
Ed Humpherson, Director General for Regulation

Hugh Stickland
Office for National Statistics
(by email)

14 March 2022

Dear Hugh

Over 50s Lifestyle Study

I am writing to endorse the approach taken by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) in developing new statistics on those aged over 50 who have recently left the labour market. This information is important for decision-makers and support services trying to understand the motivations, financial positions, and demographics of those who have left the labour market in the last six months, and the impact of this growing group on the economy.

My team has conducted a rapid regulatory review of these statistics. We have reviewed the extent to which they have been produced in accordance with the Code of Practice's Trustworthiness, Quality and Value pillars, while taking account of the short timeframe ONS has been required to develop these statistics in. I appreciate the time that your colleagues have spent talking through the development of the survey with my team. A summary of our findings, including recommendations, is set out below.

Value

- ONS has demonstrated its ability to be agile and responsive to addressing data gaps that have emerged post-pandemic. Its analytical hub model for identifying and providing analysis to support policy needs across government has been an effective development in its approach to addressing user need and ensures evidence is at the heart of decision-making.
- The Over 50s Lifestyle Study (OLS) was designed and launched in a quick time frame. It is good that ONS considered opportunities to maximise existing data sources, such as the Labour Force Survey, before initiating a new data collection. OLS requires recontacting those aged 50 and over who have previously completed the Opinions and Lifestyle Survey (OPN) in the last six months and said they are out of work. This allowed ONS to quickly reach a sample of the target audience to produce preliminary findings. The costs of launching OLS were also able to be absorbed within the OPN funding which further demonstrates ONS' commitment to efficiency when developing new statistics.
- As there is a range of factors that contribute to an individual's decision to leave the labour market, we welcome the decision taken by ONS to conduct qualitative follow up interviews with respondents to OLS to support the findings. On 1 March, ONS [published its early insights from OLS](#) which it had shared with the Cabinet Office, which

commissioned this work. The summary publication on 1 March was followed up by a fuller article on 14 March, which included extracts from the qualitative interviews. We are pleased to hear that the OLS data will be made available via the Secure Research Service.

- The launch of OLS was in part driven by the Cabinet Secretary's interest in understanding the over 50s' labour market behaviour. The trend in over 50s leaving the labour market at a greater rate post-pandemic has been commented on more widely in the media and is of clear interest to a range of users. We therefore look to ONS to broaden its user engagement to fully understand what public value can be derived from this survey and to ensure that the relevant insights are drawn out to meet user needs. It was good to hear that the team spoke with interested stakeholders outside of government on 1 March to talk them through the early insights.

Quality

- Questionnaire design experts from Social Statistics Transformation in ONS were involved with the development of the OLS questions to help ensure consistency and harmonisation with other ONS surveys where possible, and adherence to ONS best practice. The questionnaire also underwent rigorous scenario testing to ensure it collected the required information. We felt the early insights release could have benefited from some clarity around the questionnaire design, to aid interpretation of the results. ONS should ensure it is clear about the insights and comparisons that can be drawn from these statistics to support understanding.
- ONS looked to maximise the sample size to allow analysis by various characteristics within the target group. As the target group required individuals to be over 50 and recently out of paid work, ONS recognises that this will limit the granularity of analysis. It therefore plans to rerun the survey in 4-6 months' time to make use of the Labour Market Survey which will further boost the sample size to allow for more-granular analysis to be carried out.
- ONS has ensured it carries out a range of quality assurance on the statistics despite the short turnaround. These include dual running of outputs and wider congruence checking with other data sources, such as the Labour Force Survey and Annual Population Survey. This helps ensure that the OLS outputs are coherent with other headline published estimates.

Trustworthiness

- The ability of ONS to stand up these surveys in a short time frame demonstrates the capability of the analysts in the analytical hub to work together at pace. The statistics team looks to recycle existing materials where possible to make things deliverable. However, the success of the analytical hub has led to an increase in requests and commissions for new information. The statistics team told us that it tries to be proactive in approaching these research questions and thinking about how to create value for other areas in ONS. We welcome the creation of a new role in the analytical hub to prioritise these projects and would encourage the post holder to review how external user interests are considered alongside the policy needs of the departments commissioning the work.
- During the development of these statistics, the early insights were shared with Cabinet Office ahead of publication as a form of management information. To demonstrate transparency in its approach to releasing data and information, ONS should be clear about its release practices and ensure it is consistent in its definition of management information and application of guidelines. We are pleased to hear that ONS plans to

update its guidance and process on management information and will ensure equality of access is considered as part of this.

We look forward to seeing you develop these statistics to make sure they meet a wide range of user needs. My labour market and welfare statistics team will continue to liaise with your statisticians over the coming months as they develop the statistics.

I am copying this to Rachel Skentelbery, Deputy Head of Profession for Statistics in ONS.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Ed Humpherson', written in a cursive style.

Ed Humpherson
Director General for Regulation