
Plan Overview

A Data Management Plan created using DMPonline

Title: Enhancing and future proofing UK self-completion surveys (ENHANCE)

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Project abstract:

Context

For many years, face-to-face in-home interviewing was seen as the highest quality method for carrying out probability-based surveys of the general population. However, changes in society over recent decades have made it more difficult to do face-to-face interviewing well. At the same time, rising costs alongside reduced interviewer workforces, have led many survey agencies to reduce their capacity for delivering face-to-face surveys.

Challenges the project addresses

As a result, face-to-face interviewing in the UK is beset with issues around declining response rates, quality concerns, demand outstripping supply, and increasing costs, raising questions about its quality and future (Charman et al. 2025). Meanwhile alternative self-completion (SC) methods have shown rather promising results when compared directly to face-to-face (Fitzgerald et al, 2025) but the use of good practice remains patchy (Domarchi et al. 2026).

There is now a need to further improve the ways in which self-completion surveys in the UK can be implemented, so they can offer a robust data collection method.

Aims and objectives

The 'ENHANCE' project will test ways to move self-completion surveys in the UK beyond the state of the current state of the art and provide evidence for new and improved methods that support high quality. No such study testing so many elements together has been conducted in the UK in recent years outside of the official statistics system (Domarchi et al. 2026).

Building on the ESRC funded Surveys Futures project, ENHANCE will undertake a large experiment to test data collection enhancements. The focus will be on efforts to get many more target respondents to open survey invitations (noting the lack of an individual sampling frame) and then better persuade them to take part. Areas to be examined will include but not be limited to: a web only survey vs mixed mode self-completion data collection; concurrent versus sequential inclusion of paper questionnaires; incentive variations; pre-notifications and targeting of sample units in deprived areas to reduce bias.

Potential applications and benefits

The findings are expected to influence hundreds if not thousands of future survey design decisions as more surveys are conducted without field interviewers in the future. In turn this will help to provide better value for money for survey funders. The results will be summarised in a report which will support a series of journal articles and a seminar in the ESS-NatCen-City St George's survey methods seminar as well as conference presentations. The project will conclude with an updated best practice guide for conducting self-completion surveys in the UK.

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Enhancing and future proofing UK self-completion surveys (ENHANCE)

Assessment of existing data

Provide an explanation of the existing data sources that will be used by the research project, with references

Assessment of existing data

As part of this research project, new data will be generated, as no existing datasets, including prior ESS rounds or holdings within the UK Data Service, the UKRI Gateway to Research, or the CESSDA Data Catalogue, contain the experimental manipulations, detailed paradata, or controlled testing environment required for this study. While the ONS has previously conducted a series of experiments using the Labour Market Survey (Ipsos MORI 2018a, 2018b), these were limited in scope. The experiments examined factors such as incentive types (gift vouchers and material incentives but not cash), envelope colour, regionalised branding, and different letter combinations, including prenotification. However, these were conducted in a web-only survey and did not include key experimental conditions proposed in this study, such as different self-completion data collection modes, visible cash and coin incentives, or targeted mailings to addresses in deprived areas.

Provide an analysis of the gaps identified between the currently available and required data for the research

While the ONS has previously conducted a series of experiments using the Labour Market Survey (Ipsos MORI 2018a, 2018b), these were limited in scope. The experiments examined factors such as incentive types (gift vouchers and material incentives but not cash), envelope colour, regionalised branding, and different letter combinations, including prenotification. However, these were conducted in a web-only survey and did not include key experimental conditions proposed in this study, such as different self-completion data collection modes, visible cash and coin incentives, or targeted mailings to addresses in deprived areas.

Information on new data

Provide information on the data that will be produced or accessed by the research project

Data consisting of paradata, demographic, and attitudinal variables will be collected through a large-scale probability sample survey (web and paper) and processed on Centerdata servers (Tilburg, Netherlands), part of the ESS Core Scientific Team. City St George's will act as data controller, with the University of Essex and a fieldwork agency (to be selected through a tendering process) as data processors. The fieldwork agency will handle paper questionnaires and manually enter data into Centerdata's survey platform; questionnaires will be destroyed after confirmation of data completeness.

Quality assurance of data

Describe the procedures for quality assurance that will be carried out on the data collected at the time of data collection, data entry, digitisation and data checking.

The fieldwork agency will handle paper questionnaires and manually enter data into Centerdata's survey platform using double entry procedures; questionnaires will be destroyed after confirmation of data completeness. As survey invitations are sent to specific addresses with specific serial numbers and passwords the potential for fraud is very small (and has not been detected to date in the ESS).

Backup and security of data

Describe the data security and backup procedures you will adopt to ensure the data and metadata are securely stored during the lifetime of the project.

To ensure data integrity, the fieldwork agency will undertake secure data entry, cleaning, and validation, with additional quality assurance conducted by the research team.

All data will be stored securely on institutional servers (City St George's, University of Essex, and the fieldwork agency) and within Centerdata's platform. Access will be restricted to authorised personnel and controlled via secure login and two-factor authentication. Data files will not be transferred directly between processors; authorised users will access data via the secure platform. Digital data will be stored in approved cloud environments (e.g., Microsoft OneDrive), with no local storage.

Management and curation of data

Outline your plans for preparing, organising and documenting data.

Data will be prepared and documented by the research team at City, St George's University of London according to the guidelines required by the UK Data Service. We will also provide a technical report describing the survey and including all relevant documents (screen shots of the web survey, letters, photos of envelopes and incentives).

Difficulties in data sharing and measures to overcome these

Identify any potential obstacles to sharing your data, explain which and the possible measures you can apply to overcome these.

The research team will follow the usual ESS procedures for ensuring data anonymisation prior to deposit of the data at the ESS archive. This includes suppressing or combining variables which might be

disclosive eg very high age values for instance over 95 years old

Consent, anonymisation and strategies to enable further re-use of data

Make explicit mention of the planned procedures to handle consent for data sharing for data obtained from human participants, and/or how to anonymise data, to make sure that data can be made available and accessible for future scientific research.

All of those invited to take part in the survey will receive a respondent information leaflet outlining their rights. The ESS does not use consent as the basis for collecting personal data.

The lawful bases used in ESS are that it is undertaken as a task in the public interest and necessary for research and archiving purposes, in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation and national laws.

The legal basis under UK GDPR and EU GDPR is art 6.1 (e), 9.2(j), 89(1) and applicable national laws. We will use the same legal basis for this project (City St George's will be the data controller however rather than the ESS).

Copyright and intellectual property ownership

State who will own the copyright and IPR of any new data that you will generate.

There will be no copyright or IPR.

Responsibilities

Outline responsibilities for data management within research teams at all partner institutions

Nhlanhla Ndebele at City St George's University of London will be responsible for data management and archiving the data at the UK data Service. A data processor agreement will be signed between City, Essex and Southampton to allow data to be shared prior to deposit at the archive. This will be for both data processing (eg weighting) and early analysis.

Preparation of data for sharing and archiving

Are the plans for preparing and documenting data for sharing and archiving with the UK Data Service appropriate?

All of the anonymised survey data will be deposited at the UKDS.

Is there evidence that data will be well documented during research to provide highquality contextual information and/or structured metadata for secondary users?

The data will be deposited in line with the European Social Survey data protocol ensuring it is in line with the FAIR requirements. The technical report will include all of the contextual information including a description of the the experimental conditions. The dataset will include the detail of which experimental group respondents and non respondents were assigned to.