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Case Study: Surveys

You will want to tap into the annual People survey data but ideally you will have the capacity to run more regular surveys that build on some of these results. Sampling works well, avoids survey fatigue, and gives you statistically significant results. The Home Office undertakes quarterly surveys using a rotating quarter of staff so no-one gets survey overload. These surveys provide invaluable data which enables trends to be assessed over rolling 12-month periods.

If you are going to run surveys in-house it pays to get any colleagues who look after your department's surveys on board. They can advise on sample size, length and clarity of questions. However there is a lot of good practice and online tools available, and remember surveys are quick to set up and can be run online.

Sampling

A term used to describe those taking part in a survey.

It's not usually possible to ask everyone within the audience that we are interested in (known as the 'universe' in research, e.g. all young people) to take part in a survey or study. We look for a representative and as large a sample as possible within the constraints of time and budget.

When analysing results it is important for you to be aware of the details of the sample, to understand who the results represent, how the results might be influenced by the sample and how robust they are in representing that group.

Top 10 tips on survey design

1. Always work backwards – consider what do you need to know and why

Will the questions you design produce measurable and robust answers to the original business questions?

Can you split the data sufficiently (e.g. demographic, behavioural, attitudinal)?
Do you already have this data somewhere else?

What do you hope to gain from your results?

2. Do your research

Look at previous questionnaires on similar topics



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Remember that the longer the length of the questionnaire the greater the potential reduction in data quality and increase in cost.

Ensure those you ask have the necessary knowledge – if required, explain briefly any context/background they need to be aware of before asking the question

Segment your audience: consider the different types of people or stakeholders you might need to engage with.

3. Plan your survey

When will the analysis be done and by who and will you need to analyse during the survey as well as after it's finished.

Resource and timings may impact on decisions you make as to how to set up the engagement, research or consultation activity. For instance, if resource is low and/or timings very tight, you might want to think about: making the questions or discussion more structured and standardised rather than free flowing as this is more time consuming to analyse (e.g. closed tick box questions rather than open text / verbatim comments); Having a smaller number of questions or discussion points; outsourcing the analysis work.

4. How to word questions

Keep it short and simple to help respondents with reading and understanding the question.

Limit the number of questions as far as possible: Longer surveys tend to generate fewer responses as people's attention and patience lowers. Explain the survey length and likely time to complete it upfront to help manage expectations. Signpost how far through the survey people are as they complete it (e.g. 'section two of five', or '30% complete'). Consider limiting the word count within free text questions (especially question intended for the public) to focus comments.

Ask for only one piece of information at a time – otherwise you will not know how to interpret your data.

Clarity - Ask precise questions (to get precise answers!) – questions must be clear, succinct, unambiguous. Never assume respondents will read instructions.



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Keep language jargon free, in plain English, making clear any acronyms, and don't assume prior policy knowledge.

Minimise Bias – think about how the question is asked, the order of question compared to other questions and order of answer options. Rotate & randomise where possible. Don't lead - i.e. force or imply a certain type of answer – all answers should be equally likely.

Consider using a combination of open and closed questions

Open questions (free text) allow contributors to give full opinions but are much more difficult, time consuming and resource-intensive to analyse (they tend to be longer, more difficult to categorise to draw conclusions from and can be open to interpretation). Including some closed questions will help analysis, give some quantifiable data, make them quicker to complete and can improve response rates.

Make it flexible: Ensure that people can skip questions if they want to and move easily around the questionnaire.

This will help increase take up. Response to some but not all questions is better than them giving up entirely in frustration.

Provide simple background information so that your audience can have an informed response: Ensure information is balanced and sets out the pros and cons fairly. Think about how you present potentially complicated issues and arguments. For example, use tables and diagrams to illustrate processes or concepts. Where relevant, provide the existing facts and evidence that 21 Home Office Guide to Open Engagement and Consultation.

Ask one question at a time. Don't combine two points in one question – it can be confusing to the respondent and often means you get an answer to one aspect but not both. Ask precise questions to get more valuable, precise, answers.

5. Be consistent with your wording

The best way to be sure you can compare like with like over time is to ask exactly the same question in subsequent surveys. So get the wording right first time and only change it if you really have to – you want robust results that are not open to challenge, and if you ask something different from one survey to the next, it is difficult to directly compare the results.



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6. The order of questions is important!

- go from general to particular
- go from easy to difficult
- go from broad to sensitive
- go from factual to abstract
- start with closed format questions
- start with questions relevant to the main subject
- do not start with demographic and personal questions unless they are part of the screening process.

7. Test the survey with someone not involved in the design to get another perspective.

Test your questions: Whoever your audience is, trial the questions before launching your survey. For public consultations or surveys, trial amongst people who don't know your policy area. We recommend asking a range of colleagues from Policy, Insight, Digital and Strategic Communication teams to test your questions. Be mindful of the language you are using as this could nuance your message in an unintended way or offend some part of the target audience. For example, the term 'prostitute' has negative connotations whereas 'sex worker' may appear less judgmental.

8. Analysing the results

Think about the best way to get the information – for example as a spreadsheet.

Think about the way that the information to be provided to you. E.g. will responses need to be manually logged or will the data automatically be exported to an Excel spreadsheet? If a spreadsheet, ask to review some dummy data to ensure it provides you with what you need, in a way that helps you make sense of it. You also need to be prepared to manage and analyse non-digital responses that you may receive depending on your activity (e.g. event feedback forms, emailed or posted consultation responses). Note that if the activity you are carrying out is digitally-based, there may well be an analysis



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package attached to the programme you are using. Ask Research or Communications colleagues for advice.

Consider whether you'll need to provide quantitative (numbers) information as part of your analysis

If so, think about how the activity you are proposing will be able to generate that type of data, e.g. consider asking closed questions (questions with defined options for answers rather than free text boxes), or including a comment rating system to capture propensity of views rather than just ideas and comments. Also consider the way you receive your data to allow you to generate figures easily.

9. Think about how you can ensure feedback improves your policy design

Pass those insights onto the right people – there is little point in surveying if no action is taken on the results.

10. Feed back to the people you have engaged.

You are relying on people's views to make your policy better, but they will not engage again unless you tell them how their experiences have been used. It will reduce any cynicism around consultation exercises just being a 'tick box' exercise. You probably have a good story to tell!