

**Methodology Advisory Committee Paper
June 1998**

**Agenda Item 5:
COMMONWEALTH GOVERNMENT STATISTICAL CLEARING HOUSE**

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ABSTRACT

1. In its 1996 report "Time for Business", the Small Business Deregulation Task Force recommended the establishment of a clearance process for Commonwealth Government business surveys as a means of ensuring that these surveys are necessary, well designed, and place minimum load on business respondents. Funding for survey clearance was allocated from July 1997 onwards, and, in view of both its statistical expertise and its coordination role, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) was selected to conduct the process. In December 1997, clearance of surveys began. The entire suite of Commonwealth Government business surveys will be reviewed by June 1999. Those that do not satisfy the review criteria are not permitted to start or, in the case of existing ongoing surveys, to continue.
2. This paper outlines the genesis, objectives, development and operation of the Statistical Clearing House. Part A describes the objectives, challenges and framework within which developmental and operational activities are taking place. Part B focuses on the review criteria, procedures and systems, and the corresponding information about surveys that is required for the review and that is subsequently disseminated publicly via the Internet. Part C deals with the organisation of the Statistical Clearing House, including staffing, communications, coordination with other areas, and reporting and evaluation requirements. Part D summarises the findings of reviews conducted to date and the impact on respondent burden and quality. Part E raises the outstanding issues and outlines possible future directions.

3. The primary question that we would like to put to Methodology Advisory Committee members is whether the survey review criteria and the information required to enable their application are appropriate. We would also appreciate suggestions on any other aspects of the clearance process and, in particular, how we can best market it to survey managers, consultants providing survey design and operations services, and the businesses themselves.

PART A: BACKGROUND

Genesis

4. The Small Business Deregulation Task Force report proposed that "statistical collections affecting 50 or more businesses and run by, or on behalf of, all Commonwealth Government departments and agencies be subject to a central clearance process", that non-approved surveys not be permitted, and that approved surveys receive a registration number to be displayed on collection material. The report also outlined the review criteria it expected to see incorporated in the clearance process, and it further noted that clearance should not apply to statistics produced as by-products of administrative processes, that clearance should be administered by the ABS, and that, to ensure even handedness, all surveys, including those conducted by the ABS, should be cleared.
5. The Commonwealth Government was fully supportive of the proposal in its March 1997 "More Time for Business" statement and allocated funding to the ABS for implementation. Thus, in July 1997, the Statistical Coordination Section, a self-contained unit within Methodology Division was established to develop and operate a "Statistical Clearing House" (SCH).
6. To ensure that creation of the SCH was fully supported and publicised across all Commonwealth Government departments and agencies, a Cabinet Submission was prepared. It was discussed by the Cabinet in September, 1997. The outcome was a letter from the Prime Minister to all Ministers stating that clearance of existing and proposed new surveys would begin on 1 December 1997 and that the Australian Statistician would determine further details of the process and communicate them to the relevant agencies.

7. On 24 October, 1997 the Australian Statistician wrote to all departmental portfolio heads and to the heads of agencies known to have business survey activity. The letter and accompanying annex (copy appended) elaborated SCH procedures and requested that each department/agency nominate a "Survey Liaison Officer" to interface with the SCH. It also stated that information about approved surveys would be recorded in a "Commonwealth Register of Surveys" accessible via the Internet.

Objectives and Benefits

8. The SCH has three basic, interrelated objectives. The first is to reduce the load imposed by the Commonwealth Government on businesses, particularly small businesses, by eliminating duplication and by ensuring that the design and conduct of business surveys follow good practice. The second is to increase the value of survey outputs by improving the quality of the methods used. The third is to enhance the use of survey outputs by improving access to documentation describing them and the methods used to produce them.
9. The SCH is expected to have a significant effect on respondent burden measurement and control. It is raising awareness of respondent burden amongst survey managers. In most agencies, respondent burden has never been monitored before, let alone managed. The SCH is requiring a respondent burden projection to be specified for each survey subject to review, followed by an estimate of the burden actually incurred. These data are recorded and will be disseminated through the Register of Surveys. They will enable the first assessment of the total burden imposed by Commonwealth statistical collections on business respondents, and the relative load imposed by each agency, including the ABS, as a proportion of the total. As the SCH stamp of approval on the front of survey forms becomes recognised over time, it will be viewed by business respondents as validating that a survey is necessary and well designed for its purpose.
10. Not only does the SCH aim to reduce respondent burden and improve survey quality, it is also providing the ABS with an opportunity to enhance its statistical co-ordination role. Standards can be promoted through the SCH. The Register of Surveys will gradually increase the awareness and use of Commonwealth Government statistical data, and of the documentation describing these data and their production processes.

Barriers and Challenges

11. Notwithstanding its benefits, survey managers have a natural tendency to view the SCH, initially at least, as a bureaucratic impediment rather than as a potential source of improvements to survey procedures and outputs. Faced with tight deadlines and budgets, managers can be reluctant to set aside the time and effort to provide the information required for SCH review, or to make any changes required for their surveys to satisfy the review criteria. A major challenge for the SCH is to persuade survey managers that review by the SCH is more a potential source of value added than a policing operation.

12. In fact, this will not be the first time that the ABS has engaged in a review of statistical collections. In 1983, there was a ministerial direction requiring Commonwealth agencies intending to conduct surveys to consult the ABS beforehand. This direction worked with diminishing success for two reasons. The ABS had only an advisory role and could not insist on changes to a survey. As well, the ABS could spare only limited resources for the review program. The process was finally abandoned in 1993 as being ineffectual. Thus, past experience indicates that there are some pitfalls to be avoided if the clearance process is to have the desired impact.
13. The present SCH differs from the earlier approach in several ways that greatly increase its chances of proving effective.
 - The drive for a clearing process has come from outside the ABS. The SCH is being championed by the Office of Small Business on behalf of its constituency, with the primary aim of reducing provider load.
 - Funding has been allocated for SCH development and operation.
 - The clearing process is more narrowly focussed, including only surveys of 50 or more business respondents, rather than all surveys.
 - There have been significant improvements in the technology available to support the process. In particular, use of the Internet enables SCH information to be more readily accessed and updated.

PART B: DEVELOPMENT

Implementation Timetable and Strategy

14. The implementation timetable has four phases. In the first phase, which lasted from program initiation until Christmas 1997, the focus was on recruiting staff, developing review and approval criteria, establishing the initial clearance procedures and systems, and informing stakeholders.
15. The second phase, from December 1997 until June 1998, involves full scale clearance operations as well as continuing development. Reviews are being conducted of all new surveys prior to their going into the field and of the larger ongoing surveys. The review criteria are being refined in the light of experience and feedback from stakeholders. The Register of Surveys is being developed, and SCH procedures and systems are being enhanced.
16. The third phase, from July 1998 until June 1999 will involve continuing review of all new surveys coupled with review of the remaining backlog of smaller ongoing surveys. As the review load diminishes, the SCH staff will increase its statistical coordination activities to include more active promotion of standards and harmonisation.
17. Towards the end of 1998/99, there will be an independent evaluation of SCH development and operations. Preparations will be made to move the SCH into the fourth, steady state operational phase. SCH operations will be scaled down to a level sufficient to deal with the ongoing stream of new collections.

18. Strategic principles include:
- making no distinction in the clearance process between ABS surveys and surveys conducted by other agencies;
 - allocating survey review effort in accordance with its likely benefits in terms of respondent burden reduction or survey improvement;
 - conducting clearance reviews in a timeframe that has minimum effect on the survey development timetable with, at the very worst, a turnaround time of 20 working days from the date complete information about a survey is received;
 - harmonising with and utilising any existing procedures and systems, within the ABS or outside, that perform related functions;
 - recording and disseminating survey review information electronically.

Scope and Definitions

19. As previously noted, the Task Force report proposed that "statistical collections affecting 50 or more businesses and run by, or on behalf of, all Commonwealth Government departments and agencies be subject to a central clearance process". The precise scope and definitions of the SCH were established within this framework and incorporated Paragraphs 1-27 of the Annex to the Australian Statistician's letter.
20. "Statistical collections" are distinguished from "administrative collections", the latter being defined as ones in which the identity of each individual business is significant and the data collected determines the particular treatment of that business.
21. A "business" is defined as a legal entity (or group of legal entities), excluding government departments or agencies, engaged in the production or sale of goods or services in Australia. Organisations such as private schools, hospitals, voluntary organisations, designated under the law as "not for profit" but producing or selling goods or services are regarded as businesses as they feel respondent burden in just the same way.

22. "Commonwealth Government departments and agencies" is interpreted to include organisations that are considered part of general government for the purpose of the National Accounts, excepting some that are not "budget funded" as defined in compilation of public and private financial statistics.

Review Criteria

23. The review criteria are the kernel of the clearance process. The Task Force report (Chapter 5) and the Cabinet Submission provided guidance regarding the nature of the review criteria, requiring the SCH to ensure that:
- there is no adequate alternative source of information available and no reasonable, alternative means of obtaining the required information with less provider load;
 - the collection methodology is appropriate for the objectives of the collection and the intended uses to be made of the results, in particular, the frame provides adequate coverage, the collection forms have been appropriately tested, the expected level and quality of responses are justified, statistical standards are used where appropriate, and proposed processing and estimation systems are adequate;
 - a group of businesses or business associations have been consulted about the nature and objectives of the collection and data availability, and there is an assessment of provider load; and
 - there are adequate systems (both computer and people-based) to ensure the collection is conducted and processed in a manner that will provide output of quality appropriate for its intended uses.
24. Within this general framework, operational review criteria have been established. They are based on various survey design guidelines, quality checklists, and information from similar programs at other agencies. An important consideration in their formulation was the intended depth of the review process. The more detailed the review, the more potential for finding ways in which survey can be substantially improved, but the more information about the survey has to be furnished by the survey manager and the longer the review takes. There is a practical balance to strike between thoroughness and practicality. Thus, the choice of review criteria has been influenced not only by respondent burden and quality considerations, but also by the average time that can be devoted to reviews (roughly estimated from the number of surveys to be reviewed and the resources available) and the information that survey managers and designers can reasonably be expected to have at their fingertips.
25. The review criteria and the survey information required to support them have been incorporated in an electronic "information template", which is sent to each survey manager at the beginning of the clearance process. In the case of ABS collections, the template is already populated with information from an internal metadata system (the Collection Management System) so that the survey manager does not have to supply again information that has already been recorded there.

26. Since its initial introduction, the information template has been streamlined in response to survey manager feedback, mostly comprising complaints about the difficulties in understanding what was required and time spent in gathering together the information. The latest version of the template is appended. It does not contain any information that the manager or designer would not need to know in order to design and conduct the survey efficiently, effectively and with minimum respondent burden.
27. One point regarding the criteria is worth highlighting. It is assumed that each Government agency is an authority regarding its own information requirements. These requirements are not subject to SCH questioning. However, they must be well documented, and the SCH does require evidence that a survey is necessary to meet them

Clearance Procedures

28. Development of clearance procedures began with identification, elaboration, and documentation of the core SCH functions, as outlined in the following paragraphs. A solid infrastructure of well defined procedures provides basis for ongoing continuous improvement.
29. *Procedures for identification of Commonwealth Government business surveys.* Within the ABS this is a relatively simple process as, in principle, every survey collecting information intended for public dissemination is recorded in the "Collection Management System". All that had to be added to satisfy SCH needs were records for pilot tests, survey evaluation surveys, and other program and product evaluation surveys not previously recorded in the system.
30. Identifying business surveys conducted by other agencies is not so straightforward as there is no equivalent list. (In fact, as previously noted, such a list will be a significant by-product of the clearance process.) Survey identification is a primary role of the survey liaison officers. Their efforts are being supplemented by periodic review of Government consultancy contract proposals submitted for approval, and ad hoc examination of Government internal bulletins, newsletters, etc.
31. *Survey review procedures.* Ideally, every review starts with face to face contact between the SCH reviewer and the survey manger and/or designer. The key dates in the review timetable are identified and the mechanism - usually the Internet - for communicating information about the survey is established. The earlier the SCH becomes involved the more likely the review is to bring benefits rather than delays. However, there is also a balance to be struck here, as the SCH does not have the mandate or resources to comment in detail on proposals that are still at a very preliminary stage.

32. The time spent on a review is determined in accordance with its potential for improving the survey or reducing respondent burden. Factors taken into consideration are:
- the size of the survey in terms of respondent burden - the larger the survey, the more scope for reduction in burden;
 - the organisations designing and conducting the survey - the less their experience, the more potential for identifying improvements; and
 - the type of survey according to its intended uses - the more widespread the use, the more widely beneficial improvements will be.
33. In this last mentioned respect, surveys are classified into two basic types: "public interest" surveys and "other". Public interest surveys are those collecting data that are to be publicly and widely disseminated. Most ABS surveys fall within this category, as do many of the surveys conducted by organisations such as ABARE, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, etc. The "other" category includes survey pilot tests, survey evaluation studies, and the whole raft of client satisfaction (program and product evaluation) surveys. This category of surveys receives less attention. In particular, for product evaluation surveys (of which ABS readership surveys are an example) whilst basic information, including respondent burden, is collected, there is no formal review or approval as such. This is because the likely benefits of reviews are outweighed by the effort required to provide the information for, and to conduct, the reviews.
34. *Approval and non-approval procedures.* Surveys satisfying the review criteria receive an approval number to be displayed on all survey material that is seen by respondents. Survey managers have the option of using the SCH approval logo. As SCH activities become well known use of the logo may begin to improve response rates.
35. At the same time as approval is given, the survey manager is asked to identify any information about the survey that should not be made publicly available via the Internet. It is not envisaged that there will be much information in this category at least not for ABS surveys as they are conducted for public good at taxpayers expense and the information can in any case be obtained under the Freedom of Information Act.
36. A non-approval situation requires great sensitivity. A non-approval can be appealed by the agency head to the Australian Statistician. When a non-approval seems imminent, the ABS Division Head with responsibility for the SCH is briefed. Non approval is a last resort. A much more frequently occurring situation is where the SCH sets certain conditions for approval, and provides approval when these are met.

37. *Procedures for post survey evaluation.* After a survey has been conducted, the survey manager is asked to complete a post survey template and to confirm that the survey has been conducted according to plan or to document significant variations.

Dissemination - Commonwealth Register of Surveys

38. A by-product of the clearance process is the Commonwealth Register of Surveys containing information that has been provided to the SCH during the clearance process. Dissemination via the Internet essentially replaces the need for a single omnibus printed publication, which, based on past experience would be obsolete before it was produced. The Register will become an important element of the clearance process itself as, over time, it will be a primary source listing surveys that have already conducted and their objectives. This should greatly reduce the potential for duplication.

Systems

39. A phased approach to systems development has been adopted. The SCH began survey clearance in November using standard (Notes) software available with the ABS, and standard Internet features. As the systems requirements become more precisely identified through practical experience, the software is being enhanced and refined in stages, so that, ultimately, it will support direct update and access to review results by survey managers outside as well as inside the Bureau

Experiences at Other Statistical Agencies

40. One of the starting points in the development of SCH procedures was an investigation of programs with similar objectives administered by national statistical agencies abroad. The investigation proved to be a very fruitful source of ideas. Several key aspects of SCH originate from these ideas adapted to Australian circumstances.

41. In the UK, procedures for control of Government statistical surveys were introduced in March 1992 with the stated objectives of minimising the burden placed on businesses and abolishing, simplifying, or reducing the sample sizes of, surveys wherever possible. The procedures were subsequently modified and expanded in response to recommendations from the Business Deregulation Task Forces, and were elaborated in a letter from the Prime Minister to Ministerial Secretaries, August 1994. Their essential features are that:
- new surveys and significant changes to existing regular surveys require prior ministerial authority;
 - all surveys conducted at regular intervals should be thoroughly reviewed by Ministers at least once every five years, and in the case of monthly or quarterly survey, every three years
 - proposals for new surveys and reviews of regular surveys must be cleared through the Survey Control Unit of the Office for National Statistics and include a rigorous assessment of compliance costs.
42. The UK clearance model profoundly influenced SCH implementation in terms of the design of clearance procedures, their promulgation through the letter from the Australian Statistician, the identification of survey liaison officers within each department, and the allocation of clearance effort according size of survey . This does not imply slavish use of the UK model. There are some quite distinct differences reflecting the more centralised statistical system in Australia, the broader objectives of the clearance program, and the opportunities to use more modern information technology. In particular, the SCH review is to a considerably greater depth, mirroring the objective of improving output quality as well as reducing respondent burden. Also survey information is collected in electronic form and disseminated via the Internet in contrast to the UK's paper based approach.
43. In France there is a parallel program for review of business surveys, though it is confined to surveys of public interest. The program which is run by the Institute Nationale de Statistiques et Etudes Economiques (INSEE) includes annual review of all economic surveys by the French National Council for Statistical Information, also the assignment of a "general interest label" to surveys that satisfy "conformity" criteria.
44. The National Council was established in 1972 and expanded into its present form in 1984. Review by the National Council is at broad conceptual level. Its objectives are to ensure that each survey program meets a genuine information requirement in the public interest, that it is not redundant, and that it contributes to the medium term goals for the field under study. The role of the "Label Committee" was defined in 1994. Review by the Label Committee complements that of the National Council by focusing on survey methodology with the objective of ensuring appropriate survey practices are used.

45. In the US, the program for clearance of all Federal Government business surveys has been in place for at least a decade. The Office of Management and Budget (OMB) reviews business surveys in accordance with rules and regulations for controlling paperwork burdens on the public based on the Paperwork Reduction Act. Despite a critical audit of the program in the early 1990s, it was reaffirmed in 1995. The review process includes both public interest and program/product evaluation surveys. Interestingly, the OMB has apparently been taken to court by a business for clearing a survey that the business asserted should not have received clearance.
46. Until 1991, Statistics Canada used to have a program operating on similar lines to the UK ONS Survey Control Unit and the US OMB program, but including all surveys not just business surveys. It was eliminated in a round of budget cutting in 1991, being considered of less benefit than other parts of the statistical program.

PART C: ORGANISATION

Communications

47. The major stakeholder types, internal and external, have been identified. The roles and appropriate communications arrangements for each type have been defined. Particular emphasis has been placed on the opportunities for partnerships, and for harmonising activities with other areas
48. Prior to the Australian Statistician's October letter detailing SCH procedures, meetings were held with senior managers in five other Commonwealth Government agencies believed to have significant business survey activities. The objectives of the meetings were to outline the broad level SCH proposals and ensure their support, and to identify any issues to be taken into account in preparation of the SCH procedures.
49. Every opportunity is being taken to publicise SCH objectives, procedures and accomplishments through face to face meetings, seminars and articles in Government publications and, most recently, the Commonwealth Register of Surveys. SCH information and training material and services are being developed in collaboration with the Statistical Consultancy and Training Section.

50. Survey Liaison Officers have been identified in all departmental portfolios and agencies with business survey activity. A SCH User Group (SCHUG) has been established and meets regularly. It has representatives from external and ABS survey areas, from the Office of Small Business, and from potential users of SCH information. Maximum use is also being made of existing links to agencies through ABS outposted officers and the through the Statistical Network.

Reporting and Evaluation

51. The ABS is required to provide an account of the SCH in its Annual Report. In addition, the Office for Small Business, in its role of following up on implementation of the Small Business Deregulation Task Force Report recommendations, is the primary SCH sponsor and requires progress reports on a regular basis. The SCH also reports to its User Group and an internal ABS Implementation Committee. Also, as previously noted, mid way through the second year of operation, there will be an evaluation of the SCH. The aim will be to complete the evaluation in time to incorporate its recommendations into plans for operation from July 1999 onwards

PART D: OPERATIONS

Review Schedule

52. The framework within which the review schedule has been set is that, beginning November 1997:
- all new or substantially redesigned surveys must be reviewed before going into the field;
 - the complete suite of regular ongoing surveys must be reviewed by 30 June 1999; and
 - larger regular surveys (typically those with more than 2000 respondents) should be reviewed before smaller ones and by 30 June 1998 if possible.
53. Within this framework, allowance has been made for practical realities. For example, some large surveys are being redesigned and their reviews cannot begin until after June 1998.

Review Results and Impact on Quality and Respondent Burden

54. As of 1 May 1998, SCH staff had completed 17 reviews (8 ABS and 9 external) and were actively engaged in a further 17 reviews (12 ABS and 5 external.) Of the completed reviews, all but one had resulted in an approval. The disapproved survey was not conducted as had originally been proposed, the information sought being simplified to the point where the resulting survey was no longer subject to SCH review.

55. Although it is too early to be sure whether the benefits of the SCH justify the costs, reviews can produce positive outcomes in terms of quality or respondent burden, as evidenced by the following examples.
- SCH concerns about the frame, response rates and questionnaire for an Internet Commerce Survey resulted in the sample being reduced from 1100 to 100 and the mailback questionnaire replaced by a personal interview with much more focus on respondent's understanding of the questions.
 - Concerns about business respondents' capacity to provide the details requested in the proposed DWRSB Award Coverage Survey were validated by the pilot test and the survey was delayed to enable redesign of the questionnaire. In the absence of SCH intervention, the survey would have gone ahead without the results of the pilot.
 - The review of the ABS Business Expectations Survey identified two superfluous questions which have since been eliminated from the questionnaire.
56. On average, eight days were spent on each of the 17 completed reviews. In five cases some quality improvements were made and in four cases there were reductions in respondent burden. In two reviews, the SCH was complimented on its work, but in 12 others there were complaints from survey managers. The commonly lodged complaint is about the volume and complexity of information that survey managers are obliged to supply. However, when pressed, those complaining cannot identify which information requirements or review criteria should be eliminated. Indeed, on more than one occasion, the information template and review criteria have been described as providing "a good checklist".

PART E: CONCLUDING REMARKS

Issues and Challenges

57. The initial reaction of most survey managers is to see the SCH as a bureaucratic impediment, involving additional effort to furnish the information required for the review, the risk of jeopardising the survey timetable, and no tangible benefits. The challenge for SCH staff is to provide sufficient useful advice that the review is seen, with hindsight at least, as adding value. We emphasise that the SCH does not ask for any information that should not already be documented. Furthermore, in the case of surveys that are conducted by a consultant, we stress to the survey manager the potential benefits of the review as a check on the quality of the work that they are receiving.

58. In many cases, there is little time to conduct the review and identify changes suggested or required for the survey before the questionnaire is scheduled for printing, or, worse still, is due in the field. There are two basic reasons for this. First, survey clearance is relatively new and survey managers are not aware of the responsibility to put their surveys through the process, or of the lead time this requires. Second, and particularly in the case of program and product evaluations, the need for a survey and its design occur in a very short time frame. The challenge for the SCH is to promote its activities in such a way as to ensure that consideration is given to survey clearance right from the very start. In the case of surveys conducted by consultants, review and approval should be built into the contract. The sooner the SCH is involved, the more opportunity to identify major problems early and the less likelihood there is of a delay in schedule.
59. Often, especially in the case of regular ongoing public interest surveys, the survey objectives are well articulated, but the underlying information requirements that a survey is designed to satisfy are poorly expressed. Although the SCH does not question information needs, it does demand that they are well documented as only by this means can alternative sources of information be properly assessed for potential duplication.
60. Sample sizes are rarely well justified. Quite commonly, the sample size is set to the maximum that the survey budget can stand rather than the reverse. When the target population is relatively small, say 2000 businesses or less, there is a natural tendency for survey managers to prefer a census rather than a sample survey, even where small area or other detailed breakdowns are not required. The simplicity of a census is considered to outweigh its extra cost. The challenge for the SCH is to make departments and agencies more conscious of the respondent burden their surveys impose, and to be more inclined to factor it into sample size decisions.
61. Particularly in the case of smaller, one off surveys, there is lack of concern about low response rates and their implications. SCH staff have encountered several instances where the survey manager has expressed a preference to conduct a census and expect a low response rate, say 40%, than to aim to get the same number of respondents from a, say 50%, sample. The SCH approach is to emphasise that the results cannot be interpreted as representative of the population unless the response rates are reasonable, or unless there is some other evidence that the respondents are representative of the non-respondents. Here "reasonable" depends upon the intended use of the results, but is likely to be at least 60%.

62. Finally, there are several instances where regular ongoing surveys with apparent duplication in their underlying information requirements and objectives should be reviewed as a group, but for practical reasons, e.g., differences in survey reference period, have to be scheduled for review separately. Specific examples are:
- the ABS's agricultural commodity and agricultural finance surveys and ABARE's agricultural and grazing industries and diary farm surveys;
 - ABS surveys collecting employment related data items as their principal focus and other ABS surveys collecting employment data in conjunction with financial or commodity items;
 - surveys collecting tourism data.
63. The approach that the SCH is adopting in these cases is to conduct the reviews separately but to give approval for a limited period only and to accompany it with comment to the effect that between now and the next approval the issue of overlap with other surveys in the group will be the subject further SCH scrutiny and will need to be addressed prior to the following approval.

Where to from Here

64. Visions for future development include the following.
- In partnership with State and Territory governments, expanding the clearance process and/or register to embrace State and Territory surveys.
 - Ensuring that an entry is automatically generated in the Register of Surveys at the time that a new survey proposal is first put forward for funding.
 - Expanding the Register to include descriptions of administrative processes that generate statistics and of other surveys that are not covered by the clearance process but are of public interest. Under this scenario the "Register" would become a "directory".
 - Including links from the Register (directory) to the data outputs produced by the surveys. This would greatly enhance the value of both the Register and the data products.
65. Ultimately the goal would be to educate Government survey managers and designers to the point where response burden and survey quality consciousness were sufficiently well embedded that the SCH review could be scaled back to an audit role, or disappear entirely, leaving in place a register in which all survey descriptions were automatically recorded. This would be akin to building quality and documentation right into survey taking processes rather than carrying out quality control and monitoring after the event.

APPENDIX

STATISTICAL CLEARING HOUSE INFORMATION TEMPLATE

Containing Review Questions and Criteria

(Revised February, 1998)

Information provided in answer to the questions below, labelled A1, A2,...B1, B2, etc., forms the basis for the Statistical Clearing House (SCH) review of a survey.

The questions are grouped into sections. Survey managers are requested to provide answers to each section as soon as the relevant information becomes available

Within each section, the corresponding review criteria are labelled SCH01, SCH02, etc. SCH staff review a survey in relation to these criteria, based on the answers provided by survey managers to the questions. There are no review criteria for Section A .

For a repeating survey, the questions refer to the first survey cycle that is subject to clearance.

A. General Information

A1. What is the name of the survey?

A2. Which agency and area is responsible for the survey?

Note

Area refers to section, branch, division or equivalent in your agency.

A3. Who is the survey manager and/or principal contact person for survey clearance?

Include

Phone number and email address (where applicable).

A4. Is the survey voluntary or mandatory? If mandatory, under what authority?

A5. What agency (or agencies) is (are) funding the survey?

A6. Is the survey a new survey or a cycle of an existing repeated survey?

A7. To what reference period(s) does the survey refer?

Note

Reference period refers to the period of time for which data are collected and/or compiled (eg calendar year, financial year, specific day of month, etc).

A8. Is the survey to be conducted once only or repeated?

(For repeating surveys only)

A9. With what frequency is the survey to be repeated?

A10. Are there likely to be significant changes between survey cycles, and if so what are their general nature?

Note

Factors that may cause a significant change are:

- . changes in the principal outputs such as a change in classifications or data items used, or an increase in the number of data items;
- . a change in the data collection methodology (eg from self-completion to telephone interviewing);
- . a change in the sample design;
- . a change in the frequency of data collection.

B. User Requirements / Survey Objectives / Budget

B1. Why do you need to conduct a survey?

Note

- . Refers to the underlying information requirements that the survey is intended to address. For example, what problems are you trying to solve? What decisions need to be made? What specific policies or actions are being determined or assessed?
- . Please include who requires the information.

B2. How will the survey meet this need? That is, what are the objectives of the survey in terms of content and constraints?

Note

- . Under 'content' please list what topics the survey will cover.
- . Please include any of the following constraints if applicable:
 - fixed costs
 - fixed sample size
 - fixed accuracy (eg target RSEs)
 - any other constraints

B3. What is the timetable for the survey?

Include

- . testing
- . the date data collection commences
- . the date data collection finishes
- . when results are available

B4. What is the budget for developing and conducting the survey?

Include

A breakdown of the budget, eg fieldwork, testing, coding, data processing.

Review Criteria:

- SCH01 Have the information requirements that the survey is to address been adequately described?
- SCH02 Do the objectives of the survey match the underlying information requirements?
- SCH03 Do the objectives appear to be achievable within the budget?
- SCH04 Does the survey timetable satisfy the underlying information requirements and does it appear to be achievable?

C. Alternative Sources of Data

C1. What alternative sources of data have been considered?

Include

- . surveys during the previous two years that collect similar data
- . other sources apart from surveys

C2. In what respects are these alternative sources insufficient?

C3. What consideration has been given to working with other agencies to make their data more suited to your needs?

Review Criteria:

SCH05 Have alternative sources of data been investigated?

SCH06 Is full use being made of other sources of data?

D. Data Outputs

For repeating surveys, please provide copy (copies) of previous publication(s).

D1. What are the principal data outputs to be produced?

Note

- . Refers to the main data items to be produced by the survey and how they will be cross-classified (eg by geography, industry, size, sector of business, etc).
- . Copies of previous publications, final reports or outlines of proposed reports can be provided to help answer this question.

D2. What consideration has been given to the use of standards? Please specify.

Include

- . Standard data items such as employment, housing, etc.
- . Standard classifications such as industry, geography, commodity, etc.

D3. What consideration has been given to making data items consistent between survey cycles or across surveys?

Review Criteria:

SCH07 Do the principal data outputs satisfy the survey objectives?

SCH08 Have standards been used where appropriate?

SCH09 Has consideration been given to the consistency of data items between survey cycles or across surveys to facilitate comparison or joint use?

E. Questionnaire Design and Data Collection

Provide copy (copies) of questionnaire(s).

E1. Are there any questions not used directly in the principal data outputs specified in D1? If yes, how are these questions used?

E2. What is (are) the method(s) of collecting the data (eg self-completion, telephone interviewing, face to face interviewing, etc)? Why was it (were they) chosen?

Note

If more than one method, please indicate the extent to which you expect each method to be used, eg 5% of responses by fax and the remaining responses by phone.

E3. If only one method is stated in E2 above, what consideration has been given to offering respondents a choice in how they provide their answers (eg phone, fax, mail)?

E4. What testing of the questionnaire(s) has (have) taken place?

E5. What other consultations have taken place with businesses or business associations regarding availability of data items and data collection methods?

Note

Refers to activities other than testing.

E6. What training of staff involved in data collection has taken place or is planned?

Include

- . Interviewers
- . Staff involved in follow-up activities
- . Staff involved in answering queries from respondents

Review Criteria:

- SCH10 Do the questions to be asked match the statistical tables to be produced? Are there superfluous questions, ie does every question have a justification? Are there missing questions?
- SCH11 Has the choice in data collection method(s) been justified?
- SCH12 Do the data collection methods involve minimum respondent burden?
- SCH13 Are the data collection methods appropriate for the data items to be collected?
- SCH14 Has (have) the questionnaire(s) been designed and tested adequately? Is there evidence that all questions can be answered?
- SCH15 Have staff been effectively trained to minimise non-sample error?

F. Respondent Burden

F1. On average how long will a respondent be expected to spend in completing each questionnaire? How has this estimate been derived?

F2. What steps have been taken to reduce the burden on small businesses, eg use of a reduced questionnaire?

F3. What commitments have been made to preserve the confidentiality of respondents? How will these be implemented?

Review Criteria:

SCH16 Are estimates of respondent burden credible?

SCH17 Does the estimated respondent burden imposed by the survey appear reasonable given the survey objectives?

SCH18 Have confidentiality concerns been appropriately addressed?

G. Population / Frame

G1. What is the target population for the survey?

Note

. The target population, or scope of the survey, is the population about which information is sought.

Include

. any geographical, industrial and size constraints

G2. How is the frame for the survey to be obtained?

Note

- . The frame, or sampling frame, is the list of businesses from which the sample is selected.

G3. What is the type of unit on the frame to be used for the survey?

Note

- . examples of type of unit are: location, establishment, management unit, enterprise, employer

G4. How many units are there on the frame?

Note

- . this refers to the number of units, not the number of types of unit

G5. What information on the frame about these units will be used for the survey?

Note

- . examples of information which might be used are employment size, industry classification, whether the unit is in private or public sector, etc

G6. In what ways does the coverage provided by the frame differ from the target population?

Include

- . an estimate of the proportion of units expected to be defunct (ie. no longer in business)
- . an estimate of the proportion of units expected to be out of scope

(For repeating surveys only)

G7. How will the frame be updated for future survey cycles?

Review Criteria:

SCH19 Is the sampling frame appropriate given the underlying information requirements?

SCH20 (For repeating surveys only) Will the sampling frame be adequately maintained?

H. Sample Design

H1. What sample design will be used, eg stratified simple random sample?

Include

- . the sample selection strategy
- . if the sample design is multi-stage or multi-phase (or both), the sample selection strategy used in each stage/phase

H2. What is the total sample size and how has it been set?

Include

- . any constraints which have been imposed (eg cost)
- . target relative standard error (RSE) levels on selected data output items (if any) and reasons for choice

H3. What stratification has been used in the sample design?

Include

- . stratification variables
- . stratification boundaries (noting any strata which are completely enumerated)
- . reasons stratification strategy adopted
- . if multi-stage/phase sampling is being used, report for each stage/phase

H4. How has the sample been allocated to strata?

Include

- . allocation formulae (if used), and from where data referenced by formulae obtained
- . minimum and maximum stratum sample size constraints
- . reasons why the allocation strategy was adopted
- . if multi-stage/phase sampling is being used, report for each stage/phase

H5. What consideration has been given to ensuring respondent burden is spread evenly by controlling sample selection across surveys, or (for repeating surveys) over survey cycles?

H6. Of the total sample size reported in H2, how many units are expected to respond, and how many units are expected to be defunct (ie. no longer in business) or out of scope?

Include

- . how these estimates were determined
- . if the sample is multi-phase then report these quantities for each phase
- . if quota sampling is used, please indicate the expected number of units to be approached to achieve the desired sample size

H7. What allowances have been made for known frame deficiencies in the sample design?

Include

- . allowances made for expected defunct units (ie. units no longer in business)
- . allowances made for expected out of scope units

H8. What allowances have been made for expected non-response in the sample design?

Include

- . allowances made for refusals and non-contacts

H9. What evidence is there that the expected respondents will be representative of non-respondents?

Review Criteria:

- SCH21 Is the sample design appropriate given the survey objectives?
- SCH22 Are the expected response rates realistic, given survey authority, data items and collection methods?
- SCH23 Is the expected non-response bias tolerable given the survey objectives?
- SCH24 Is there scope for a reduction of small businesses in the sample?
- SCH25 Is there scope for spreading respondent burden more evenly by controlling sample selection across surveys, or (for repeating surveys) over survey cycles?

I. Data Processing, Estimation, and Analysis

I1. What steps will be taken to ensure the expected response rate is achieved?

Include

- . what follow-up procedures are planned

I2. What quality control procedures will there be for data entry and coding?

Note

- . for example clerical scrutiny of forms, on-line edits, etc.

I3. Will outliers be identified, and if so how will they be handled?

I4. What sources of non-sampling error could have a significant impact on survey results and what is being done about them?

Include

- . what imputation procedures will be used
- . what known frame deficiencies are to be treated in estimation
- . what other allowances will be made for other potential sources of non-sampling error in estimation

I5. Will data be aggregated into statistical tables, and if so what are the estimation formulae for the principal output data items?

Include

- . how adjustments for outliers, imputation and frame undercoverage factors have been incorporated into estimation formulae
- . variance formulae for variances to be published

I6. How are the results of the survey to be analysed?

Note

- . relate response to answers provided in questions B1 and B2

I7. How are the results of the survey to be made available to the major users?

I8. What processing performance measures have been defined?

Note

- . This question is concerned with processes which are in place to ensure that the timetable deadlines will be met, eg responses received by date, percentage of data captured by date, percentage of data edited by date, etc.

I9. How have the data processing, aggregation and dissemination systems been tested?

Review Criteria:

SCH26 Is the quality control of data processing procedures adequate given the underlying information requirements?

SCH27 Is there evidence that the resulting data will be successfully processed, aggregated and disseminated?

Post Survey Information

Respondents

1. Did the average time(s) actually taken by respondents to complete the questionnaire(s) differ significantly from what was planned? If so, what were the amounts and reasons for the differences?

Original information (from F1):

2. How many written complaints were received from respondents and what steps were taken to handle these complaints?

Processing

3. Did the achieved response rates differ significantly from what was planned? If so, what were they and why did they differ?

Original information (from H6):

4. Did the actual data entry, coding, editing and imputation procedures differ significantly from what was planned? If so, in what way?

Original information (from I2 & I4):

Survey Results

5. Did the broad level data outputs differ significantly from what was planned? If so, in what way?

Original information (from B2):

6. Did the accuracy of the results differ significantly from the target accuracy? If so, what are the differences and why did they occur?

Original information (from H2):

7. Will the outputs (or some of the outputs) be made available to the public? If so, to which outputs (eg final report, selected tables, etc) should the Commonwealth Register of Surveys provide links?

Costs

8. Did the cost of developing and conducting the survey differ significantly from what was budgeted? If so, what was the cost and what were the reasons for the differences?

Original information (from B4):