

MEETING OF THE STATISTICS ADVISORY COMMITTEE
13th September 2023

In attendance

Mr Edgar Jardine	Chair	Mr Brian Green	NISRA
Dr Philip Wales	NISRA	Ms Nicola Fisher	NISRA
Mr John Compton	Member	Ms Carole-Anne McKay	NISRA
Mrs Sharon McNicholl	Member	Ms Norma Broomfield	NISRA
Dr Chris Morris	Member	Mr Chris Ganley	NISRA
Dr Kieran Payne	Member	Mr Richard Elliot	NISRA
Dr Bernie Stuart	Member	Mr Aaron Maguire	NISRA
Dr Danielle Blaylock	Member	Mr Gerard Colgan	NISRA
Ms Amanda Alexander	NISRA	Mr Sandy Fitzpatrick	NISRA

Item No.	Subject	Action
1.	<p>Welcome, Introductions and Apologies (10:00-10:05)</p> <p>Mr Jardine welcomed members and officials to the meeting and apologies were received from Mr Richard Ramsey.</p> <p>Mr Jardine also informed members of Dr Nancy Xenaki's decision to resign as a member of SAC. On behalf of the committee, he thanked her for her contribution to SAC.</p>	
2.	<p>Minutes and Matters Arising (10:05-10:10)</p> <p>It was agreed that the minutes were an accurate account of the previous meeting (7th June 2023).</p> <p>All action points arising from the previous meeting were addressed.</p>	
3.	<p>An Update on the NISRA Outputs Consultation (10:10-10:30)</p> <p>Dr Wales provided an overview of the 'Consultation on changes to NISRA's Statistical Outputs' paper which was circulated to members prior to the meeting.</p> <p>He began by contextualising the consultation in light of budgetary changes for the 2023/24 financial year. Specifically, explaining how in real terms the Department of Finance (DoF) has experienced a budget cut of around 20%, with the majority of this falling on centralised teams, for example Economic and Labour Market Statistics. He informed members that in addition to the DoF, the Department of Health (DoH) is also experiencing budget restraints.</p> <p>Dr Wales explained how the organisation has sought out alternative sources of income including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • From ONS: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ NISRA is running a one-time 'Management and Expectations' survey which samples GB businesses on behalf of ONS. ○ A team of statisticians are to be seconded to work in ONS on a Public Service Productivity project for a defined period. 	

- Capital funding, specifically in relation to Economic and Labour Market Statistics projects has been increased.
- Co-location with another business unit in Colby House is planned.

Dr Wales then discussed the impacts of a reduced budget on statistical outputs. He explained how with less staff, branches are unable to produce the same number of outputs, and where there were vacancies/staff shortages changes have been identified to reduce pressure on teams. He ensured that the organisation has been working closely with the Office for Statistics Regulation to ensure any changes proposed are compliant with the Code of Practice. Some outputs have been identified which will be suspended, some will be scaled back in terms of commentary (but will retain data detail) and some will be delayed.

At present, there have been seventeen responses to the consultation and indicative data shows there aren't many major concerns. Following the consultation period, NISRA will develop a response which will set out for users what will be done.

Dr Wales invited questions and feedback from attendees.

Discussion

- Dr Stuart questioned what statistics are going to be suspended? Dr Wales explained that the outputs which are to be suspended are compilation statistics which are already available elsewhere, for example N.I. In Profile, rather than specific statistical releases. He also noted that data collection for the Coal Inquiry may be suspended in light of the very small numbers of responders available to this survey.
- Mr Compton questioned what the message management strategy is for the consultation. Specifically, how will the organisation communicate the balance between the benefits and risks set out in the consultation? Dr Wales emphasised that message management surrounding the consultation is a complex challenge. Specifically, where there are budget cuts changes will be required, for example having less staff means having to reassess some outputs. However, by scaling back releases this reduces pressure on teams and allows them to focus on progressing and improving work streams, for example, the Transformed Labour Force Survey. He also assured members that the underlying data will still remain in spite of scaling back bulletins.
- Dr Wales informed members that the Economic and Labour Market Statistics branch, where a lot of the changes are happening, are holding a user consultation event on 21st September where the team will discuss changes with attendees in more detail. Mr Green then provided members with a summary of how bulletins, for example the Labour Market report, will be scaled back and how the underlying data will be maintained. He encouraged members to attend the ELMS user consultation and provide feedback.
- Dr Stuart suggested that when the consultation period ends, the organisation should emphasise the message that all underlying data will remain accessible to users.
- Dr Morris spoke of the importance of bulletins for describing the data to users and his concerns about losing this detail. Mr Green confirmed that the bulletins are going to continue to be released in a shortened format.

	<p>He ensured that the bulletins will not lose detail and the underlying data will be clearly signposted. However, with the branch experiencing staff losses in conjunction with more transformation work, for example the new business survey system, scaling back bulletins is necessary. He also informed members that the new ELMS table builder is being improved to link users to dashboards to improve how users can access information.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dr Payne commended the branch for focusing on innovative and transformative work in spite of the budget cuts they are experiencing. • Mrs McNicholl shared her support of the changes and understands the challenges the organisation is facing. • Mr Jardine queried the HR implications of budgetary restraints. Dr Wales relayed to members the actions that have been taken to manage the impact of the budget cuts on staff, including statisticians being seconded to ONS and a managed move exercise for staff in DoF to DoH which involved moving staff towards where funding is available. He also informed attendees of upcoming Deputy Principal and Assistant Statistician recruitment competitions. 	
<p>4.</p>	<p>Census Update (10:30-11:00)</p> <p>Mr Elliot spoke to his slides 'Census Update' which provided an overview of on-going Census developments.</p> <p>Mr Elliot began by giving an overview of all Census 2021 publications to date. This was followed with a summary of key messages to take from the Census 2021 data. Some key messages to note include a fast-growing older population, more cars and vans being in use, and a lower unemployment rate than the 2011 Census showed.</p> <p>Mr Elliot outlined future plans for the Census branch which include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aggregate statistics to be released in the coming months; • Microdata to be released in the coming year; and • Other activities such as stakeholder engagement events and recommendations for the Census 2031 (ongoing). <p>Mr Elliot detailed the new geographies (released on 21st February 2023) whereby new Data Zones will replace previous Output Areas. It was noted that these new output areas will have implications for some users in the context of Deprivation Measures. He explained why these new Data Zones have been put in place, with points including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Layout issues with previous Output Areas (irregularly shaped); and • User feedback from the 2018 outputs strategy consultation. <p>Mr Elliot then displayed a practical example of how these new Data Zones differ from previous Output Areas and assured members that the new geographical areas allow for better data. Points to consider with the new Data Zones include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They are more regularly shaped, aligning with the main road network; • They have less variation in size; and • More socially similar in terms of housing characteristics. <p>Mr Elliot outlined on-going developments in ONS with points including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ongoing consultation on the future of the Census in England and Wales; • How NISRA is working with ONS to understand the potential impact of no 2031 Census; and 	

- Confirmed that no decisions have yet been taken for the NI 2031 Census.

Mr Elliot ended his presentation by providing members with an overview of both the Area Explorer and Table Builder resources now available to Census data users.

Mr Jardine thanked Mr Elliot for his presentation and invited comments from members.

Discussion

- Mr Jardine queried when a decision must be taken regarding the future of the 2031 Census. In response, Dr Wales explained that there is currently no defined point whereby a decision must be taken. However, the ONS consultation is an important milestone for decisions moving forward. For example, if in Spring 2024 ONS decide they will not carry out a 2031 Census, at that point NISRA would be required to move quickly towards ministerial recommendations for the next Census.
- Mr Jardine also asked if the ongoing ONS consultation is GB only or if it is UK wide? Dr Wales explained that ONS are consulting on the future of population and migration statistics across the UK. However, the way ONS move forward will have an impact on how NISRA progresses work on the Census and therefore we must ensure ONS are mindful of this.
- Mr Elliot described to members how NISRA already utilises administrative data to output annual series population and migration statistics; and how ONS have created a dynamic population model using administrative data which they are now trying to progress to model deeper population characteristics. A question was posed that if NISRA is able to implement something akin to this, is there a need for a wider Census. Mr Elliot also elaborated on timescales, relaying that if there is no decision made regarding the 2031 Census by the end of 2025, this will compress what the branch can deliver.
- Mr Green informed members how Dr Wales has been advancing work to improve the current funding model to keep NISRAs work progressive and in line with ONS developments. At present, ONS have three-year bidding cycles whereas NISRA receives funding for one year and this is spread across multiple departments.
- Dr Wales explained that currently there is a push to have comparable health statistics across the UK, for example waiting times for cancer treatments and A&E waiting times. However, the difficulty with achieving this is that health is a devolved matter and there is a lack of funding available to achieve comparable and aligned statistical work across the devolved administrations.
- Dr Wales encouraged all attendees to make use of the new Census table builder application.
- Mr Jardine questioned whether work on the 2021 Census is drawing to a close. Mr Elliot confirmed that it was, specifically by late 2024 the majority of outputs will have been released and the branch is starting to look forward.

<p>5.</p>	<p>ELMSB Update (11:00-11:20)</p> <p>Mr Ganley provided an overview of the SAC ELMS paper which was circulated to attendees prior to the meeting.</p> <p>He discussed a number of statutory matters including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The improvement in response rates across surveys. • Data collection initiatives that are on-going within the branch. For example, the avoiding refusal training that administrative staff (referred to as the compliance team when engaging with businesses) took part in has been successful in terms of business engagement and improving response. • The development of the new business survey system is well underway, and meetings are on-going with consultants to bring the new system to operation by summer 2024. • Statistical production is moving away from current processes which include a mix of SAS, Access and Excel to using primarily R open-source software. • Prosecutions: All bar one business on the annual survey prosecution lists have returned their survey forms for this period. • The number of microdata requests ELMS receives has increased since last year. • An overview of data linkage projects, namely the Business Data for Research database – of which, the launch event for the next phase will be held on 8th November 2023. <p>He discussed a number of non-statutory matters including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The NISRA Outputs Consultation and how this impacts ELMS releases moving forward. Mr Ganley invited members to the upcoming Economic & Tourism Statistics User Consultation which will discuss proposals regarding the ELMS branch in more detail on 21st September 2023. • The ELMS Labour Market Statistics User Group will be held in Colby House (with an online option available) on 24th October 2023. • An update on the Transformed Labour Force Survey. • An update on the Economic Accounts Project. • The new imports questions which have been added to the Annual Business Inquiry and the application for funding through HM Treasury’s Economic Data Innovation (EDIF) to assist with the extra administrative work the addition of these questions has created. • The Tourism Satellite Accounts, which will be produced in conjunction with ONS and CSO and provide a robust and comparable dataset for the Northern Ireland Tourism sector. • The NI Public Expenditure Dashboard, which will make public expenditure data and information more accessible to users. <p>Mr Ganley brought members attention to the list of outputs which have been published since the last SAC meeting (33 in total).</p> <p>Mr Jardine thanked Mr Ganley for the branch update and welcomed questions from members.</p> <p>Discussion</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dr Stuart questioned how the branch decides which businesses are put forward for prosecution procedures. Mr Ganley explained that the criteria for prosecution has not changed and remains that if a business is placed on a prosecution list it has been done so based on its history of non-response and the importance of that business to ELMS survey data. Mr Colgan 	<p>1. Secretary to send out invite to the upcoming ‘NISRA User Consultation - Economic & Tourism Statistics’ to all members following the meeting.</p>
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echoed Mr Ganley's points, confirming that bigger businesses in terms of their importance to surveys and businesses with repeated non-compliance fall under the consideration criteria for prosecution. He also provided members with an overview of the administrative work involved in prosecution processes. Mr Green emphasised that the criteria the branch employs for prosecution processes is applied equally across the branch, with a common approach across surveys. He also informed members that the branch is strengthening the message within the ELMS compliance team to encourage survey responses.

- Dr Stuart asked about the delays in some ELMS publication dates as noted in the NISRA Outputs Consultation and queried how will this help resources long term. Mr Ganley explained that several factors have led to some publications being delayed. For example, in relation the delay with the next NI Research and Development (R&D) publication, work has been ongoing in line with ONS to improve survey methodology and processing of data. All this improvement work is co-ordinated with ONS and current plans are for both ELMS and ONS to release in the next NI R&D results sometime in Q1 2024. Both Mr Ganley and Mr Colgan elaborated on the increased workload the branch has been experiencing due to the development of the new business survey system. Examples of such work include, testing for the new business survey system and on-going consultations between survey teams and the supplier. They explained that this increase in work, in conjunction with less staff has meant push backs for some releases. Mr Green commended both Mr Ganley and Mr Colgan for their on-going efforts to manage the increased work load within the branch. He ensured members that the team is being strategic and pragmatic with limited resources and is content that effort is focused on the correct places.
- Dr Blaylock asked whether the switch to R software has led to the branch experiencing any difficulties associated with switching to a new statistical language. Mr Ganley discussed how the branch has dealt with the change well. Specifically, staff have utilised online training and resources to assist their R development. He also explained how the branch has been working closely with ONS who are also incorporating R into their work. He drew example from the trade statistics team, who over the previous two years have moved completely from SPSS and SAS to R. One of the results of this is that the team can now produce tables in R that feed directly into the online data portal. He emphasised that it is important to provide staff with space to learn and implement the language over time. Dr Wales spoke about experiences of moving to R software across wider NISRA branches. He explained that it is more of a mixed picture across the organisation, which faces an upskilling challenge. He noted that the Tech Lab working alongside business areas to develop R versions of their work has been helpful, although as an organisation we are at the start of this transformation journey.
- Mr Ganley further explained that the branch has brought in an external consultant to code R to transform the Quarterly Business Survey. He informed members that the statisticians are working closely with the consultant to learn from their experience and to communicate branch needs. At present, R code is being heavily annotated and procedures manuals are being developed from this work to improve in-house knowledge.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dr Blaylock also asked if the plan is to specify that R is the language people have experience in when sourcing new hires. Dr Wales confirmed that a software language requirement will not be specified. Rather the requirement will be broader but suggested that having some form of programming experience may be useful moving forward. 	
<p>6.</p>	<p>Official Statistics Update (11:20-11:35)</p> <p>Ms Broomfield provided an overview of the SAC Official Statistics Update paper which was circulated to attendees prior to the meeting. Members were updated on issues including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • National Statistics assessments including the 2021 Census and the Transformed Labour Force Survey, both of which are on-going. • Breaches of the Code of Practice since the last SAC meeting, of which there have been none. • The State of the Statistical System Report. • The on-going review of the Code of Practice for Statistics. <p>Mr Jardine thanked Ms Broomfield for the update and opened a discussion between attendees.</p> <p>Discussion</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mr Jardine queried whether the change in threshold for reporting breaches has contributed to the lack of breaches over the last year. Ms Broomfield confirmed that as some breaches no longer need reporting, the list detailed to SAC members is now smaller. • Dr Wales informed members of an ongoing Westminster parliamentary enquiry on the uses of data within the context of policy making, and whether the statistical system is supporting this; and of the Independent Review of the UK Statistical Authority which is engaging with devolved administrations on the efficiency and governance of the statistical system. In light of these developments, he noted the timeliness of the review of the Code of Practice. • Dr Wales also detailed to members the formal mechanism whereby when ONS wish to publish data on a devolved matter, for example on health statistics, there is a requirement for ONS to discuss the proposals with devolved administrations to ensure they are content with what is being released. He also noted that there needs to be better alignment with what the statistical system produces at a UK level and the funding mechanisms it has to deliver the data. 	
<p>7.</p>	<p>SAC Business Item (11:35-12:00)</p> <p>Mr Jardine introduced the topic 'A proposal for how to move forward in relation to the role SAC has in reviewing and consulting on new surveys' before handing over to Mr Green who provided an overview of the topic paper which was sent out to members prior to the meeting. Points from the document included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How the legislation sets out what departments can do and must do in respect of statutory surveys, for example, they must consult with SAC. • Next steps involve sending the requirements as listed in the paper, under the name of the Chair of the Committee, to Departments via the cross Departmental Statistics Co-ordinating Group who will cascade as appropriate. 	

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The requirements will be clear when stating if a department wants to conduct a statutory survey, this can be done under legislation and consultation with SAC is necessary. • Before a department launches a statutory survey, they should first investigate whether they can already source the information they are interested in from an alternative source to minimise burden. • As the committee typically meets twice a year, if there is an opportunity for the department to bring the survey to the committee by way of a meeting then that should occur. If there is not such an opportunity, then there is a mechanism to bring it to SAC via correspondence. • The document lays out what information SAC would need to see from survey proposals. • SAC reserves the right to hold a meeting regarding a survey proposal if it is felt that it is warranted. • The proposed timescale for SAC members to respond is four weeks. <p>Mr Green asked members if they are content with such a document detailing requirements is sent out to departments, and invited comments on the paper.</p> <p>Discussion</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mr Compton explained, while he is content with what is being proposed, it should come with one caveat – where a GB survey is being carried out in NI, whichever department is sending the survey proposal to SAC must first ascertain whether or not the survey can be done in NI. • Dr Stuart commented that the proposed document is essential and queried what happens in relation to correspondence where it is not possible to have a meeting to discuss through the proposal. Dr Stuart also queried whether four weeks is long enough for SAC to consider a response to proposed surveys. In response to Dr Stuart’s first query, Mr Jardine suggested if it was a one item agenda meeting i.e., the survey proposal, this could be carried out remotely rather than in person. In relation to proposed timescales for SAC to make a response, Mr Compton suggested if a department sends the committee erroneous information and SAC members respond noting these errors, at this point the response window of four weeks could stop and then restart when responses are provided. • Dr Payne queried whether SACs role in advising on surveys includes only statutory surveys or both statutory and voluntary surveys. A discussion between attendees on whether or not SAC should be consulted on both statutory and non-statutory surveys followed. Some suggestions that arose from this discussion included: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Mr Jardine proposed that given the significance of SACs role in consulting on surveys it may be useful to get a legal opinion on whether or not both statutory and non-statutory surveys require SAC consultation. ○ Dr Wales proposed that it may be worth asking whoever is proposing the survey whether or not they intend to carry it out on a statutory or voluntary basis. Dr Wales also emphasised that any surveys which do come to SAC for consultation should do so in good order and in ample time. 	
8.	AOB and Close (12:00-12:15)	

	<p>Dr Wales provided members with an update on the recruitment processes for new SAC members in light of several SAC appointments coming to an end. He informed members that the legal advice they received was that the Permanent Secretary could not make appointments to the committee in the absence of a minister. However, the legislation and the importance of the role of SAC in relation to statistical matters and statutory function was emphasised to the Departmental Solicitor’s Office, who in turn put the case for new member appointments to the Secretary of State for consideration.</p> <p>Dr Wales extended his thanks to committee members for their work and commitment to SAC. He reflected on members’ time on the committee and the service they provided over the past ten years. He commended the work the committee has overseen, which includes but is not limited to – the 2011 and 2021 Census; Program for Government data and developments; the sharing of administrative data for research purposes; EU Exit and NI Protocol statistics; NISRA’s work with the Office for Statistics Regulation; NISRA’s public profile; and engagement with social media. He extended his gratitude for their service and the statutory duties they contributed.</p> <p>Mr Jardine echoed Dr Wales’ remarks by extending his thanks to committee members and recalled how NISRA has changed and progressed over both his time involved in the organisation and his time as Chair of the Committee.</p> <p>Mr Jardine brought the meeting to a close by thanking attendees and members for their contribution to what was a constructive meeting.</p>	
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Summary of Actions

Action	Subject	Update
1.	Secretary to send out invite to the upcoming ‘NISRA User Consultation - Economic & Tourism Statistics’ to all members following the meeting.	Sent to members on 13 th September 2023.