



Office for National Statistics

Survey Charter

www.statistics.gov.uk

ONS Survey Charter

The Office for National Statistics (ONS) *Survey Charter* sets out our commitments to the people and organisations who take part in our surveys and use our survey statistics. It aims to help you understand the standards and practices we apply when handling our most valuable resource – the information we obtain through the trust of our survey respondents. Our standards and practices are based on the principles described in the *National Statistics Code of Practice*, which we follow in all our work.

If you are taking part in an ONS survey, the *Survey Charter* explains the importance of your contribution and the high professional standards that you can expect from us. It describes the steps we take to protect the confidentiality of your information, and the measures in place to ensure that we take up as little of your time as necessary.

If you use our survey statistics, the *Survey Charter* explains how we aim to meet the needs of government and the wider user community. It describes how we uphold the quality of our statistics, ensure openness and transparency, and promote widespread access, understanding and use.

The *Survey Charter* applies to all our surveys. It supplements the commitments we make on letters, leaflets, survey questionnaires and the National Statistics website, as well as those made on the phone or in person by our interviewers and other employees. Most of the commitments we make in the Charter describe what we are already doing. Some are aspirational, describing where we are aiming and how we plan to get there.

About the Office for National Statistics

ONS is a UK government department and the country's largest provider of official statistics. Most of our statistics are based on the information given to us by individuals, households, businesses and other establishments in response to our surveys.

The government uses our statistics to make decisions about society and the economy that affect the lives of everyone living and working in the UK. We also publish our statistics so that the UK's citizens and businesses can use them, and they are a valuable source of information for schools, universities and the media. The impartial information they provide on a wide range of topics enables more effective public debate and makes it easier for people to monitor government performance.

If you are selected for one of our surveys, it is important that you take part. It is the only way that we can build a full and accurate picture of society and the economy, and make sure that every group of people and type of business is represented in the information used to govern the UK. Many people see taking part in our surveys as worthwhile and an act of good citizenship.

The following examples describe some of our surveys, and how their results are used.

- The Expenditure and Food Survey collects information on how we spend our money and what food we eat. The information is used in studies of diet and nutrition, and to measure how the cost of living is changing.
- The Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings collects information on pay and working hours. The Low Pay Commission uses the information to make recommendations about the minimum wage.
- The Annual Business Inquiry collects information on companies' finances and numbers of employees. This contributes to the National Accounts, which measure the state of the UK economy, and influence interest rate decisions and government economic policy.

ONS is also responsible for carrying out the Census in England and Wales, which takes place every ten years. We will be publishing a companion document to the *Survey Charter* that sets out the commitments we make to you in our Census work.

You can find further information on individual surveys on the National Statistics website **www.statistics.gov.uk** or by contacting us using the details provided at the end of this leaflet.

Our commitments to the people and organisations who respond to our surveys

a. We will value your time and ask for information only when your involvement is important.

Our surveys provide the government with the high quality information it needs to make policy, take decisions and allocate resources. We only collect information when it is of national importance. We are not a commercial organisation and we do not work for political parties.

Most of our business surveys are conducted under the Statistics of Trade Act 1947, which means that you are required by law to give us the information we ask for. Participation in our surveys of people and households is not required by law, so we seek to give you a good understanding of why taking part is worthwhile and an act of good citizenship. We know that answering our questions takes time and effort, and that this adds up if you are giving us information on a regular basis or are involved in several surveys. In return, we understand that we have obligations to you.

What this means to you

- We will only ask for information when it is of national importance and we have no other practical way of obtaining it.
- We will ensure that we make the best use of your contribution. We know that the time and involvement you have given us are valuable.
- We will ensure that, consistent with getting results of the required quality:
 - the number of people we ask to take part in each survey is as small as possible;
 - you are selected for as few surveys as possible; and
 - our surveys are as quick and easy to complete as possible.
- We will periodically review each survey to make sure that it is still necessary, and we will introduce a new survey only if we cannot get the information from anywhere else.
- We will monitor the average costs of completing our surveys, and publish these on an annual basis.
- We will try to find ways to make it easier for you to share your information with us, such as using the Internet and, where practical, using information that is already held by other government departments.

- We will only use the legal process to obtain information from a business as a last resort.

b. We will treat you with respect.

The National Statistics logo acts like a quality mark. It guarantees that the information we are collecting is of national importance, that we have high professional standards, and that we will treat you and your information with respect.

What this means to you

- We will clearly identify ourselves as from the Office for National Statistics whenever we contact you. The National Statistics logo will be prominently displayed on our survey forms and leaflets, and on our interviewers' photo identification cards.
- We will set high professional standards for our staff. We will maintain these standards of behaviour and integrity through the rigour and quality of our recruitment, training and management practices.
- We will work with you to address any difficulties caused by our requests for information.
- We will respect your rights, time and privacy, and the way you conduct your life or your business.
- We will listen to your views and take them into consideration when we design our surveys and business practices.

c. We will give you the opportunity to understand the background to a survey before you share your information with us. We will explain your obligations and describe our obligations to you.

If you have been selected to take part in a survey, you will want to know why we are asking for information, how we will use that information, and if you are required by law to supply it.

What this means to you

We will usually send you a letter describing the background to a survey when you are first selected to take part. However, you might not have seen the letter or you may want to ask some questions. We can supply you with further information by post, telephone or e-mail, or through the National Statistics website. For surveys of individuals and households, an interviewer will call on you. They will be able to describe the

background to the survey and provide you with relevant leaflets.

We will aim to describe to you:

- how you were selected to take part;
- what information you need to share with us;
- our guarantee of confidentiality;
- if your involvement is required by law;
- the principal reasons for carrying out the survey, including the main people who will be using the information and what they will be using it for;
- any known plans to use the results of the survey in combination with other data; and
- how you can obtain further information about the survey, including survey results.

If you have been asked to take part in one of our business surveys, we will also tell you:

- the date by which we need your information; and
- what happens if you do not supply the information by the given deadline.

d. We will treat the information we receive with the strictest confidence and ensure that it is only used for statistical purposes.

Safeguarding the information you give us is as important to us as it is to you. Protecting the confidentiality of the information in our care is a vital part of all our business practices.

We publish statistics for a wide and varied audience, but we do not to publish anything that is likely to identify an individual, household or business. We want to make the most of the information we hold and we know that unpublished data, such as individual survey responses, can be a valuable resource for researchers. We provide access to these detailed survey data only to carefully selected researchers under strictly controlled conditions.

What this means to you

- We will include a confidentiality guarantee on all of our survey questionnaires and on relevant survey literature.
- We will ensure that our staff are aware of their obligation to protect your confidentiality and of the legal penalties likely to apply if they wrongly release information.

- We will maintain the security of our computer systems and buildings.
- We will not publish anything that is likely to identify an individual, household or business.
- We will make sure that your information is only used for statistical purposes. It will never be used to check other information that the government holds about you, such as the tax you pay or the benefits you receive. We would seek to prosecute anyone involved in this sort of activity.
- We will control access to microdata (individual survey responses, usually with direct identifiers such as names and addresses removed) using a panel of senior ONS staff, which reports to the National Statistician. We will grant access only when this is lawful, and only to carefully selected researchers. These researchers must agree to comply with the *National Statistics Code of Practice* in its entirety, use the data only for statistical purposes and honour all of our confidentiality commitments. We will publish on our website details of who has been given access to which individual survey results, and for what statistical purpose.
- We will regularly assess the adequacy of the legal basis for protecting statistical records in the UK, and we will make sure that Data Protection and Freedom of Information legislation is applied to reinforce ONS practice as described in this *Survey Charter*.

Our commitments to the people and organisations who use our survey statistics

e. We will listen to your views, and we will consider the needs of the user community when we design our surveys and survey statistics.

Our surveys are more relevant and useful when they are designed to meet the needs of our users. We will listen to your views and the views of the other people and organisations who use our statistics through a mixture of informal and formal consultations. We try to identify the best way to address the various and diverse needs of our user community, through our surveys or other sources of information.

What this means to you

- We will explain how you can find out more about a survey, encourage your questions and comments, and help you understand our survey statistics.
- We will consult with users and user groups, and make these consultations an integral part of the process of producing statistics. We will make sure that users are involved from the outset when we are planning a major change to a survey.
- We will communicate with users in a clear, simple and transparent manner. We will report on the outcomes of our consultations and explain subsequent decisions and actions.
- We will co-ordinate consultations to make sure we get the best results while keeping the work for our users to a minimum.
- We will ensure that the team working on each survey is aware of the main users and uses of the survey results, and takes them into account at all stages of the survey process.

f. We will aim to produce survey results that are objective, fit for purpose, and of high quality.

Users want survey results that meet their needs in terms of content and quality, and that are free from political influence. You may want to compare or combine survey results with other sources of information, or to use the results to investigate changes over time. We recognise the importance of comparability and consistency, and the need to balance this against the benefits of change.

What this means to you

- We will ensure that our survey methods are sound and compare well with the best practice of other National Statistics Institutions and major survey organisations.
- We will keep up to date with new methods and technologies, while balancing the benefits of change with the importance of maintaining consistency.
- We will support the use of standard practices and definitions.
- We will regularly monitor the quality of our surveys.
- We will publish information about our survey methods, survey quality, systems and tools, and encourage comment and evaluation. We will work towards making more information available and standardising its format and content.
- We will ensure that all our survey activities are carried out professionally. We will do this through our management practices, the recruitment and training of properly qualified staff, research, and reference to best practice.
- We will ensure that there is no political direction to the way we run our surveys.

g. We will be open and transparent in the way we release our survey results.

It is important for users to know what we will publish and when so that they can plan accordingly.

What this means to you

- We will issue a timetable setting out what we will publish and when. We will usually plan to release results on the earliest date that we expect them to be ready for publication.
- We will make the information that we publish available to everyone at the same time. We will publicise any limited exceptions to this commitment, for example if we allow early access to government ministers.
- We will announce any changes to publication dates as soon as possible, along with an explanation for the change. We will not withhold, delay or otherwise alter the release of information for political purposes.
- We will announce any substantial changes to our methodology before we publish survey results based on those methods.
- We will be open and transparent about any revisions we make to our published statistics.

h. We will make survey results available in ways that promote widespread access and use.

We need to make sure that people who want to use our published survey results can access them easily. We also recognise that unpublished data, such as individual survey returns, can be a valuable resource for expert users. Protecting the confidentiality of the people and organisations who respond to our surveys is of vital importance to us, so we control access to this detailed information very carefully.

What this means to you

- We will aim to publish survey results and information about the surveys and their results in formats that are convenient for the widest range of users.
- We will make survey results available in as much detail as is practicable, as long as we judge them to be reliable and there is no risk to the confidentiality of survey respondents.
- We will not charge for access to headline survey results, or other information that is of broad and general interest.
- We will use the Internet as our main channel for publishing survey results.
- We will focus our first releases of survey information on key messages and make additional information available as soon as possible.
- We will present the information that we publish in a way that is helpful to users, for example by providing links to related articles and data.
- We will channel all requests for access to microdata (individual responses, usually with direct identifiers such as names and addresses removed) through a panel of senior ONS staff, which reports to the National Statistician. We will grant access only when this is lawful, and only to carefully selected researchers. These researchers must comply with the *National Statistics Code of Practice* in its entirety, use the data only for statistical purposes and honour all of our confidentiality commitments.

i. We will publish information about our surveys and survey results, and will work towards presenting information in a standard format and to a consistent level of detail.

To make the best use of our survey results, people need to know how the surveys are designed and run, and about the quality of our statistics. This information should be available in easily accessible formats.

What this means to you

For many users, the main sources of detailed information about our surveys are our technical reports and the National Statistics website. We are currently undertaking a major project to modernise our statistical systems and standardise what we document and publish for each survey, and in future we will make even more information available on our website.

- We will work towards standardising the content and format of the technical information available for our surveys, and making it available online.
- We will work towards publishing qualitative and quantitative measures of the quality of our surveys, with guidance on their interpretation for non-expert users.

Our commitments to individuals, organisations and the government

j. We will conduct our survey work efficiently and cost-effectively and strive to obtain maximum value from survey data.

We have a duty to provide good value for money in our survey work. We treat survey data and results as a valuable and irreplaceable resource, making them generally available and encouraging their widespread and long-term use.

What this means to you

- We will design survey systems that, as far as possible, are robust and able to adapt to the changing needs of our users.
- We will promote common definitions and frameworks, and encourage statistics providers everywhere to adopt international standards.
- We will deposit survey information of long-term research value with the UK Data Archive (the UK's largest collection of digital data from the social sciences and humanities) or The National Archives (the custodian of the nation's public records). Many archived statistical records are made public once they reach a certain age, such as 100 years. Some of these, particularly information from population censuses conducted in the 19th century, have become invaluable historical resources.
- We will actively seek out opportunities to reduce our costs. As priorities change, we will continue to monitor and report on the balance between our costs and the benefits we provide.

k. We will invite requests, questions, and comments, and deal with them in a professional manner.

We welcome constructive comment on our survey work and the customer care we provide. It helps us to improve our service.

What it means to you

- We will welcome your feedback.
- We will aim to reply to you within ten working days.

- We will treat complaints seriously and in confidence. We will aim to acknowledge any complaint, and give the name of the member of staff dealing with it, within three working days.
- We will ensure that our communications are concise and clear.
- We will treat you with courtesy, respect and consideration.

Monitoring our performance and contacting us

We welcome comments on the *Survey Charter* and our performance against it.

We will monitor our performance against the commitments set out in the Charter, both on the basis of your feedback and through internal review. We will publish an assessment of our performance in the ONS Annual Report (available on our website) as part of a wider report on our compliance with the *National Statistics Code of Practice*.

You can contact us by e-mail, telephone, fax or letter using the details below.

by e-mail

info@statistics.gov.uk

by phone

(Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm)

0845 601 3034 - charged at local rates
for calls made within the UK

01633 812 399 - MINICOM for the
hearing impaired

by fax

01633 652 747

by letter

Survey Charter
c/o Customer Contact Centre
Office for National Statistics
Cardiff Road
Newport
NP10 8XG

website

www.statistics.gov.uk