



Nuffield Foundation response to the Office for National Statistics consultation on changes to ONS products 2015

Submitted by email to: ons.communications@ons.gsi.gov.uk

cc. Vanessa Cuthill (ESRC); Glenn Everett (ONS); Claire Feary (ESRC); Alison Park (CLOSER)

This document is the Nuffield Foundation's response to the 'Changes to ONS Products 2015' consultation launched by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) in December 2015. We have chosen this format over the consultation document supplied as it allows us to present our views in the most accessible way. Our response has been informed by conversations with colleagues at the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and the Cohort & Longitudinal Studies Enhancement Resources (CLOSER) unit based at University College London (UCL).

Background

The Nuffield Foundation is a charitable trust established by William Morris, Lord Nuffield, the founder of Morris Motors. Our aim is to improve social well-being and we do this by:

- Funding research and innovation projects in education and social policy. In 2014 we funded 39 new projects with a total value of £4.9 million. The majority are based in universities, with others in research institutes, think tanks and voluntary organisations. Many of these projects involve secondary analysis of statistical data including those produced by the ONS.
- Building research capacity in science and social science, most notably through Q-Step, a £19.5m programme designed to promote a step-change in quantitative social science training for undergraduates (co-funded with the ESRC and the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE)), and Nuffield Research Placements, which provide over 1,000 Year 12 students each year with the opportunity to undertake STEM research projects.

Overall view

This consultation and its outcome have several implications for the Nuffield Foundation. Broadly, our view is that the consultation, whilst necessary, is not asking the right questions about a new offer to stakeholders.

We understand that the ONS has to make budget cuts and that this is a difficult process. However, this consultation paper could have adopted a more imaginative approach to reviewing the data infrastructure underpinning policy and research, and how this is funded across government, research councils and other bodies. The bluntness of simply trimming

the catalogue of statistical outputs from the ONS could have been sharpened by some proposals to examine new ways of managing important data needs in times of austerity, possibly involving other funders.

Access to data

The consultation's main focus is the reduction in the 'offer' of products from the ONS. While this is obviously important, stakeholders also require some reassurance about the access to those products which remain, including their storage and visibility.

This is particularly an issue when it comes to examining data trends over time. We note that there is an aim to produce 'shorter summary bulletins' to accompany data tables. This is welcome, but it is of greater value that the links between old and new datasets are clear and comprehensible, regardless of what products (entire or reduced) remain. We would welcome some more information about this and an opportunity to help your efforts to shape future policy and practice in this regard.

The focus on bespoke statistical outputs, again, seems to deflect attention from more creative approaches to managing national data collections. It is possible to envisage other ways in which investment could be directed to more generic outputs created from standardised metadata, accompanied by efforts to make the resources more accessible and discoverable.

Statistical products

It would have been helpful if the consultation had included details of the analyses underpinning the selection process for reducing the range of statistical outputs (for example, web analytics, downloads). There appears to be a strong representation (Annex B) of indicators of society's physical, mental, social and economic health and well-being. Some appraisal of the utility of these and the ease of understanding such issues without these data would be welcomed.

We have particular concerns about the proposals to scale back statistical products relating to births by parental characteristics. Changing family structures are a key driver of social change and these bulletins (and the underlying data) are frequently drawn upon by the Foundation and its grant holders.

We are pleased to see that the approach to the Wealth and Assets Survey (WAS) starts from the position that it should be retained. However, the specific proposals relating to WAS – primarily to reduce the sample size – do not seem to address the important points discussed at the conference convened by the Nuffield Foundation and held at the Bank of England in March 2015. This event highlighted, for example, strong demand for this survey, a desire for more real time data, and improved harmonisation with other wealth and assets surveys. A summary of the conference will be published shortly in a special edition of *Fiscal Studies*.

The consultation is unclear on whether other current funders of WAS have been actively involved in developing the options for achieving the best trade-off between cost and quality; or whether different funding models (and governance structures) have been considered. The Foundation would be very interested in helping to facilitate further discussions to see if

progress could be made on these broader questions. Indeed, we are in the early stages of planning a small follow-up to the 2015 conference in the late spring -- with a smaller audience -- to consider the options further. We would be pleased to discuss this with the ONS, and the relevant contact is Teresa Williams, our Director of Social Policy and Research.

The ONS Opinions and Lifestyle survey offers a unique mechanism for government departments who need to understand particular issues yet cannot (mainly for reasons of cost) support a case for a stand-alone survey on the topic. This feels like a particular loss in a climate where evidence to inform policy decisions and ensure best use of limited public resources is increasingly critical. As with the WAS, it would be useful to understand what alternative business models you had considered which might avoid losing this product altogether.

We hope you will find these views useful and would be very happy to provide more details on any of the issues discussed in this response. We are also willing to be involved in any subsequent work to develop the outcomes of the consultation should that be helpful.

Yours faithfully

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Josh Hillman". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Josh Hillman
Acting Director