

# AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT STATISTICAL FORUM

30 April 2007

## Record of Discussion and Actions arising

**Chair:** Brian Pink (Australian Bureau of Statistics)

**Present:** Brian Pink, Denis Farrell, Susan Linacre, Peter Harper, Julie Evans, Alister Nairn, Geoff Lee (Australian Bureau of Statistics), Milly Lubulwa (Australian Bureau of Agricultural and Resource Economics), Cathy Hales (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare), Neil Mullenger (Department of Immigration, and Citizenship), Ben Healey (Centrelink), Andrew Whitecross (Family and Community Services), Peter Thomson (Medicare Australia), Jacqueline Ball (Department of Health and Ageing), Evan Arthur (Department of Education, Science and Technology), Andy Turner (Department of Transport and Regional Services), Godfrey Lubulwa (Department of Transport and Regional Services), Phillip Hind (Australian Taxation Office), Dr Don Brunker (Department of Industry, Tourism and Resources), Mel Butler (National Centre for Vocational Education and Research), Lucio Krbavac (Department of Education, Science and Training), Jenny Bone (Geoscience Australia)

**Apologies:** None

**Presenters:** Brian Pink, Peter Harper, Denis Farrell, Susan Linacre, Julie Evans, Alister Nairn (Australian Bureau of Statistics), Evan Arthur (Department of Education, Science and Technology), Jenny Bone (Geoscience Australia)

**Observers:** Steve Matheson (Australian Bureau of Statistics)

**Secretariat:** Mark Lound, Eric Morris, Kettie Hewett (Australian Bureau of Statistics)

## Meeting Summary

The new Australian Statistician, Brian Pink, introduced proceedings. He raised some of the key challenges facing the ABS and the National Statistical Service, and commented on his experiences in Statistics New Zealand (Para 1-5).

Summary of progress and discussion on the possible statistical useage of the Australian Government Access Card (AGAC) (Para 6-9). Evan Arthur from DEST gave a presentation on the progress being made on the PMSEIC Data for Science Recommendations (Para 10-12).

A briefing on the Protocol for the Release of Social Security Information was presented to the Forum by the FACSIA representative (Para 13-14). Its purpose is to provide guidelines to manage the release of social security information by agencies for research and development purposes.

There were presentations from Geoscience Australia and the ABS on aligning the use of spatial data across government (Para 16-25). It was noted in the ensuing discussion that with the exception of a small number of datasets, spatial data can be attributed to most data if address information is collected. The use of Mesh Blocks, a more stable unit than Collection Districts, was seen as an important development in this area.

There was a presentation from the ABS about the development of a National Statistical Policy and how this could be approached (Para 26-31). Discussion amongst AGSF members supported the need for an NSP. It was expected that it would take several years and significant collaborative work across agencies to work through the issues and develop an NSP that would be accepted across Government.

An update was given on ABS issues in ESG, PSG and National Statistical Service and National Data Network. (Para 32-34)

## Actions Arising

AGSF Meeting	Review of actions	Assigned	Status
	<b>From last meeting</b>		
30/04/07	NSS to provide a link to GA's closed extranet	ABS - NSSLB	
30/04/07	Confirm date for next AGSF meeting	ABS - NSSLB	

## Record of Discussion

### Agenda Item 1. Welcome Brian Pink. ABS

Mr Pink moved that the minutes from last meeting be accepted.

Mr Farrell indicated that actions from the last meeting had been addressed.

1 Mr Pink raised some of the key challenges facing the ABS and the NSS, and commented on his experiences in Statistics New Zealand.

2 While in New Zealand he observed that the concept of Australia's National Statistical System had become more clearly articulated. At the same time he saw a strong set of challenges emerging that need addressing to effectively progress national statistics. He cited the increasing complexity of official statistical systems, demands of users for more effective information and increasingly antagonistic data providers.

3 In this environment he considered that a key focus for the NSS was working to make best use of information already held by government agencies. This information has the potential to offer the biggest gains to the NSS. To make significant progress, effective work was needed to address issues such as privacy, data integration, accessibility and educating providers in the value of the information they hold.

4 Mr Pink suggested that the AGSF had a key role in making progress against these issues. He cited initiatives like the National Data Network (NDN) and Standardised Business Reporting (SBR) as examples where coordinated action by statistical producers had the potential to realise significant benefits.

5 Mr Pink closed by noting the two big challenges he saw facing the Australian Statistical system:

a. Improving the National Statistical System is not the major business or core role of most agencies. Statistical leadership was needed to engage CEOs to help them buy into the whole of government advancement of national statistical priorities.

b. The statistical community had to work at balancing its role of servicing both government and the community. Statistical leadership needs to lead by informing, influencing and providing coordination in methods and standards to build a respected and trusted statistical system for producers and users whilst maintaining and building the trust of the community.

**Agenda Item 2. Statistical Issues Arising From Major Government Initiatives - briefings for information and comment**

**a. Australian Government Access Card - briefing for information and comment: Julie Evans (ABS)**

6 Ms Evans gave a presentation on the current status of the Australian Government Access Card (AGAC). She noted that the Department of Human Services (DHS) have emphasised that the AGAC is not an ID card and subscribing will be optional. She also noted that information needed for the card will be kept on a central register, while participating agencies will retain information for their uses (which will not be part of the central register). The main debate in Parliament had been regarding privacy.

7 The ABS has a strong statistical interest in the AGAC. She commented that legislation governing the AGAC was introduced to Parliament in March of this year, but the draft law setting up the AGAC was put on hold after a Senate inquiry raised major concerns about the legislation, in particular, the approach of using two stages with confidentiality provisions included in the second stage. When and if the AGAC legislation is passed through Parliament, data will be subject to the relevant agencies' confidentiality rules, and the ABS will be able to access the information on that basis.

8 There was a brief discussion about the availability and quality of data from the AGAC. It was noted that the AGAC had the capacity to improve the quality of data, as information on the register, such as address, will be able to be updated from any participating agency. However, the group acknowledged that the statistical use of the data for government organisations was limited if the AGAC could not be used for data linking and if there were problems with the quality of the source data. There was also some discussion about how the card was expected to work in practice.

9 There is a working group who meet regularly to discuss legal issues relating to the AGAC. The ABS is represented on this group and will keep the AGSF informed of progress.

**b. Data for Science - briefing for information and comment: Evan Arthur (DEST)**

10 Mr Arthur gave a presentation on the Prime Minister's Science, Engineering and Innovation Council (PMSEIC) and the Data For Science initiative (see Attachment 1). The overall recommendation from the Group was for a cooperative, whole of government approach within a national strategic framework. Key recommendations included a national network of data repositories, improved sharing and collaboration and increasing the skill of the workforce for best practice in data management. He also provided information on a number of DEST initiatives in this area.

11 There was some discussion about how the National Data Network (NDN) could potentially align with the Australian Academic and Research Network (AARNet). Although the AARNet is compatible with the NDN on a technical level, at this stage it does not have the capability that the NDN does to provide custodians of information

sources control over who can access their data.

12 There was also some discussion about the Research Quality Framework and how research across Australia could be documented in a common way. Members noted that while there are some areas that have defined topics, one of the major issues in developing a framework is that definitions are highly specific and are difficult to scale.

### **Agenda Item 3. Around the Table: Statistical Matters of Significance - briefings for information and comment**

#### **a. Protocol for the Release of Social Security Information - briefing for information and comment**

13 Mr Whitecross from FACSIA outlined the Protocol for the Release of Social Security Information. The protocol has been set up between 5 Agencies: FaCSIA, DEWR, DEST, DHS and Centrelink. Its purpose is to provide guidelines to manage the release of social security information by agencies for research and development purposes. Release of information is categorised according to the level of authorisation required to secure access. The protocol attempts to balance the requirements of stakeholders, the responsibilities of ministers and government and the constraints of relevant laws and Acts.

14 It was noted by the ABS representatives that the protocol could be used as an example of a project that would be supported through the development of National Statistical Policy (Agenda item 5).

#### **b. Other Issues**

15. No other issues were discussed.

### **Agenda Item 4. Actions to Advance and Align the Use of Spatial Data Across Government - for information and discussion**

#### **a. Presentation - Jenny Bone (OSDM)**

16 Ms Bone gave a presentation outlining Australian Government Policy on Spatial Data Access and Pricing (see attachment 2).

17 Government policy on spatial data access and pricing was established in 2001. Cabinet established the Spatial Data Policy Executive (SDPE), the Spatial Data Management Group (SDMG) and the Office of Spatial Data Management (OSDM) to coordinate implementation of the policy. The basic principles of the policy, where the IP for the spatial data was wholly owned by the Commonwealth and available to the public, determine that spatial data be made available at no charge when provided over the Internet, at the marginal cost of transfer for packaged products (nominally \$99 per CD) and at the full cost of transfer for customised products. The spatial data can be used for any purpose as long as the source is acknowledged.

18 There was some discussion on the availability of data. Ms Bone explained that OSDM worked with agencies to determine whether they had any data eligible for

listing on the Schedule. Data currently available included topographic and natural resource information, sea surface temperatures, native title boundaries, etc. She added that the list of datasets is available on the internet ([http://www.osdm.gov.au/schedule/schedule\\_search.jsp](http://www.osdm.gov.au/schedule/schedule_search.jsp)) and users can either be linked directly to data that you can download, or alternatively, there are contact details to facilitate obtaining the data.

19 Ms Bone explained that the SDMG Socioeconomic Spatial Data Working Group were investigating issues relating to the recording, geocoding, quality assurance and exchange between agencies of socioeconomic and human health data with a location element; paying due regard to all statutory and agency-specific policies and procedures concerning the protection of the privacy of individuals and the re-use of information for purposes other than those for which it was originally collected (i.e. individual identifiers were removed from any exchange of data). The group is very keen to promote 'best practice' through the use of common reporting frameworks such as Mesh Blocks and the National Address Management Framework.

20 The group noted that with the exception of a small number of data sets, spatial data can be attributed to any data that has an associated address. There was also some discussion on how the work of the spatial data group relates to the work of the 'Data for Science' initiative.

21 Ms Bone advised that Ben Searle will replace Dr John Busby as General Manager of the Office of Spatial Data Management.

(i) **Action item** - Ms Bone to provide link to closed extranet.

**b. Presentation - Alistair Nairn (ABS)**

22 Mr Nairn gave a presentation on 'ABS Initiatives to Align the Use of Small Area Statistics Across Government' (see Attachment 3).

23 Mr Nairn provided a summary of the development of Mesh Blocks (MBs) and explained differences to the current Collection Districts (CDs). He noted mesh blocks were a more stable unit, making them a better building block for statistical data. Mr Nairn also talked briefly about the Geocoded National Address File (G-NAF).

24 Mr Nairn informed the group about the review of the Australian Standard Geographical Classification (AGSC). In July 2007, the ABS will be releasing an information paper and next year, the ABS will be proactive in alerting agencies to any changes to the AGSC. He added that the 2006 Population Census and dwelling counts will be available at the Mesh Block level in 2008 and that the 2006 Agricultural Census was based on Mesh Blocks.

25 There was some discussion about confidentiality issues with Mesh Blocks compared to CDs. Mr Nairn commented that only limited data would be released at the Mesh Block level to avoid confidentiality issues.

## Agenda Item 5. Developing a National Statistical Policy

### Presentation - Denis Farrell (ABS)

26 Mr Farrell spoke about the approach to developing a National Statistical Policy (NSP). He raised the increasing importance of ABS' legislated role to provide coordination of the National Statistical Service and explained the attributes of this coordination role (integration, minimise duplication, advisor role, maximise use of data, etc.). Following the 2004 Allen Consulting Review, it was recommended that the ABS support the development of an NSP to assist the ABS in successfully delivering its objectives against this role.

27 Mr Farrell highlighted that a range of international agencies had already established statistical protocols and principles that may provide examples of how an NSP might look. These included the UN Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics, the New Zealand Protocols for Official Statistics, and the UK National Statistics Code of Practice. He anticipated it would take several years and significant collaborative work across agencies to work through the issues and develop an NSP that would be accepted across Government.

28 The following issues were highlighted as examples of areas that a NSP might cover:

- a. privacy and confidentiality of data
- b. microdata use
- c. data linking
- d. data release strategy and policy
- e. provider load
- f. data quality standards

29 Discussion supported the need for an NSP. It was identified that many components, both optional and compulsory already exist across government and could be incorporated into the NSP as it is developed. These include the Protocol for the Release of Social Security Information (discussed under Agenda Item 3a) and the Statistical Clearing House. It was noted that the drive to make better use of administrative data sources would also support the development of an NSP. Comments were also made that any policy would need to be concise and clear to make it most effective and aimed appropriately so it can effectively answer questions about statistical process and practice.

30 Mr Pink highlighted attributes of other countries National Statistical Policies. In New Zealand and the UK, the policy provided transparency to help the public see how information collected from businesses and households is used. He added that, in New Zealand, there were significant benefits for National Statistics in the collaborative process that worked through the issues. He considered development would take a while and was seeking members' opinion as to the value of this process.

31 Mr Farrell said that the next step involved identifying an approach for developing an NSP. He envisaged that this would involve a working group with cross agency representation which would take responsibility for drafting the NSP.

## **Agenda Item 6. ABS Issues of Interest - for information and discussion**

### **a. PSG Issues - for information and comments: Susan Linacre (ABS)**

32 Ms Linacre gave a presentation outlining some key projects in the Population Statistics Group (PSG).

- a. The Census processing is well underway and information about products to be released is available from the ABS website. Population estimates, such as age and sex, will be released on 5 June 2007 while state levels estimates will be available by 24 July 2007.
- b. The household survey program for the next 10 years is currently being reviewed and there have been a series of high level meetings with other agencies. There is a high demand for a 'richer program' and working out priorities has been a difficult, but worthwhile exercise. Feeding into the household survey review is the work being undertaken on data gaps. AIHW, DEST, FACSIA and ABS have been working together to identify key data sets in the area of Early Childhood Learning.
- c. ANZSCO has being implemented in all ABS surveys and the ABS is also supporting ISCO (International Standards and Classifications) redevelopment with an expert group meeting taking place later in the year.
- d. The Census Data Enhancement Program is continuing and there has been preliminary research into potential longitudinal studies following the 2011 Census.
- e. The Health area is investigating strategies to make use of and harmonise health data from different states.
- f. Due to high demand, there is work underway to develop a long term strategy for improving access to data, often administratively based, at the regional level..

### **b. ESG Issues - for information and comments: Peter Harper (ABS)**

33 Mr Harper gave a presentation outlining some key projects in the Economic Statistics Group (ESG).

- a. The 2006 Agricultural Census results will be released in mid May.
- b. The Australian Greenhouse Office (part of the Department of the Environment and Water Resources) is streamlining it's reporting procedures. It will not be ABS' responsibility to collect greenhouse data, but the ABS will work closely with the Office to get maximum statistical efficiency.
- c. The ABS is preparing a discussion paper on the development of a Business Longitudinal Database (BLDB).
- d. Part of the governments water initiative has seen \$10m funding to the Bureau of Meteorology (BOM) for 'Water Accounts'. ABS is working with BOM to ensure their work dovetails with the ABS Water Accounts to ensure comparability.
- e. The Foreign Trade Statistics area is working on a harmonised system to classify imports and exports. As of January 2007 the new trade classifications have applied.
- f. There has been a lot of interest in statistics on broadband usage. The ABS currently runs the Internet Activity Survey every 6 months with a reference period of March and September. The ACCC will be discontinuing their survey of the top 12 broadband services. While this is a good outcome in terms of reducing the duplication of data collection, it could impact on the ABS in terms of timeliness of survey results.

g. Work is being undertaken on the Standardised Business Reporting initiative to improve the efficiency of businesses reporting to government agencies. There are currently several agencies involved in the project including ABS, ATO, AGIMO, APRA and Customs. A business case is being presented to Cabinet in July 2007.

**c. National Statistical Service and National Data Network Update - briefings for information and comment: Denis Farrell (ABS)**

34 Mr Farrell gave a presentation outlining some key projects in the National Statistical Service Leadership Branch (NSSLB). He highlighted the status of the National Data Network (NDN) which is moving from Demonstration Phase to a 12 month Pilot Phase from July 2007. Mr Farrell also outlined the development of the Community of Users and Producers of Statistics (CUPS). As a first step, the NSS web site has been updated to include a section on CUPS containing: information on statistical training, recruitment and career development; statistical references, and; links to conferences, seminars and workshops. He also noted that the ABS proposes to run a Conference of Users and Producers of Statistics in November 2008 and that we would be approaching members of this group for their support and advice.

**(ii) Action item - Arrangements for next meeting:**

It was agreed that future AGSF meetings be moved to an earlier annual cycle to avoid clashes with key whole of government events. There were no objections to this proposal. The next meeting will be organised by the NSS Leadership Branch out of session.