

QIF project 2012 / 13:

Assisting the GSS in implementing quality reviews

Final Report

Initial Scope

The Code of Practice includes requirements that survey producers “*seek to achieve continuous improvement in statistical processes by, for example, undertaking regular reviews ...*”. As such, there is an increasing requirement for the GSS to review its outputs to ensure that the methods and quality remain fit for purpose. Proposals to formalise best practice in this regard were submitted to GSS SPSC for discussion at their January 2012 meeting (paper: GSS SPSC (12) 04).

This QIF project was funded to aid with the implementation of these proposals. The resource was intended to fund three areas:

- The development of guidance and templates for quality reviews,
- Raising awareness of the new requirements and the guidance developed, and
- Providing support to departments in terms of implementation of the proposals.

Guidance and templates

Three levels of survey reviews were included in the proposals to SPSC:

Survey Mini Health-check – to be conducted every time a survey is run to focus on lessons learned. The QIF funding was to develop guidance for these mini health-checks, including key issues to address and wider considerations.

Survey Annual Health-check – using the survey-relevant sections of the Quality, Methods and Harmonisation Tool (QMHT) to self-assess matters of quality, methods and continuous improvement. QIF funding was planned to adapt the relevant sections of QMHT and create a single ‘Survey Annual Health-check Tool’ to aid departments in conducting the reviews.

Full Survey Medical – in-depth reviews to be conducted every 3-5 years. The aim of these was to ensure that official statistics surveys remain fit for purpose and meet users’ needs. The bid aimed to fund the development of specific yet flexible guidance around what is required as part of a full survey medical.

The guidance and templates was to be piloted in two or three departments before being rolled-out more widely. This was to ensure that a range of perspectives and situations was taken into account before the guidance was disseminated across the GSS as a whole.

Raising awareness and providing support

Publicity (via StatNet and HoP Newsletters) and events to raise awareness of the new review requirements were to be conducted and the funding also partially covered the

commitment of ONS Quality Centre to provide support to departments in the implementation of quality reviews. Dedicated resource was also to be available to respond to queries about review implementation and the reporting templates.

Overall

The bid was aimed at supporting the GSS by providing guidance and templates to facilitate the implementation of the review proposals, to have a beneficial impact in terms of increased transparency, openness and consistency in reporting on survey quality across the GSS. The consistent approach to conducting and reporting the reviews was designed to aid users and stakeholders in gaining a better understanding of the quality of official statistics surveys. The reviews would also provide the Statistics Authority and the National Statistician with confidence that quality issues were being considered and addressed by the GSS.

Revised Scope

Following the general acceptance of the proposals submitted to SPSC in January 2012, subsequent discussions with GSS SPSC, HoPs and the National Statistician resulted in changes to the review framework. In brief, the changes included:

- A need to review statistical outputs throughout the Generic Statistical Business Process Model (GSBPM – previously known as the statistical value chain) and not just at the survey level. This is consistent with the Code of Practice, which is output, rather than survey, focussed.
- A concern over the level of resource required, particularly around the full survey medical proposals, especially amongst smaller departments and those without internal methodological experts.
- An agreement that a tailored review framework would first be piloted by ONS, which would then report back to SPSC on the outcomes.

The work contained within this QIF bid therefore had to be realigned to fit with these decisions. The revised plans included a focus on further developing QMHT to facilitate its use across the GSS and to aid users. These developments are outlined below.

Outcomes

Development of Guidance:

The changes in the scope of the quality review framework (outlined above) necessitated changes to the project. Nevertheless, the main aim of the project - to provide the GSS with a useful tool to enable them to conduct quality reviews - remained the focus. The project has overhauled and made significant improvements to the GSS Quality, Methods and Harmonisation Tool (QMHT), including making it interactive and considerably more user-friendly.

The tool now covers the whole of the GSBPM and not just the survey elements. It is also now interactive and considerably more user-friendly, providing users with methodological recommendations on the basis of their answers to the questions. This is a huge step forward as the previous version of the tool relied on the user to have sufficient expertise to self-assess against a range of areas and then develop an action plan to address areas of weakness. This should also improve the consistency of reviews undertaken across the GSS as well as aiding the standardisation of outcomes and the implementation of best practice. Collating the outcomes of the reviews will also enable individual departments to build up a picture of areas of methodological strengths and weaknesses and thus be able to prioritise developments and improvements from a position of knowing the bigger picture and being able to take a strategic view.

As agreed by SPSC, ONS is piloting mandatory annual quality reviews using QMHT and will report back to SPSC on the outcome of the reviews, any lessons learned and potential further developments. In the meantime, the use of the tool and the other guidance (Value Engineering risk assessments) and the introduction of National Statistics Quality Reviews has been raised at SPSC and, through papers, with GSS HoPs.

Raising Awareness:

The general launch and profile raising activities anticipated in the original bid have not been undertaken given the changes in the scope of the work and the decision that the ONS will report back on the outcomes of the programme of Annual Quality Reviews that it is implementing.

Despite this, efforts have been made to raise the profile of the work being done as part of this QIF bid and more widely by ONS Quality Centre to provide assurance around ONS outputs. This includes the Value Engineering risk assessment work, the Annual Quality Reviews (using QMHT) and the re-established programme of National Statistics Quality Reviews (NSQRs). Papers and presentations on this have been submitted to GSS SPSC and to HoPs (for information). ONS Quality Centre has also provided ongoing support and guidance to the National Statistician's Office (NSO) on these matters and will continue to do so.

If the decision is taken to prioritise the use of QMHT across the GSS, this profile raising work (adapted from that originally anticipated) will be undertaken by ONS Quality Centre.

Ongoing Support:

Ongoing support for quality reviews is already being and will continue to be provided to the GSS by ONS Quality Centre.

Dissemination activities

Information about the development of QMHT and the quality review process that the ONS is piloting (for later consideration by other GSS departments) was communicated to GSS SPSC and GSS HoPs.

The development of QMHT has been communicated and the tool has been relaunched on StatNet and the ONS website with additional guidance and information on how the interactive tool can be used, its benefits and other considerations.

Other dissemination activities have included a presentation to GSS colleagues in Northern Ireland about QMHT and quality reviews, informing other GSS colleagues (eg Ofsted) about the new tool and providing them with the latest version and advertising the tool at the seminar for Survey Control Liaison Officers from across government.

Further dissemination and profile raising will depend on the decisions taken by GSS SPSC. If a decision is taken to promote the use of QMHT more widely across the GSS then further dissemination activities will include publishing further information on StatNet, special events, communication with Survey Control Liaison Officers (through the network and at SCLO events), GSS HoPs communications, etc.

Benefits of the project

The extensive change in scope has, obviously, had considerable consequences. Nevertheless, the main outcome of the project (currently being piloted within ONS) has provided benefits which will hopefully be rolled out more widely to the GSS - although the tool is already available on StatNet and the ONS website and the fact that the tool is available has been disseminated to the GSS.

Given the changes in scope to the project (and the, as yet, limited roll-out of the reviews across the GSS), capacity-building has been limited. However, the provision of the review tool (QMHT) and associated guidance and support does incorporate an element of knowledge transfer. Conducting the reviews will also result in wider knowledge of methodology and quality considerations as well as ensuring a consistent approach to reviews.

Support from ONS Quality Centre and potential methodological support through various channels (including the Methodology Advisory Service) will also facilitate skills and knowledge transfer.

Improvements to the statistics from regular reviews should have a beneficial impact on users in the longer term, although these may be difficult to quantify.

Conclusion

The overall aim of the project was to enable the GSS to meet the challenge of ensuring their methods were and remain fit for purpose by providing them with a means of reviewing their outputs in a flexible way. The enhancement of QMHT (with automated recommendations,

improved functionality and user-friendliness not originally anticipated) is a successful first step in enabling the GSS to conduct self-assessment quality reviews in a consistent and standardised way. This is currently being piloted within ONS but the tool is already available for use by other departments (on StatNet and the ONS website). Dependent on future decisions, ONS will continue to provide support and guidance, as well as working to raise the profile of the tool and its benefits to colleagues across the GSS.