

# AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT STATISTICAL FORUM

23 April 2008

## Record of Discussion and Actions arising

**Chair:** Susan Linacre, Acting Australian Statistician (Australian Bureau of Statistics)

**Present:** Susan Linacre, Ian Ewing, Denis Farrell, Geoff Lee, Vince Lazzaro (Australian Bureau of Statistics), Lisa Elliston, Milly Lubulwa (Australian Bureau of Agricultural and Resource Economics), Julie Roediger (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare), Neil Mullenger (Department of Immigration, and Citizenship), Greg Evans (Centrelink), Carol Ey (Dept of Family, Housing, Community Services, and Indigenous Affairs), Peter Thomson (Medicare Australia), Robyn Popplewell (Department of Health and Ageing), Paul Balnaves (Education part of Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations), Gary Dolman (Bureau of Infrastructure, Transport and Regional Economics, Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Local Government), Matthew Maloney (Australian Taxation Office), Richard Snabel (Department of Innovation, Industry, Science and Research), Dr Tom Karmel (National Centre for Vocational Education and Research), Scott Matheson (DEWR part of Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations), Ben Searle (Office of Spatial Data Management, Geoscience Australia), Sebastian Lang (Department of Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts)

**Apologies:** None

**Presenters:** Susan Linacre, Ian Ewing, Denis Farrell, Geoff Lee, Vince Lazzaro, Helen Harkin, Tenniel Guiver (Australian Bureau of Statistics), Ben Searle (Office of Spatial Data Management, Geoscience Australia)

**Secretariat:** Mark Lound, Sue Spearritt (Australian Bureau of Statistics)

## Meeting Summary

The Acting Australian Statistician, Susan Linacre, introduced proceedings. She noted key activities across government that were was impacting on the ABS, including budget cuts to Australian Government Agencies and the increased use of quality statistical information with the new government's focus on evidence based policy (Para 1-5).

In regard to statistical issues arising from government initiatives, agencies provided a brief update on the Machinery of Government Changes which had occurred in their respective agencies following the change of government. A paper was circulated on the NCRIS work being undertaken by DIISR with agreement that this issue be included on the agenda for discussion at the next AGSF meeting. There was also an overview provided by the ABS on the VCAMS project and an update on the NatStats08 Conference. Mr Searle from OSDM provided an update on spatial data activities being undertaken across government.(Para 6-19).

Members reported on a range of statistical work being undertaken in their agencies (Para 20-33)

There were two presentations on Building Longitudinal Datasets by the the ABS, one on the Statistical Longitudinal Census Dataset and the other on the Business Longitudinal Database (Para 34-39).

An update on ABS issues was given by senior ABS staff (Para 40-43).

## Actions Arising

*Action item 1.* Review membership of forum as a result of Machinery of Government changes - ABS.

*Action item 2.* Data Linking to be included on next AGSF Agenda - ABS

## **Record of Discussion**

### **Agenda Item 1. Welcome Susan Linacre. ABS**

1. Ms Linacre, Acting Australian Statistician, welcomed members. The minutes from the 29 October 2007 AGSF meeting were accepted, with one minor change to paragraph 11a. requested by FAHCSIA - to replace 'DoHA' by 'FAHCSIA' as the reporting agency. It was noted that the action item from the last meeting would be completed against Agenda 4 of this meeting.
2. Introducing the Statistician's update, Ms Linacre observed that there had been a flurry of media reports about the ABS budget cuts, including some critical of the government cutting ABS funding. She noted that the ABS had tried to clarify the reports by explaining that the funding cuts are only in part due to an across government efficiency dividend applied to all government agencies. She added that there have also been some very positive messages in the media about the value of statistics. The ABS is currently discussing a review of its long-term budget funding with the Department of Finance and Deregulation.
3. Ms Linacre commented that with the new government's focus on evidence based policy there are opportunities for the increased use of quality statistical information and data. The Council of Australian Governments (COAG) agenda across a range of issues was one area she highlighted as an opportunity for the statistical community.
4. While there are many positive initiatives for statistics around evidence based decision making, Ms Linacre noted there is a downside risk this may see the creation of a number of small agencies to provide information for the new governments policy agenda. There is potential that issues will be quickly addressed without considering the long term governance or sustainable approach to the management of the statistical collections. Mr Searle (OSDM) noted that there are similar concerns in the spatial data area.
5. There was some discussion about the effect of the ABS budget cuts on the long term ABS workforce. Ms Linacre noted that in instances such as the reduction in the number of field interviewer staff required given cuts in the Labour Force Survey sample, if there is an increase in the 2009/10 budget the ABS will have to increase the workforce quickly, and this will create challenges.

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

#### **a. Machinery of Government Changes - Around the Table**

6. Ms Linacre invited attendees to briefly indicate to the meeting what if any, Machinery of Government changes had occurred in their respective agencies following the change of Government. The major changes noted were:
  - i. Dept of Health and Ageing (DOHA) - added Sport to it's responsibilities.
  - ii. Dept of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA) - added Housing Affordability and Community Development Employment

- Projects (CDEP) while responsibility for Childcare and the Youth Bureau had moved to the Dept Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR).
- iii. Dept Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) - newly created department from the merging of DEST and DEWR. Responsibility for Childcare and Youth Bureau has been moved to the dept from FaHCSIA while the Office of Early Childhood Education and Healthcare has been created. The Science portfolio has moved to DIISR.
  - iv. Dept of Innovation, Industry, Science and Research (DIISR) - creation of new dept from the Industry part of DITR and Science and Research from DEST. It was also noted that Innovation Analysis Section had become a Branch in the new dept.
  - v. Dept of Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts (DEWHA) - added Arts to the portfolio while some responsibilities have moved to the newly created Dept of Climate Change
  - vi. Dept of Resources, Energy and Tourism (RET) - new dept.
  - vii. Bureau of Infrastructure, Transport and Regional Economics (BITRE) - added Infrastructure to it's responsibilities
  - viii. ABARE - added National Resource Management functions to its responsibilities

7. The AGSF secretariat will apply these changes to the forum so that agency representation is appropriate.

*Action item 1.* The AGSF Secretariat will review memberships of the forum as a result of Machinery of Government changes.

#### **b. National Collaborative Research Infrastructure Strategy (NCRIS) - Population Health Network**

8. Ms Linacre introduced this agenda item and sought comments on the paper that had been provided by the NCRIS Secretariat, which is part of DIISR. The NCRIS Secretariat was not represented at this meeting but had agreed to attend the next meeting when the project was more established.

9. There was some discussion about the manner in which the network was being implemented through the university sector. Some members expressed concern about the amount of consultation with data custodians. They also considered that the current proposed model was not set up under specific legislation and would need a thorough risk assessment process to be undertaken before their agency would become involved.

10. The forum agreed that the technology aspect of the infrastructure was not the only challenge to implementation of the project. There are a number of issues for custodians in regard to policy, procedures and the management of their internal systems that need to be addressed. Members also queried who would be responsible for the framework once the three year funding for the project runs out.

11 Ms Linacre concluded the discussion and proposed that the issue of NCRIS/data linking be included as an agenda item for the next AGSF meeting.

*Action item 2.* Data Linking to be included on next AGSF Agenda

**c. Update on NatStats08 Conference - Denis Farrell.**

12. Mr Farrell informed the group that the ABS will host the NatStats08 Conference in Melbourne from 19 -21 November 2008 with the broad theme being "Working together for an informed Australian Society". The event is intended to bring together key stakeholders across government, business, academia and the community to discuss strategies across the three main themes of: Informing the Nation; Measuring the Progress of Society; and Informing the Environment Debate. Mr Farrell sought comments on the paper and in particular the draft program.

13. The meeting supported the proposed objectives for the conference and agreed that the draft program contained a good set of issues for discussion. A number of members commented that since the change of government there has been a focus on social inclusion, and that this should be included in a least one of the concurrent sessions in the Measuring Progress of Society theme.

**d. Victorian Child and Adolescent Health Monitoring System (VCAMS) - Vince Lazzaro**

14. Mr Lazzaro provided an overview on the collaborative project between the ABS and the Victorian Government - Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD). The project had piloted the use of the National Data Network infrastructure to assist in the data management of a set of indicators related to Children and Youth. The ABS outposted an officer to SOC to assist with developing the system, identifying business processes, and to manage the relationship between the ABS and the DEECD.

15. The VCAMS Board, which includes six Victorian Government Departmental Secretaries, met in March 2008 to review the pilot study and agreed to move the project to production phase. Mr Lazzaro informed the group that the project had demonstrated a number of issues around agreements and formal protocols for sharing data. The relationship with the earlier discussion about NCRIS was noted.

16. Mr Lazzaro commented that this project had three major components: the design and building of technical infrastructure; political agendas of government agencies (in relation to sharing of data); and the management of information. While the technical side is the one that often has the major focus in this sort of work, the project highlighted the importance of managing information processes and standards.

**e. Update on Spatial Initiatives - Ben Searle**

17. Mr Searle from the Office for Spatial Data Management (OSDM), Geoscience Australia, commented that while there is a range of spatial initiatives underway at the moment there is no effective whole of government process to monitor and manage the range of spatial data now being created, used, managed etc. He noted that there are an increasing number of requests for spatial data across a number of government initiatives including the environment, natural resource management, and social inclusion. He commented that the spatial component of the social inclusion topic is receiving a deal of interest from across government.

18. Mr Searle drew the meeting's attention to use of Public Sector Mapping Agencies

(PSMA) services and that Geoscience Australia will become the official reseller in 6-12 months. He noted that some of the issues around ownership are yet to be worked out.

19. Mr Farrell added that the introduction of MeshBlocks will significantly improve the flexibility of spatial data for government and business planning. He informed the group that the Australian Standard Geographical Classification ASGC is currently under review and there is an Information Paper titled *Review of the ASGC, 2007* available from the ABS website.

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

20. Participants reported on a range of statistical work being undertaken in their respective agencies.

21. FaHCSIA reported:

- i. they were going live with the Longitudinal Survey of Indigenous Children, with collectors currently in the field.
- ii. results from Round 6 of the HILDA Longitudinal Survey are now available.
- iii. information on social inclusion and housing affordability is a high priority on the department's agenda with an emphasis on place based data.

22. BITRE reported:

- i. the first *Transport Statistics Yearbook* had recently been released.
- ii. they are working closely with one of the Ministerial Councils on the national transport strategy and statistics has been noted as one area for development

23. ABARE reported that they are working on improving the questionnaire for their farm surveys to minimise respondent burden while maintaining the quality of their results.

24. ATO advised that they have recently released the publication *Taxation Statistics 2005/06*, which was well received and gained a lot of media coverage. They are also looking at providing more information on gifts after receiving an increasing number of information requests in this area.

25. DIAC reported:

- i. there will be another wave of the Longitudinal Survey of Immigrants which will be aimed at overseas students.
- ii. the departmental publication *Population Flows* was released last month.
- iii. there is a constant demand for data arrivals by visa class by state (and region). They are looking at linking arrivals data with other government administrative data to improve this area.

26. Centrelink reported that their new address validation software has been released which will significantly improve the quality of their address information on their administrative data.

27. The delegate from the Education sector of the recently formed DEEWR reported that one of their major focuses has been Early Childhood Education, in particular data on long stay childcare.

28. The delegate from the Employment sector of DEEWR reported they are:
- i. undergoing a Data Strategy Review. As part of this they are examining the quality of their administrative data because the dept are keen to use it in their policy work.
  - ii. examining the possibility of linking administrative data with the results of their longitudinal survey of income support so that they can provide data on the pathways from income support to work.
  - iii. evaluating the building of a data warehouse.
29. NCVER advised that they have been working on socio economic status and parental influences on the development of children.
30. DEWHA indicated that they are increasing the frequency of their State of the Environment Report from the current 5 years.
31. Medicare Australia reported:
- i. the Privacy Commission is issuing guidelines on the linking of Medicare and PBS data.
  - ii. the AIRC is reviewing the Privacy Act and it is expected that they will make some reference on the privacy of statistical information. They received submissions last year and an interim report is expected in June 2008.
32. DIISR reported that the dept. is focusing work on:
- i. the links between wages and inflation, particularly as other data is showing that productivity has fallen.
  - ii. the links between innovation and productivity. The dept has created an Innovation Analysis Branch and the Minister has announced a Review of the National Innovation System in response to this issue. The meeting noted that access to public sector information will be an important part of the review.
33. AIHW reported that the key issues they are focussed on at the moment are social inclusion, elective surgery waiting lists and housing assistance. Other areas noted were:
- i. the launch of the publication *Australia's Health 2008* will be on 24 June at the Australia's Health Conference
  - ii. ABS and AIHW will release a joint report on 29 April on *The Health and Welfare of Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples 2008*.
  - iii. they are working with the Ministerial Council on performance indicators for a new Health Care Agreement.

**Agenda Item 4. Longitudinal Surveys - Building Longitudinal Databases - for information and discussion:**

**a. Creating A Census Longitudinal Dataset - Tenniel Guiver (ABS)**

34. Mr Guiver opened his presentation by explaining that the main objective of this work is to enhance the value of the census by combining it with future censuses and possibly other datasets. The central feature of the project is the creation of a Statistical Longitudinal Census Dataset (SLCD). He noted that before work commenced on the project there was a thorough public consultation process which included a statement of intention about what the ABS planned to do, including Quality Studies.

35. The SLCD will create a dataset by linking successive census records for a 5% sample in order to try and better understand patterns of change over time. Records of the sample group will be brought together by matching characteristics which do not change such as date of birth, gender and place of birth. To protect the confidentiality of individuals, names and addresses will not be retained after the census processing and will not be available to link records.

36. Mr Guiver stated that while the real value of the SLCD would not become apparent for some years, the SLCD brings data together from the 2006 Census with data from 2011, 2016 and so on. Over time, the SLCD will develop as a significant national statistical asset, with the ability to address a range of national, state and local level issues.

37. There was some discussion about the increasing use of longitudinal surveys and the need for ABS assistance in training in analysing the results as it requires a different set of techniques compared to the usual survey collections. The forum were also interested in knowing how long it would be before usable results were available. Susan Linacre answered that the quality studies are already showing benefits and that it only needs two census results to provide usable information.

#### **b. The Business Longitudinal Database - Helen Harkin (ABS)**

38. Ms Harkin provided an overview of the Business Longitudinal Database (BLD). The purpose of the dataset is to:

- i. enable analysis of a group of small to medium businesses over time;
- ii. enable measurement of firm level performance and an understanding of the drivers of this performance;
- iii. improve understanding of business dynamics including identification of characteristics of business exits; and
- iv. provide a key information source for microeconomic policy development.

39. The Business Longitudinal database is panel based and includes 3000 small/ medium businesses (defined as being less than 200 staff). The database is underpinned by the ABS Business Characteristics Survey and is supplemented with administrative by-product data from the Australian Taxation Office and the Australian Customs Service. —

#### **Agenda Item 5. ABS Issues of Interest - briefings for information and comments**

##### **a. MIG Issues - for information and comments: Ian Ewing (ABS)**

40. Mr Ewing outlined key projects in the Macroeconomics Integration Group (MIG).

- i. Emissions Trading Scheme. There have been discussions with the Garnaut Review Team and the Treasury Department who are seeking ABS advice on the availability and quality of data sources, and on establishing future needs to sustain system operations. There have also been discussions with a range of financial institutions on public data requirements for an efficient emissions trading market.
- ii. Australia 20/20 Summit. The ABS has had an Outposted officer providing statistical background papers for the 2020 Summit. The ABS has been promoting a "data needs impact statement" to be compiled from each topic discussed at the



Summit.

- iii. Innovation Review. The ABS is preparing a submission to the Innovation Review following discussion with Terry Cutler (Innovation Review Chairperson).

**b. PLIES Group Issues - for information and comments: Denis Farrell (ABS)**

41. Mr Farrell outlined key projects in the Population, Labour, Industry and Environment Statistics (PLIES) Group.

- i. ABS presented two papers on water accounting and statistical support for emission trading schemes at the recent UN-organised meeting on Official Statistics and Climate Change, in Oslo. This conference signals an important step for the international statistical community in increasing its attention in the environmental statistics field.
- ii. ABS discontinued its public consultation process for the 2011 Census, following the decision to conduct the 2011 Census on the same basis as the 2006 Census, as part of the ABS budget management arrangements.
- iii. ABS formally released Mesh Blocks on 29 Feb 2008. This was released as a GIS dataset and will become a new layer in the PSMA dataset available for use from May 2008.
- iv. The full release of the SEIFA Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas) occurred on 26 March 2008. SEIFA is developed by combining multiple 2006 Census topics such as income, occupation and educational attainment to determine affluent, disadvantaged and highly skilled and educated areas based on their social and economic status.

**c. SSG Issues - for information and comments: Susan Linacre (ABS)**

42. Ms Linacre outlined key projects in the Social Statistics Group (SSG).

- i. Census Data Enhancement. A series of internal studies are being undertaken to assess the ability of the Census 2006 data to be linked to a number of other collections. These studies are seeking to test the quality of the Census and other data sets, the linkage mechanisms and the data management methods. The studies are progressing well, although there are some technical issues, with key results becoming available in the last quarter of 2008. The work will establish mechanisms for managing the linkage between 5% samples of each Census beginning with 2006 and 2011.
- ii. Australian Social Trends. Work is progressing to deliver a series of articles using ABS and non ABS data on a range of social topics.
- iii. As already mentioned *The Health and Welfare of Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples 2008* (ABS cat. no. 4704.0) is to be launched on 29 April. This is a joint publication with AIHW and is the sixth in the series. The publication *Population Characteristics: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians* (ABS cat. no. 4713.0) was released on 27 March.
- iv. The ABS is working with the Office of Indigenous Policy Coordination (OIPC), Treasury, DoHA and others on the COAG Indigenous Reform Group (IGR) on commitments around 'closing the gap' targets, and to assist in addressing commitments made by Heads of Treasury to publish information about Indigenous expenditure. The COAG IGR are funding expansions to the ABS Indigenous Social

Survey to support better analysis of Indigenous children's data.

**d. Methodology Division Issues - for information and comments: Geoff Lee (ABS)**

43. Mr Lee outlined key projects in the Methodology and Data Management Division.

- i. The two main National Data Network Pilot Projects for 2007/08 - VCAMS and Children and Youth Statistical Portal (CYSP) are approaching an evaluation stage, in preparation for planning for the 08/09 year. There will be a series of reviews which will include learnings from the VCAMS and NDN pilots, current strategies, NDN architectures, and operational readiness in preparation for developing a detailed work program for 2008-09. The reviews are scheduled to finish by June 2008 and it is expected that in 2008-09 the focus will be on a few key goals.
- ii. Proposal for Clearing House for Household Surveys. There has been some discussion amongst (Australian) Agency heads about the merits of a Clearing House for Household Survey activity by any Australian Government Agency. If the proposal proceeds, the intent will be to position the Household Clearing House in the "advice and professional guidance" role that the Clearing House for Business Surveys has undertaken.

**Agenda Item 6. Other Business**

44. There was no other business.

**Agenda Item 7. Arrangements for next meeting**

45. The next meeting date was proposed for Friday 10 October 2008 at 9.30am. The meeting accepted this proposed date.

**Agenda Item 8. Close and Lunch**

46. Ms Linacre thanked members for their attendance and contributions and closed the meeting at 12.40pm.