

# **AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT STATISTICAL FORUM**

**13 MAY 2004**

## **Summary of Discussion**

- Chair: Dennis Trewin (Australian Bureau of Statistics)
- Host: Dr Richard Madden (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare)
- Present: Susan Linacre, Rob Edwards, Geoff Lee (Australian Bureau of Statistics), Greg Griffiths (Australian Bureau of Agricultural and Resource Economic), Tom Karmel (National Centre for Vocational Education and Research), Linda Porritt (Department of Immigration, Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs), Carol Ey (Centrelink), Dr Judy Winternitz (Department of Transport and Regional Services), Robert Knapp (Family and Community Services), Jessie Borthwick (Department of Education, Science and Training), Scott Matheson (Department of Employment and Workplace Relations), Dr Don Brunker (Department of Industry, Tourism and Resources), Peter Woods (Department of the Environment and Heritage), Dr Rob Wooding, Gary Sutton (Department of Health and Ageing), Peter Thomson (Health Insurance Commission)
- Presenters: Trish Ryan (AIHW), Peter Davis, David Page (Centrelink), Jim Lumbers (Lumbers Consulting), Jonathan Palmer, Alanna Sutcliffe (Australian Bureau of Statistics)
- Secretariat: Michael Meagher, Mark Lound (Australian Bureau of Statistics)
- Apologies: Mark Jackson (Australian Taxation Office)

### **Agenda Item 1. Welcome and Introductory Comments**

Mr Trewin welcomed the attendees and rearticulated the role of the fora, which is to progress the National Statistical Service (NSS) by considering strategically important issues and sharing information on statistical developments. Mr Trewin noted that the first meeting was very useful, providing lots of frank comments which helped the Australian Bureau of Statistics formulate better ideas. Mr Trewin encouraged these open discussions.

### **Agenda Item 2. National Data Network**

Presentation by Mr Palmer, Australian Bureau of Statistics, see attachment 1.

Presentation by Mr Lumbers, Lumbers Consulting, see attachment 2.

Dr Wooding initiated the discussion by questioning whether a costly technology based solution is required or whether a metadata repository would be sufficient to meet the demand for statistics. Mr Palmer responded that the technology currently exists for the establishment of an NDN and is becoming cheaper. The networked approach allows for the automated compiling of a register of an agencies statistical sources, reducing the problems in maintenance.

Dr Wooding asked whether the plan was to have linked data permanently available on-line for all users to access. He preferred a process where the linked files were only created in response to a specific request and destroyed upon completion. Mr Trewin noted that the main focus in the short term development should revolve around linking aggregate data, rather than unit level data.

Dr Madden indicated that there are three pillars for success in data linkage: legal/ethical, technical and metadata. He noted that problems with metadata inconsistencies will require significant resources to overcome. Dr Madden suggested that he may be comfortable participating by exposing aggregated data, but first, he would like to see an articulated business case. Mr Palmer noted that the system will not replace the need for protocols (such as ethics committees), but will allow for improved sharing of infrastructure.

Dr Brunner stated that there appeared to be an imbalance between the researcher and the data provider. Mr Matheson added that another barrier to participation may be the political sensitivity of the data. Mr Trewin noted the report "Connecting Government" emphasised the importance of a whole of government approach to information and the benefits for policy and decision makers.

Dr Brunner queried whether the costs associated with participating in the network are likely to be high, particularly in terms of both correcting data for public consumption and responding to queries about the data. Mr Trewin stated that agencies will control their own data and its quality in their node. However, Mr Trewin recognised that it is extremely difficult to fix existing problems and that this can be expensive. In the future, data quality will remain in the agencies control but there will be infrastructure available to assist. Mr Karmel and Mr Thompson noted that neither of their agencies found that the cost was significant to support queries about their data. Mr Griffiths noted that utilising the system internally for data management would reduce the cost of having two separate systems.

Mr Palmer noted that there have been discussions with a range of interested parties and their participation would be confirmed through the development of memorandums of understanding. These agencies would participate in developing a pilot version of the network to demonstrate its potential to other agencies. Mr Trewin suggested that agencies interested in the proposal should arrange for further discussions with Mr Palmer.

### **3. Revised National Statistical Service (NSS)**

Mr Trewin introduced this item by noting that the revised NSS proposal sees the progression of a number of NSS activities rather than a formal NSS. This revised proposal is based on feedback the Australian Bureau of Statistics has received from other government agencies and is consistent with the goals of the IMSC (Information Management Steering Committee). Mr Trewin noted the NSS resources (such as the handbook, standards and shared protocols) are being complemented by activities which are being progressed in the ABS and other agencies such as the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. For example, Information Development Plans.

Dr Madden queried whether agencies were still required to sign-up to the NSS. Mr Lee noted that previous papers suggested formal mechanisms to sign up to the NSS. However, feedback showed that this was inappropriate for Australia, and the NSS would instead be progressed through a range of projects. These projects will feed into the ongoing development of NSS resources.

Mr Trewin noted that some consistent principles are still required to underpin the NSS. Mr Edwards noted that signing up to the NSS Principles is an agreement to pursue the best efforts in applying the principles. Dr Brunner inquired whether signing-up to the NSS would be a prerequisite to participating in the NDN. Mr Trewin responded that agencies can participate in the NDN without signing-up to the NSS Principles. However, both projects have similar goals such as data quality and data sharing.

Dr Madden noted that the Australian Bureau of Statistics and the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare are two agencies whose primary purpose, set down in legislation, was statistical. But the statistical activities of other agencies were often not covered by their primary legislation, and signing up to a common set of statistical principles could be a valuable step towards improving the alignment of statistical activities.

Mr Trewin summarised the discussion by noting that the responsibility for becoming involved in the NSS lies with the agency itself, however the Australian Bureau of Statistics will assist when requested.

#### **4. Metadata Standards for Statistical Data**

Presentation by Ms Ryan, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, see attachment 3.

Presentation by Mr Davis, Centrelink, see attachment 4.

The Forum thanked Ms Ryan and Mr Davis for their interesting presentations.

#### **5. Developments in Statistical Classifications and Other Standards**

This item was not discussed and will be held over to future meetings.

#### **6. International Statistical Activities**

A range of International Statistical Activities were discussed including:

- benchmarking the International Student Survey conducted by the OECD.
- the role of the Statistics Directorate of the OECD in the labour statistics area.
- the role of Central Statistical Agencies at the upcoming Conference of European Statisticians

Mr Trewin offered to circulate any relevant documents from the Conference of European Statisticians.

Dr Madden suggested the establishment of a clearing house of international statistical meetings and papers. Ms Linacre noted that this would align with the proposal from StatsNZ to set up an information sharing mechanism, perhaps a linked web site with StatsNZ.

Mr Trewin agreed with this suggestion and suggested that the NSS web site would be a logical repository for this list of contacts.

#### **7. Developments in Geo-Referencing**

Mr Trewin summarised the paper by stating that the Australian Bureau of Statistics are active participants in the Geo-coded National Address File (GNAF) initiative. However, ensuring the confidentiality of geo-coded information is still a key risk for statistical agencies, which will be managed through meshblocks. Meshblocks are being developed for use as a basis for output, particularly in regard to census and agricultural output.

Ms Linacre noted that the proposed boundaries of meshblocks have been designed so that they can be aggregated to a variety of existing

administrative boundaries. This should improve the ability to compare small area administrative data with other administrative or census data. There is a Position Paper from the Australian Bureau of Statistics which asks for comments on the appropriateness of the proposal, and input is welcomed from other government agencies.

Ms Linacre added that technology will be developed to code address information to a meshblock.

Mr Edwards commented that in terms of agricultural data, the latitude and longitude are only measured at the front gate. Mr Griffiths noted that they will still be extremely useful to relate data back to non-standard geographical areas such as water catchments.

In response to a question about meshblocks and data linking more generally, Mr Trewin said that the Australian Bureau of Statistics is investigating the potential for linking a sample of census records over time. Other possibilities under consideration are to link census data to agriculture and other files through meshblocks. Market testing of perceptions is currently being undertaken to ensure that the population census is not put at risk. Mr Trewin commented that if this work is progressed then it can be brought back to this group.

## **8. National Statistical Training Institute (NSTI)**

Mr Trewin indicated that the Australian Bureau of Statistics' National Statistical Training Institute has been established with a deliberate focus, initially, on the Bureau's internal development needs. However there will be a longer term focus on the external environment. Programs are currently being developed and we are interested in how other government agencies feel about the long term goals.

Ms Borthwick noted an interest in her agency in analytical skills such as those presented in Thinking Analytically, Problem Solving and Story-telling.

Mr Karmel suggested involving policy developers to contribute to the course development. They are experienced at drawing the messages from statistical data into the arguments they develop in policy proposals. Dr Madden noted that the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare have grappled with this issue of getting the right balance between policy support and merely stating the figures. He commented that they are developing some training programs and are keen to integrate these into a broader approach. Dr Madden noted his support of the leadership role by the Australian Bureau of Statistics in this area.

Mr Knapp noted his agencies support for this initiative, particularly in ensuring that data sets support the needs of policy developers. Dr

Brunker and Mr Matheson also noted their agencies support for this initiative. Ms Ey identified that there was a need for medium level analytical skills. She commented that the courses should also seek accreditation.

Mr Lee noted that in the short term, there are a range of external programs provided by the Australian Bureau of Statistics currently available that agencies could utilise.

Mr Trewin summarised the reaction of the group and suggested that the Australian Bureau of Statistics may look to be more ambitious in progressing this initiative.

### **Close**

Mr Trewin thanked Mr Madden for hosting the Meeting.