Survey Futures: Phase 2 Research Programme

Call for Proposals

Issued 26/02/2024

Introduction

The ESRC has funded a consortium of organisations, led by the University of Essex, to form the Survey Data Collection Methods Collaboration, known as *Survey Futures*. Recognising that there are currently considerable challenges to carrying out high quality surveys in the UK, but also some new opportunities, the objective of Survey Futures is:

> "t*o deliver a step change in survey research to ensure that it will remain possible in the UK to carry out high quality social surveys of the kinds required by the public and academic sectors*."

To achieve this objective, the first phase of *Survey Futures*, which began in July 2023, includes a programme of research that aims to assess the quality implications of a range of important survey design choices relevant to future UK social surveys and to provide good practice guidance and practical training materials. A particular focus for Survey Futures is online and mixed-mode surveys. There is also a stream of activities relating to training and capacity building that aims to identify promising ways to improve the capacity and skillset of both interviewers and research professionals and take steps towards making those improvements.

Survey Futures is now seeking proposals for a second phase of research that will make essential contributions towards achieving the objective of the Collaboration. Proposals should complement research already underway in the first phase of the collaboration (details of the first phase research programme are available in Annex A), should address the most urgent issues facing the survey community, and should result in, or contribute to, good practice guidance and practical training materials targeted at relevant practitioners within the survey community. Projects can commence on or soon after 01/09/2024 and must be completed by 30/04/2026, so the maximum duration of a project is 20 months.

It is expected that research involving secondary data analysis will involve use of high-quality UK data resources. *Survey Futures* may be able to advise on relevant data sources, including some that are not publicly available but that survey organisations are willing to make available for research purposes. Any enquiries about suitable/available data sources should be directed to the *Survey Futures* project manager, Marc Abbott (ma23872@essex.ac.uk). Research projects are not required to use secondary analysis; other methods may be proposed.

A total of around £1 million is available for second phase research projects. We will cover 80% of the full economic costs (fec) of the proposal. Within this total budget, we anticipate funding 5 to 10 projects, but applications for small projects are welcome: there is no minimum or maximum budget. The principal investigator must be based at a UK research organisation eligible for ESRC funding, but co-investigators can be based elsewhere, including overseas.

What We Are Looking For

Proposals should seek to provide new knowledge regarding survey data collection methods that will contribute to the collaboration's objective of ensuring that it will remain possible in the UK to carry out high quality social surveys. The new knowledge could relate to how to collect survey data or how to assess the quality and fitness for purpose of survey data. Evauation of innovative new methods is particularly welcome. Proposals should not duplicate research already underway in the first phase of *Survey Futures* but can build upon or extend these projects. The first phase research programme is outlined in Annex A. Potential applicants are welcome to seek clarification on the content of first phase research strands in order to ensure that proposals are complementary. Enquiries of a general nature should be addressed in the first instance to the *Survey Futures* project manager, Marc Abbott (ma23872@essex.ac.uk), while enquiries relating to a specific strand should be addressed to the strand leader (see Annex A).

We have identified a number of topics that we see as top priorities to be addressed by the second phase of research projects. These are listed below. We hope to be able to fund proposals addressing at least some of these topics, but proposals addressing other research areas will also be considered, provided that it is clear how the research will contribute towards meeting the overall objectives of *Survey Futures*. Priority research topics are:

Representation

Some population groups may tend to be under-represented in surveys, in some cases to the extent of being largely excluded. This tendency may be exacerbated by the use of particular modes of data collection but can perhaps also be overcome by combining different modes or methods appropriately. Research could inform the design of surveys to minimise under-representation and maximise inclusivity.

- Methods to mitigate the impact of differential willingness to participate in surveys on non-response bias (e.g. use of human-centred design or community engagement, informed by better understanding of public concerns and attitudinal barriers to participation);
- Methods to mitigate the impact of differential ability to participate in surveys on non-response bias and thereby improve accessibility and inclusivity (e.g. addressing issues of literacy, internet skills, disability, sampling frame undercoverage, etc);
- Innovative methods to boost the coverage of difficult-to-sample groups;
- Methods – such as weighting – for dealing with data from very low response rate surveys.

Measurement

Recent trends such as declining response rates and increased use of online and mixed-mode data collection have raised concerns about the quality of survey measures. To ensure that future surveys can provide accurate data, research could inform methods to measure concepts that are difficult to measure well without the support of interviewers[1], methods to enable or encourage respondents to provide high quality data, or methods to detect and to handle poor quality data.

- Methods to measure concepts that are difficult to measure without interviewers;
- Detection and prevention of undesirable respondent behaviours in modes other than face-to-face interviewing;
- Methods and tools for identifying and handling fabricated data and low-quality data.

[1] Note that measurement of industry and occupation, event histories and cognitive function, as well as collecting consent to linkages, are already being addressed in the first phase of research projects – see Annex A. Proposals relating to measuring these concepts must be complementary to the research already in progress.

Survey Quality

With falling response rates and burgeoning diversity in the survey modes and methods being proposed by survey agencies, it is increasingly difficult for survey commissioners to know how best to specify their quality needs and how best to assess the quality delivered by different survey designs. Improved practice, and improved consistency in practice between commissioners, could greatly strengthen the ability of the survey community to meet commissioners' needs.

- Assessment of design, cost and quality trade-offs;
- Identifying best practice for survey commissioners in specifying and assessing survey quality and value for money;

Analysis of mixed-mode data

Methods of analysis for survey data with differential non-response error and/or differential measurement error, for example due to being collected using different modes or methods.

Mode measurement effects are known to occur when mixed-mode data collection strategies are used, and can sometimes be substantial. However, practical guidance to analysts on how to take this into account is limited. Mixed-mode data is likely to become more prevalent in the future, and will involve more and different mixes of modes, so it is important that the research community should know how best to use such data.

- Methods for statistical correction / estimation with mixed-mode data that could be subject to mode measurement effects.

We hope to be able to make available by the end of February a list of relevant data sets that are not currently publicly available but may be made available by the data holders specifically for use on *Survey Futures* projects. The list will be posted on the funding opportunity page at www.surveyfutures.net.

Requirements

By being part of *Survey Futures*, applicants will have the opportunity to shape the future of survey data collection practice as part of a whole-sector collaboration. We can only achieve this by projects/contributors working together to deliver a package of activity which collectively meets the overall objectives. We therefore expect successful applicants to demonstrate a commitment to work collaboratively with other Survey Futures research teams as appropriate, to effectively engage with the Survey Futures Leadership Team, including survey organisations, with regard to research questions, study design, outputs, and TCB activities, and to contribute to cross-grant activities such as stakeholder engagement and dissemination events.

Each second phase research project must contribute to the *Survey Futures* training and capacity building (TCB) mission by producing, for example, an accessible practitioner guide(s) covering the topic of the research and presenting a good practice workshop(s) for survey practitioners. If primary data collection is proposed, this must be fully justified[2]. It is also expected that each project will submit at least one scientific paper to a peer-reviewed journal.

[2] Any proposed primary data collection must comply with the guidance provided in ESRC's Research Funding Guide. In particular, note that any sub-contracted work is subject to normal competitive purchasing principles. Data collection costing more than £10,000 should be subject to external competition to ensure best value for

The principal investigator is required to submit a brief quarterly progress report documenting progress towards milestones and deliverables that will be agreed at the start of the project and the project is expected to be represented at the *Survey Futures* international conference, to be held in London in June 2026.

Applicants are expected to comply with UKRI's standard terms and conditions for research grant funding and the specific guidance provided in ESRC's Research Funding Guide. The application must be supported by your organisation's Research Office or equivalent authority for organisations outside of HE.

Project Costs

Eligible costs are:

- Directly incurred staff costs
- Directly allocated staff costs
- Estates and Indirect costs
- Other directly incurred costs, e.g., travel and subsistence, data collection

Given the short duration of these projects we will not provide funding for capital equipment.

All costs should be calculated and presented using full economic costing, consistent with Section 5 of the ESRC Research Funding Guide.

How to Apply

Please complete the application form and return it by 17.00 on 8 May 2024 to Marc Abbott, ma23872@essex.ac.uk. Please ensure that all sections are completed.

Assessment and Timetable

Proposals will be assessed by a panel that is independent of all persons and institutions involved in the *Survey Futures* award, based upon the following criteria:

- fit to the objectives of the call;
- potential impact on how high-quality social surveys are carried out in the UK;
- quality of the proposed research design and proposed outputs;
- demonstrated ability to deliver the project;
- value for money.

When recommending proposals for funding, the Panel may take a portfolio approach to funding decisions and consider thematic spread to ensure that the second phase projects collectively best meet the *Survey Futures* objectives.

We hope to be able to let you know whether your proposal has been successful by 26 July 2024.

money, while if a subcontract is expected to exceed £25,000, the research organisation's full tendering procedures must be followed. Data collection commissioned from a third-party sub-contractor is eligible for fEC exception funding at 100%.

Annex A: First-phase research programme

The first-phase research programme of *Survey Futures* consists of seven research strands, each with a number of projects. Proposals for second-phase projects should seek to be complementary to the first-phase projects in achieving the overall objectives of *Survey Futures*. The first-phase research strands are outlined here. Should you require further clarification on the scope and nature of these strands in order to ensure that your proposal will be complementary, you are welcome to contact the strand leader, who is indicated below.

Research Strand 1: Enhanced Sampling frames and procedures

Strand Leader: Prof Paul A. Smith, University of Southampton (P.A.Smith@soton.ac.uk)

This strand aims to establish the feasibility and advantages of individual-based sampling and respondent-driven sampling (RDS) to recruit of hard-to-reach groups, and to identify good practice in the use of non-probability sampling.

RS1 will establish the feasibility of using information from administrative sources to enhance the Postcode Address File (the current best-available sample frame) or as an alternative sample frame. This may facilitate greater use of online approaches for surveys, more cost-effective data collection (little or no need for screening) and improved inclusivity by facilitating boosts (e.g. based on ethnicity). Administrative data frames have been employed successfully on special population surveys (e.g. DfE cohorts of young people, COSMO) and health surveys (e.g. REACT, digitrials, clinical trials). RS1 will provide an overview of sources that have recently been used for sampling and a description of the criteria and process for gaining access (with examples) and will investigate the wider feasibility of these approaches, and how these frames can be made accessible to survey practitioners. RS1 will evaluate gains in efficiency and coverage.

Many surveys suffer from under-representation and biases within samples of minority groups, but these groups are often of particular interest. RDS using a probability-based 'seed' may provide a relatively robust, but cost-effective way to reach these groups. RS1 will review existing literature on use of RDS to recruit hard-to-reach groups and will produce a report summarising current knowledge and practice, including guidelines for practitioners.

Evidence continues to suggest that data from non-probability (NP) samples (in particular commercial online panels) are less reliable than those from P samples (Cornesse et al, 2020). However, NP samples also provide opportunities to collect data in a more timely and cost-effective manner and reach scarce populations. Combining NP samples with P samples can reduce bias while maximising the achieved sample for a given cost. RS1 will review current practice on collecting data from NP samples and combining them with P samples. RS1 will analyse data from NP samples used in parallel with Natsal and the NatCen panel to compare P and NP samples and experiment with different approaches for integrating them. Based on this RS1 will produce good practice guidelines and tool-kit for combining P and NP samples.

Research Strand 2: Post-pandemic role of interviewers

Strand Leader: Debbie Collins, NatCen (Debbie.Collins@natcen.ac.uk)

This strand aims to address three key challenges:

- improve understanding of the ways in which the role of the face-to-face fieldworker is changing in response to societal, commercial, technological and methodological trends;
- identify the key skills and attributes needed by the face-to-face fieldworker today and how this is likely to change in the future;

- identify the implications for sourcing and retaining skilled face-to-face fieldworkers.

An independent HR specialist will consult key stakeholders from ONS, NatCen, Ipsos and Verian to scope the study and agree what knowledge can be collected and shared with whom and for what purposes. In addition to these four organisations, the HR specialist will consult other smaller/specialised survey data providers that have a face-to-face field force. Information will be collected using confidential group interviews with each organisation, and two round table discussions with all organisations. The outputs will include two specifications of the face-to-face interviewer role now and in the future (a total of 4), a paper discussing implications for the sourcing and retention of face-to-face interviewers, and recommendations on next steps. Activities will include an online cross-community event to share and discuss the findings and recommendations.

Research Strand 3: Video-Interviewing

Strand Leader: Matt Brown, University College London (matt.brown@ucl.ac.uk)

This strand aims to establish the merits of video-interviewing in population surveys and to identify and promote good practice in the implementation of video-interviewing.

Using video-calls to conduct social survey interviews is relatively new but interest in this mode accelerated considerably during the COVID-19 pandemic when in-person interviews were not feasible. Video-interviewing was introduced during the pandemic on studies including the 1970 British Cohort Study (BCS70) and the European Social Survey (ESS). Post-pandemic, video-interviewing may have potential to address inclusivity concerns (some participants may prefer it) and a reduction in interviewer capacity and to reduce costs, while retaining many of the benefits of face-to-face interaction. The novelty of the video-method means little is known about its impact on data quality, measurement, nonresponse bias; how to optimally design video-interviews; whether video-interviewing could increase inclusivity; which measures can effectively be collected via video or the implications of this new mode for interviewer recruitment, training and organisation of fieldwork. It is now important to assess whether video-interviewing has a post-pandemic future and if so in which circumstances.

The project will gather evidence from UK and overseas studies on practical aspects of the implementation of video-interviewing, encompassing both the process of setting up interviews and the conduct of the interview itself. RS3 will produce a review paper setting out experiences, outcomes and lessons learned so far, which will serve as a good practice guide for survey practitioners and commissioners on how to implement video-interviewing.

RS3 will also include an assessment of the impact of video-interviewing on data quality and measurement through analysis of data from the current surveys of NCDS and BCS70, in each of which around a third of the c. 7,500 interviews will be video interviews with the remainder completed in-person. These interviews include cognitive assessments, data linkage consent and sensitive self-completion questions. At least two research outputs will be published as well as good practice guidance on the suitability of video-interviewing for collecting different kinds of data.

Research Strand 4: Methods for surveys without field interviewers

Strand Leader: Dr Olga Maslovskaya, University of Southampton (om206@soton.ac.uk)

RS4 will investigate the main barriers to effectively conducting self-completion surveys in both cross-sectional and longitudinal contexts. It will explore ways to optimise design characteristics, with the aim of achieving more representative samples of the general population. The main challenges associated with self-completion general population surveys are associated with the absence of field interviewers to facilitate recruitment and retention of participants, and, additionally in a UK context, the absence of a sampling frame of named individuals.

We will consult with key UK survey practitioners and commissioners and review existing literature as well as carry out analysis of existing data to identify good practice and inform a series of practitioner guides with recommendations, which focus on different aspects of recruitment when an interviewer is not present (such as QR codes, number of reminders, incentives, design and branding, days of the week for posting survey invites and other strategies). RS4 will also include work to advance knowledge on targeted survey procedures, developing and comparing methods for identifying optimum designs within a cost constraint and providing survey designers with clear guidelines.

Certain population subgroups may struggle to take part in self-completion surveys, such as those with special needs or the functionally illiterate. A literature review will be conducted followed by a production of a good practice guide to define ways to make it easier for those groups to take part.

It is still unclear whether a Knock-to-Nudge (KtN) approach to establish contact with respondents brings improvements in data quality and sample inclusiveness. Recommendations will be made on whether this strategy should become an integral part of self-completion surveys and whether it has a post-pandemic future.

Regarding within-household selection methods of individuals in self-completion surveys, this RS will examine work outside the UK such as in the ESS and from studies in the USA and will bring that together with recent UK based evidence and produce a good practice guide for survey practitioners. This area is of importance due to the absence of a sampling frame of individuals in the UK.

Research Strand 5: Complex measurement in self-completion surveys

Strand Leader: Lisa Calderwood, University College London (l.calderwood@ucl.ac.uk)

Capturing complex phenomena is crucial for many social surveys. Existing research has shown that a key challenge for moving to online data collection is how to administer complex measures without detriment to data quality and/or comparability. RS5 will focus on four types of complex measures that are important for many surveys and which present distinct challenges. Standardised measures of **industry and occupation** rely on probing in interviewer-administered surveys and are consequently prone to mode effects. **Consent** rates to data linkages, bio-samples and re-contact tend to be substantially lower online. **Event history data** are more likely to be incomplete when collected online. And the assessment of **cognitive function** is a good example of a complex measure that is challenging to assess comparably across modes.

For each of these four types of measures, we will carry out a review of existing evidence on mode and measurement effects and will investigate how best to collect these kinds of data in online surveys. In the case of event history data, the investigation will focus particularly on how to improve recall of complex histories and how to avoid break-offs. We will conduct new analysis of existing data, designed to address key knowledge gaps identified by the review. For industry and occupation, we will analyse experimental and observational data from the NatCen panel, Generations and Gender Survey (GGS), Next Steps study and the 2021 ONS Census-Link Study. For consent, histories and cognition, we may also conduct new analysis using data from appropriate surveys including GGS and Next Steps.

Outputs for each of the four areas will include practical guidance on how to effectively implement high quality measurement online and we will also produce research papers on high priority topics.

Research Strand 6a: Reducing mode effects

Strand Leader: Joanna D'Ardenne, NatCen (Joanna.D'Ardenne@natcen.ac.uk)

The first component of this strand will provide practical resources for survey researchers on how to reduce mode effects through good questionnaire design. An existing valuable resource that can be used to help control mode effects will be updated and associated good practice guidance will be produced. NatCen previously developed a framework for evaluating the risk of measurement effects when transitioning a questionnaire from one mode to another. The framework allows practitioners to

assess survey questions against a checklist of criteria likely to increase the risk of non-equivalence (e.g. question sensitivity, complexity and visual presentation). The framework has been applied to *Understanding Society*, the English Longitudinal Study of Aging, and the English Housing Study.

Since the framework was produced, there have been changes in online technology (notably, increased use of smartphones), advances in methodological knowledge, and additional empirical evidence on measurement effects. We will conduct a literature review on measurement effects based on what has been published since the earlier review which informed the existing resource and will collect feedback from practitioners who have used the original framework to gain insight into how it could be improved and whether the risks identified were corroborated by subsequent analyses. Based on the findings, RS6 will update the framework and produce a guidance document on sources of measurement effects and how these can be mitigated, designed for use by survey researchers from multiple disciplines. These resources will be made freely available and will be publicised through an online event.

Research Strand 6b: Evaluating mode effects

Strand Leader: Prof Annette Jackle, University of Essex (aejack@essex.ac.uk)

The second component of this strand will produce a practical guide to identifying the effects of data collection modes on measurement once data have been collected. The key challenge is that different modes of data collection can lead to differences in the way respondents answer survey questions (measurement effects), but can also lead to differences in the types of people who complete the survey (selection effects). These two effects are typically confounded. Methods to identify the effects of mode on measurement need to be able to distinguish the measurement effect from the selection effect. We will review the research designs that have been used to do this. These include comparing responses by randomised mode allocation, hall test experiments, record linkage studies, test retest or repeated measures studies, weighting or covariate adjustments to account for differences in sample composition, and experiments with non-compliance to treatment. For each method RS6 will review the assumptions underpinning the method and the required analysis methods. RS6 will also discuss the limitations of each method in terms of how successfully it controls for differences in selection between modes and whether it produces unbiased estimates of the effect of mode on measurement. To illustrate each of the research designs and corresponding analysis methods, we will develop a set of case studies, using examples from the literature as well as studies conducted on *Understanding Society*. This will be accompanied by an annotated bibliography.

Research Strand 7: Data integration

Strand Leader: Prof. Joe Sakshaug, University of Warwick (Joe.Sakshaug@warwick.ac.uk)

Recent years have seen an explosion of non-survey data sources that provide an unprecedented amount of information about populations and the communities they reside in and have the potential to help address some of the challenges facing surveys. These sources include geospatial data, satellite imagery, and administrative data. However, approaches to mobilising, integrating, and leveraging these non-survey data assets into survey programmes require development.

RS7 will conduct a systematic literature review and develop a typology of non-survey data sources that have been integrated with surveys, as well as those that would be likely possible and useful to be integrated with a range of UK surveys. We will review what is known about the quality aspects of these data sources, including their coverage, selection, and measurement properties, and review proposed data quality indicators and correction methods. This work will feed into the development of a report cataloguing the different data integration options available to survey practitioners, and describing their associated data quality implications and, where available, potential quality improvement strategies.

Through a series of case studies, we will demonstrate and evaluate how non-survey data can be integrated and leveraged for specific survey data collection activities, namely: 1) evaluating and

correcting for nonresponse bias; and 2) monitoring and intervening in survey data collection. The case studies will be written up as practical reports for survey researchers, highlighting the potential uses and opportunities of data integration across a range of survey sectors. The reports will be accompanied with companion “how-to” guides providing a generic framework for implementing the data integration methods for each of the above survey activities.