

MEETING OF THE STATISTICS ADVISORY COMMITTEE
21ST May 2021

In attendance

Mr Edgar Jardine	Chair	Ms Cathryn Blair	NISRA
Dr Danielle Blaylock	Member	Mr Gerard Colgan	NISRA
Mr Derek Bond	Member	Mr Chris Ganley	NISRA
Mr John Compton	Member	Ms Carole-Anne McKay	NISRA
Mrs Sharon McNicholl	Member	Dr David Marshall	NISRA
Dr Chris Morris	Member	Dr Tracy Power	NISRA
Dr Kieran Payne	Member	Mr Sandy Fitzpatrick	NISRA
Mr Richard Ramsey	Member	Dr Eugene Mooney	NISRA
Dr Bernie Stuart	Member	Mr Aaron Maguire	NISRA (Secretariat)
Dr Athanasia Xenaki	Member		

Item No.	Subject	Action
1.	<p>Welcome, Introductions and Apologies (13:30-13:35)</p> <p>Mr Jardine welcomed members and officials to the meeting and introduced Aaron Maguire as the new secretary.</p> <p>Mr Colgan discussed action points set up prior to the meeting and changes to the agenda.</p> <p>Apologies were received from Siobhan Carey and Brian Green.</p>	
2.	<p>Minutes and Matters Arising (13:35-13:40)</p> <p>It was agreed that the minutes were an accurate account of the previous meeting (2nd October 2020). These had been circulated.</p> <p>Mr Jardine discussed the positive response from business bodies to questions posed about working from home.</p>	
3.	<p>Department of Health COVID-19 dashboard presentation (13:40-14.10)</p> <p>Dr Eugene Mooney spoke to his slides: COVID-19 a Call to Action. The slide pack detailed the background and processes involved in creating the DoH COVID-19 daily dashboard alongside a demonstration of key statistics presented within it.</p> <p>The following points were noted:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mr Jardine noted the widespread positive response to the dashboard both from public users and business bodies, and applauded the team for their continued work. Work began on the dashboard on 17th March 2020. It was stated that the public was the main point of focus when developing the 	<p>1. Secretary to obtain Department of Health COVID-19 dashboard slide pack and send to attendees.</p>

	<p>dashboard so as to develop a tool which served user needs effectively. With this in mind the DoH team developed both an internal dashboard which allowed in-house usage of the data and a public version which was open to all.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The process involved when creating the dashboard included data sourcing followed by analysis and quality checking. Improvements were made based on user feedback. • The dashboard was created to combine statistics from various sources rather than for these to remain fragmented. The initial focus was to collate information to help identify groups which would be most vulnerable to the effects of COVID-19 and to protect the health service. Cross departmental work was carried out to appropriately define what makes a vulnerable group and to improve the support these groups received. • Dr Mooney discussed his experience of developing the dashboard. The NISRA team who are responsible for creating and maintaining the dashboard were commended for their commitment. The experience of working with health staff was largely very positive. • An overview of the dashboard landing page and each sub-topic was provided. Dr Mooney displayed what each topic tells the user, what is important to take away from each page and how to navigate them successfully. • All dashboard data is downloadable. <p>Questions and Answers</p> <p>Dr Mooney then took questions from members. The following questions and answers were noted:</p> <p><i>Mr Jardine asked why we hear less about the R number, how the R number is calculated and what the current status is?</i></p> <p>Response: There are several R numbers. However, as cases become less and less the confidence intervals for the R number become greater and greater. As such, when we are at a COVID peak, R becomes more useful and accurate; with less cases the usefulness of R tapers off.</p> <p><i>Mrs McNicholl and Dr Morris provided thanks for the dashboard and the work that has gone into it.</i></p>	
<p>4.</p>	<p>Census presentation (14:10-14:45)</p> <p>Dr David Marshall and Mr Sandy Fitzpatrick spoke to their slides which provided an overview of the current census and progress being made.</p> <p>The following points were noted:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Key dates - Work began on developing the 2021 census in 2015 with a consultation followed by a census rehearsal in 2019. The media campaign for the official census went live on 22nd February 2021 with census day being on 21st March 2021. 	<p>2. An update on census analysis was requested for the next SAC meeting.</p>

- Key metrics - In NI, 840,000 households were contacted; Over 4 million pieces of post were sent out; Over 1,600 staff took part including 50 staff in the census office in Belfast.
- Suppliers - The team engaged with ONS to establish a memorandum of understanding. Other establishments used to assist in census completion included Royal Mail (for distribution) and Flex Language Services (for translation). Notably, several NI companies secured contracts to work with the census.
- Wave of contact - Postcard 1 was sent to households in late February followed by a “take part” letter/questionnaire in early March. Postcard 2 was sent to households in mid-March with census day being on 21st March.
- The makeup of the census questionnaire is as follows – 80% e-form and 20% paper form.
- Response rate - Highest return rate since 1991 at 97%.
- “Public Live” – An overview was provided of what is currently happening with census operations.
- Next steps – The survey response window is still open for a short while with non-compliance follow up currently underway. The first census results are expected in summer 2022.
- Challenges faced – It was noted that in hindsight, things would have been done differently in light of COVID-19. In ROI, a decision was made when the Kent variant appeared not to continue on with their 2021 census. However, due to the mitigations in place and with consideration of the rest of the UK, NI was able to continue.
 - The delivery of services within the census was well maintained under the pressure COVID-19 added.
 - The team was considerate of the negative publicity potentially brought to the census following recent social unrest. Work was done with enumerators to reduce the added stress that could have come from this.
 - There was a lot of online interest in the census which provided its own challenges.

Questions and Answers

Dr Marshall and Mr Fitzpatrick then took questions from members. The following questions and answers were noted:

Mr Compton asked what demographic data is available on elderly responders and their online completion rate?

Response: Paper questionnaires were submitted to elderly responders to reduce demand on call centres from older individuals having difficulties with online completion. However, of the paper questionnaires that were sent to elderly households, about one third of these were completed online. Moving forward the census will continue to be a primary online platform, but considerations of difficulties with this will be considered.

	<p><i>Ms Blair asked what are the conversion rates from paper to online form completions? How are the census prosecutions carried out in an online environment and has the legislation been amended in relation to the census work?</i></p> <p>Response: Everyone who has not responded with a completed census form by this current final stage will receive a paper form of the questionnaire in the post. The objective of this is to show that people have had every opportunity to respond which will relate to prosecution procedures when the time arrives. The legislation was not amended to match how the census has been carried out this year.</p> <p><i>Mr Jardine queried the census coverage survey.</i></p> <p>Response: The coverage survey has now become a standard exercise. It is a sample of 2% of NI households where CSU interviewers carry out an address listing separate to the census. The purpose of this is to check if the census team missed any households and/or if they have missed any individuals within households. This will help create more informed output analysis.</p> <p>There has been significant government, public and business support for the census this year.</p> <p><i>Mr Jardine queried the nature of the 2031 census.</i></p> <p>Response: It was confirmed that there still will be a census in 2031 but the nature and form of it is yet to be confirmed.</p>	
<p>5.</p>	<p>PMI presentation (14:45-15:05)</p> <p>Mr Richard Ramsey spoke to his slides which presented an overview of the PMI survey.</p> <p>The following points were noted:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mr Ramsey started by providing a broad overview of the PMI survey. The survey from which statistics are produced on a monthly basis was launched in 2003. Since launch, the PMI survey has become a main indicator around the world for financial markets for a number of reasons including its ability to display impact on exchange rates and its ability to show economic turning points early. The PMI measurement flows from 0 to 100. Anything above 50 on this measurement shows an expansion with higher numbers signalling a faster rate of growth. Anything below 50 on this measurement signals a shrink with lower numbers signalling a faster rate of shrinkage. • Why the need for better economic data – the PMI survey offers timeliness. It is published on a monthly basis in comparison to official data which is on a quarterly basis. The PMI survey is not subject to revisions unlike official data. • Coverage – The UK PMI covers both manufacturing and service sectors; the NatWest UK PMI covers regions; Ulster Bank covers 	

	<p>the NI PMI. The Ulster Bank PMI samples private sector firms only and is weighted based on the GDP share of the sector.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mr Ramsey gave an overview of the PMI survey in comparison to other surveys. He noted that the PMI survey has carefully selected samples and is a one page form with few carefully designed questions. This all assists to provide strong response rates (average response rate = 79%). The latest PMI survey results for both the UK and NI were shown in comparison to the Northern Ireland Composite Economic Index (NICEI) and the Northern Ireland Quarterly Employment Survey (QES). • Mr Ramsey discussed some advantages and disadvantages of the PMI survey. In terms of advantages, it was discussed how the PMI has representative panels, has strong response rates and is based on 'hard' data. It was also mentioned that the PMI has good timeliness and frequency (published at the beginning of each month) and presents good sectoral coverage. In terms of disadvantages, one key element discussed was how it does not quantify the scale of the decline in the same way that GDP does. For example, in the PMI survey both small and large companies are counted the same. <p>Questions and Answers</p> <p>Mr Ramsey then took questions from members. The following questions and answers were noted:</p> <p><i>Mr Jardine asked if it is expected that there will be a national upswing in inflation following COVID borrowing.</i></p> <p>Response: Yes, there will be an increase in inflation and the VAT reduction for hospitality for example will impact this. Additional frictions in the economy and supply chain will also impact increased inflation. The hope however is that this inflation will be somewhat temporary.</p>	
6.	<p>Economic and Labour Market Statistics Branch Update (15:20-15:35)</p> <p>Mr Colgan provided an overview of the ELMS branch update document that was sent out to members prior to the meeting.</p> <p>The following points were noted:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mr Colgan provided an update on the ELMS branch response to the COVID-19 pandemic for the NI business surveys. After a challenging year, things are starting to settle back down. In particular, the return of businesses has led to an improvement in responses. The increased use of online forms in favour of paper forms has helped drive this response rate improvement. • A brief overview of business survey response rates was provided within the document sent out to members prior to the meeting. • An overview of the Business Impact of Coronavirus Survey (BICS) now named the Business Insights and Conditions Survey was provided. 	

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mr Colgan discussed the impact of Brexit on the supply chain between NI and the rest of the UK. It was mentioned that the data for this has arrived recently and will be looked into. • Mr Colgan shed light on the impact of COVID-19 on prosecution procedures. It was stated that no businesses were forwarded for prosecution action in 2020. A review of the prosecution procedures is planned in light of the suspension of processes this past year, an increased online response rate and what this means for legislation and consideration of different processes across the surveys. • Mr Colgan provided an overview of HMRC data ELMS now has access to and the ongoing efforts being made to get further access. • Updates were provided on the modernisation project, for example in relation to the work currently underway to identify a new and improved system for business surveys for 2023. <p>Questions and Answers</p> <p>Mr Colgan then took questions from members. The following questions and answers were noted:</p> <p><i>Mr Ramsey asked if HMRC data can be broken down by sectors and other categories.</i></p> <p>Response: Yes this is possible.</p> <p><i>Mr Compton asked in relation to the Annual Business Inquiry form whether there will be significantly more revisions to the 2020 survey.</i></p> <p>Response: Mr Colgan said at this stage no there won't be. Rather, the challenge for the branch is how best to deal with missing cases in light of a lower response rate due to the pandemic. Mr Ganley emphasised Mr Colgan's point saying that in relation to ABI, the branch is confident that there will be a sufficient response rate. The challenge will be improving imputation methods which are already being considered.</p> <p><i>Ms Blair discussed what options are available in light of increased online response rates in comparison to paper forms.</i></p> <p><i>Mr Jardine asked how Mr Colgan sees the modernisation project developing over the next 18 months.</i></p> <p>Response: The branch will continue to promote the online form as much as possible. The branch is also looking at alternative methods of data collection in addition to traditional online/paper forms.</p>	
7.	<p>Official Statistics update (15:35-15:50)</p> <p>Dr Tracy Power provided an overview of the Official Statistics update document that was sent out to members prior to the meeting.</p> <p>The following points were noted:</p>	

- Dr Power provided an overview of current assessments of official statistics (both National Statistics Assessments and Compliance Checks).
- Dr Power discussed reported breaches of the Code of Practice, reporting that there have been 10 since the last meeting and zero in the current financial year so far. Most of the 10 which occurred since the last meeting concerned release problems (9:30am publication time). Where serious breaches have occurred, education is provided to reduce the risk of this re-occurring.
- Dr Power provided an update on the Official Statistics (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2021. The order has now been cleared by the Executive and the Finance Committee.
- Dr Power discussed the importance of having effective statistical leadership within government, and how this has become even more important in light of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- User Engagement Strategy – The strategy aims to improve collaboration with users, improve the capability of statisticians to deliver user engagement activities and improve the user engagement culture. The strategy will have a three phase approach beginning with sharing examples of effective user engagement.
- It was mentioned that meetings have occurred at Westminster to discuss statistical transparency following COVID-19 and work will be done on this.

Questions and Answers

Dr Power then took questions from members. The following questions and answers were noted:

Mr Compton noted that young people get a lot of their information from social media. He discussed how it is important not just to generate leadership in the statistical community but also reach out to stakeholders and young people (via schools) to help them understand how statistics inform their lives.

Response: Dr Power agreed that it is worrisome how statisticians' viewpoints and findings are not always presented first, particularly in government. However, efforts are being made to improve focus on experts and official findings. NISRA has a close relationship with Fact-Check-NI to maintain education and training delivered towards young people to improve their knowledge and reduce reliance on social media as a news source.

Dr Stuart suggested that throughout the pandemic there has been less trust in figures politicians are quoting and that it will be important to encourage politicians to adhere to the code in future rather than quoting inaccurate figures.

Mrs McNicholl discussed how she views the relationship between NISRA and government (with statisticians acting within government) as a good

	<p><i>model which should be thought about when moving forward as we come out of the COVID-19 pandemic.</i></p> <p>Response: Dr Power noted that statistical leadership within government has worked very well. However, at times the government did not recognise the need to invest in analysts. A different model whereby there would be a central source of analytics was suggested, however there are currently not enough statisticians to support this.</p> <p><i>Dr Morris mentioned how COVID-19 dashboard breaches (in terms of publishing later than intended) occurred more commonly than other publications.</i></p> <p>Response: Dr Power noted that there was special dispensation to allow the dashboard to be published at 2pm. NISRA relies on being informed by statisticians on potential breaches in relation to the COVID-19 dashboard.</p>	
8.	<p>AOB (15:50-close)</p> <p>Mr Jardine closed the meeting and it was agreed that the next meeting should be in autumn 2021.</p>	3. Secretary to arrange the next meeting in autumn 2021.

Summary of Actions

Action	Subject
1.	Secretary to obtain Department of Health COVID-19 dashboard slide pack and send to attendees.
2.	An update on census analysis was requested for the next SAC meeting.
3.	Secretary to arrange the next meeting in autumn 2021.