees.
5.	An update on census analysis was requested for the next SAC meeting.
6.	Ms Blair to follow-up with Mr Ramsey on potential engagement with Construction and Manufacturing sectors.
7.	It was requested that a consensus letter confirming SAC members support Option 1 for publication times moving forward is developed and signed.
8.	Secretary to obtain list of awards from chair and send to Dr Power.
9.	A briefing from DoE on plans for addressing the deficit detailed within the “What has happened to the attainment gap during the pandemic?” report was requested for the next meeting.
10.	Secretary to arrange the next meeting in spring/summer 2022.