

Population and Migration Statistics (PAMS) Committee (Scotland)

Report on the Meeting of the SCOTSTAT Board March 2016

Introduction

1. After a gap of over almost 18 months a SCOTSTAT Board meeting was held on 14 March 2016. This note reports back to PAMS members on the business of that meeting.
2. The agenda and papers for the [meeting](#) should be available on the SCOTSTAT website shortly

Meeting report

3. The latest meeting of the SCOTSTAT Board was held on Monday 14 March 2016 at St Andrew's House. The meeting was chaired by Roger Halliday the Chief Statistician in the Scottish Government.
4. The agenda for the meeting was as follows:
 - Statistics strategy
 - Data developments
 - Statistics.gov.scot
 - Household surveys and core survey questions
 - Governance of official statistics in Scotland
5. Roger Halliday introduced the draft 'Vision and Strategy for Official Statistics in Scotland' developed in discussions with National Records of Scotland (NRS) and the NHS Public Health and Intelligence. The aim was to work towards an official statistics system in Scotland which would support the Scottish public sector in making informed decisions based on high quality evidence.

This would involve data collection, including making better use of already existing data, collecting, managing, sharing and publishing data. The intention was to bring evidence together to give new insights. This needed to be done to the highest possible standards of integrity, honesty, objectivity and impartiality.

Identified priorities were:

- Reviewing engagement with users;
- Supporting data sharing legislation to overcome barriers to accessing data;
- Exploring efficiencies in analytical data infrastructure;
- Developing data science skills;
- The next stages of the long term survey strategy - UK wide and local surveys;
- Developing evidence based narratives in conjunction with users;

- Widening data in statistics.gov.scot and developing a flexible table service;
- Developing a data management system and sharing metadata;
- Ensuring researchers could securely access personal data where it was for the public good;
- Speeding up the process of data linkage.

At the same time the staffing capacity of the statistical service would be developed, including developing capacity throughout the public sector.

Roger sought feedback on the paper and outlined proposals for engaging users and statisticians on it. The Board welcomed the paper although Information Technology (IT) felt it should focus more on the purpose than the process. There was a suggestion of first agreeing the vision and then developing an action plan. There was a need to explain why data matters and the importance of understanding what key data was. One issue which needed to be explored was the impact of further devolution of official statistics, especially in respect of Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs (HMRC) and the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and the new Scottish Government agencies.

The Board reflected on how well SCOTSTAT committees were working. Some were working better than others. Social media offered new ways of engaging with users, but unfortunately many local authorities blocked access to it. It was pointed out that the current structure perhaps reflected a time when the capability and capacity of councils, and others, was stronger than it is now.

The Statistics User Forum format run by the Royal Statistical Society (RSS) and the Office for National Statistics (ONS) was seen as having strengths and a conference similar to the one held in 2015 for all statisticians across Scotland was planned for 2016 to reflect this.

6. On data developments, Roger expanded on some of the topics of the previous paper. The aim was to reduce costs and the burden of data collection and make better use of the data which was collected. A Joint Board covering Scottish Government, NRS and NHS - Public Health and Information would be set up. The Board was supportive.
7. The Scottish Government had launched statistics.gov.scot as the successor of Scottish Neighbourhood Statistics (SNS). It aimed to give open access to open data from a range of suppliers – Scottish Government (SG), NHS Information Services Division (ISD), NRS, etc. Feedback so far had been mixed. The priority was to get existing datasets updated before publishing new datasets.

Gregor Boyd gave a short demonstration of the system. The objective was to encourage the use of statistics and it had enhanced functionality with the ability to write your own queries and to export any analysis. Currently it replicated the old SNS but the aim was to load on more data linked to the publication cycle and the main launch for the system was likely to be around the launch of the new SIMD2016.

Weaknesses already identified included the need to improve the geographies on the site and a blog had been created to help raise awareness – though again there was an issue of the blocking of access to blogs by some employers. Scottish Government were open to approaches to identify data that could be added to the site.

Some Board members expressed surprise at the launch of the new site and felt that there had been insufficient notice of the change. Roger apologised for this.

8. Julie Wilson provided an update on harmonised questions for household surveys. Around 10 years ago work began on establishing a set of harmonised questions for household surveys and now a set of 20 core questions had been created which both avoided multiple calls on households but also allowed for more granular analyses to be undertaken – such as on sexual orientation – which would improve the data around these aspects of the inequalities agenda. Work was currently underway on processing the 2014 data which would mean that data would then be available for three years – 2012, 2013 and 2014 – which would enable trends to be considered. The next step would be to evaluate the core questions.

Funding of household surveys was always an issue and was becoming tighter and so the focus was on getting data for those topics which administrative data could not provide. For the Scottish Household Survey a consultation was underway on options – including reducing the sample or covering selected topics in alternate years – as well as improving the governance structures. Funding for 2015 and 2016 had already been committed. The importance of the Scottish Household Survey to local government benchmarking and the National Performance Framework was emphasised by the Board.

9. In the light of the suggestions discussed under paragraphs five and six, Roger proposed that this would be the last meeting of the SCOTSTAT Board as currently constituted and that it would be replaced by a new structure which reflected the way governance was developing. There would be a new Scottish Official Statistics Board with around 10-12 members – primarily the key providers of official statistics and selected representatives of data users. Its function would be to oversee the strategic plan and help achieve the strategy, as well as seek to strengthen the connection between the plan while being representative of the views of the key users of statistics and to consider opportunities and challenges. There would also be a SCOTSTAT Users Forum of up to 100 users of official statistics that would meet annually and be used to seek feedback and provide a clearer link to the views of the providers and users of official statistics. There would also be more events held to bring providers and users together. The forum and these events would provide opportunities to ensure that the structure did not become too focused on statisticians and what interests them but also the needs and interests and requirements of users of statistics including the public, the private sector, the third sector and academics.

These proposals met with general approval.

Conclusion

10. This paper summarises the issues discussed by the SCOTSTAT Board at its meeting in March 2016. I am happy to provide further information if required.
11. Since I will be retiring in September, PAMS should be identifying a new representative on the SCOTSTAT Board. However, the proposal that this would be the last SCOTSTAT Board meeting makes this unnecessary at present. However, I would ask NRS to keep this under review and seek to ensure that the PAMS Committee and its views are properly represented in the new structure.

It has been a privilege and a pleasure (I am a strange person!) to represent PAMS over these last few years on the SCOTSTAT Board and I would like to thank PAMS members for the opportunity.

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