

Survey Futures Position Statement on the Future of Face-to-Face Interviewing in the UK

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In an increasingly complex society, policy makers face unprecedented challenges — from immigration and public health to inequality and social exclusion — that demand nuanced, high-quality evidence drawn from all sections of the population, including those hardest to reach. For decades, face-to-face survey interviewing has been central to meeting that need, and it remains a vital part of the UK's data infrastructure.

Face-to-face interviewing forms part of an integrated system of survey data collection methods. If investment is concentrated on online approaches alone, we risk creating an unbalanced system that cannot deliver the representative, high-quality evidence that policy demands. Face-to-face survey data collection brings irreplaceable strengths to that system:

- **It supports participation and inclusivity.** Face-to-face interviewers can reach people who are unlikely to respond by other modes, including marginalised and vulnerable populations whose inclusion is essential for sound policy. In mixed-mode designs, it may safeguard the representativeness of data by reaching segments of the population that other approaches leave out.
- **It enhances data quality.** Interviewers provide explanation and guidance, administer complex procedures such as cognitive assessments and within-household random selection - ensuring the right individual is surveyed rather than simply whoever chooses to respond - and probe answers to the standard required for official classifications of occupation and industry. For some data types and target populations, face-to-face interviewing produces substantially higher-quality data than other modes.
- **It builds trust and cooperation.** The presence of a skilled interviewer is vital, particularly for engaging people on complex topics, for securing participation when the survey commitment is considerable or the topic is challenging, and for initial recruitment to longitudinal studies - foundations on which years of subsequent data collection depend.

Broader value to the UK

Beyond its contribution to high-quality evidence for policy, maintaining a strong face-to-face interviewing capacity delivers wider benefits. It sustains a professional, skilled workforce, often a diverse group including parents, carers, and retirees, working flexibly across the country. These interviewers possess specialist skills in communication, safeguarding, and data collection that take significant time and investment to develop. Their continued employment contributes to the UK economy and preserves expertise that would be extremely costly to rebuild if lost.

There is social value too. Each year, interviewers enable thousands of citizens to share their experiences and opinions with researchers - an exercise in public engagement and democratic participation. Many respondents value the opportunity to speak with a real person, and for some, particularly those experiencing loneliness or social isolation, the interaction itself is meaningful.

The risk we face

In recent years, rising costs, declining survey participation, growing difficulties in recruiting and retaining skilled interviewers, and the expansion of web and mixed-mode data collection have placed face-to-face capacity under significant strain. Despite these pressures, face-to-face interviewing continues to remain a core part of the systems the UK relies on to produce trusted evidence and information for public decision-making. Without deliberate action, there is a real risk that the UK will lose a capability that cannot be quickly or affordably replaced.

What needs to happen

Face-to-face interviewing will only remain viable if the conditions it requires are actively sustained. This demands coordinated action:

- **For funders and budget holders:** Recognise face-to-face interviewing as critical national data infrastructure. Ensure that survey budgets reflect the true cost of maintaining a professional, skilled interviewer workforce including appropriate remuneration and retention, and the operational systems - including technology, data security, training, and management - that underpin high-quality fieldwork.
- **For survey commissioners and designers:** Use face-to-face interviewing strategically - for tasks it is uniquely placed to perform - and ensure that the strengths and limitations of all data collection modes are fully considered in survey design, so that this vital resource delivers maximum value.

Time is of the essence. Once lost, face-to-face interviewing capacity is costly and time-consuming to rebuild. Securing this capacity now is an investment in the quality of our national evidence base, the health of our democracy, and the infrastructure on which sound policy depends.