Moving ONS business surveys online

Challenges and successes

Dr Kate Thorsteinsson
Head of Business Survey Research, Design and Development
Business Surveys and Registers Transformation
Office for National Statistics (ONS), UK
ONS Business Surveys

Survey portfolio
• 77 business surveys (nearly all mandatory)
• 2.6 million questionnaires per year
• 380,000 businesses selected per year
• Larger businesses could receive nearly all
• Burden could be substantial

Mode: historically, nearly all on paper

• For ONS: printing, posting, processing a major operation
• For businesses: outdated as the digital world evolved
Developing an online data collection system

- Decision: an ONS, bespoke “Survey Data Collection” service

- Started cautiously to get it right:
  - Built the infrastructure, account management system, design tool and the electronic questionnaire (eQ)

- Business-centred research methods:
  - user testing merged with cognitive interviews

- First survey online was the Monthly Wages and Salary Survey (MWSS)

- Rather than a survey-by-survey approach, designed across the survey portfolio
Successes

• 85% (2.1 m) of annually despatched questionnaires now online
• First-time clearance rates improved and reduced operational burden from printing and processing
• Better meets businesses’ needs
• System more flexible compared to paper
• New infrastructure developed to manage most of our remaining complex surveys
• A real ‘One ONS’ approach, collaboration across disciplines
Challenges

• Complex surveys: need tailored information, or detailed accounts-based data
• COVID-19 Pandemic – higher risk appetite, but also meant editable pdfs for paper surveys
• managing the live environment, while also delivering change (updates, bugs)
• Numerous modes for businesses while we finish transitioning but they ask for a central online portal
• ‘Tightening our belts’ and ‘cutting our cloth’
Next steps

The work continues to move the remainder online.

- Over this financial year, we aim to have 98% online, reducing reliance on paper, telephone and editable pdfs, bringing efficiencies for the office and improving the business experience.

Continuing to reduce our survey portfolio, tailor our service to become more business-centred and improve our internal systems.
Thank you!
Welcome any questions or comments
Contact: kate.thorsteinsson@ons.gov.uk