

Australian Bureau of Statistics
Regulator Performance Assessment
Report, 2015–16

Introduction

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) is Australia's official national statistical agency, providing trusted official statistics on a wide range of economic, social, population and environmental matters of importance to Australia. These statistics support research and inform decisions being made every day by government, businesses, non-government organisations and the wider Australian community.

In order to produce these statistics, the ABS relies on the cooperation of individuals, households, businesses and governments. To help achieve this cooperation, the ABS seeks to impose the lowest possible burden on providers.

In consultation with key stakeholders, the ABS developed performance metrics to demonstrate compliance with the government's Regulator Performance Framework. This report is the ABS' first self-assessment of performance against these measures and covers the 2015-16 financial year.

ABS transformation

The ABS is changing. There are new opportunities, and also challenges for Australia's national statistical office. To respond, the ABS has embarked on a significant transformation of the organisation and its statistical business to provide the capability and infrastructure to continue to better meet the statistical requirements of Australia within constrained resources and minimal provider burden. The Australian government made an investment of \$257m to modernise ABS infrastructure and business processes. This investment is part of a broader ABS transformation program (due for completion in 2020) across six dimensions of environment (context), strategy, governance, people, culture and infrastructure.

Examples of transformation activities with the potential to reduce provider burden include: moving more collections to the use of online forms; and improving functionality and usability of online forms; and increasing the use of administrative data.

2016 Census of Population and Housing

The most significant statistical collection that the ABS undertakes is the five-yearly Census of Population and Housing. The Census is critical to form the basis for accurate population estimates, and inform government, businesses, researchers and the community to underpin important policy and investment decisions.

On the night of 9 August 2016 (Census night) the online Census, hosted by IBM, experienced a denial of service attack. This prompted the closure of the online Census form until the afternoon of 11 August 2016. The ABS appreciates the inconvenience this caused for many people. However, protecting the information of Australians was the ABS's highest priority. Census information was never compromised.

In addition, in the lead up to Census night, an unprecedented demand experienced by the telephone and email Census Inquiry Service (CIS), led to significant 'call-blocking', causing inconvenience to many members of the public.




The ABS apologises to the Australian public for the inconvenience caused by these events.

As these events occurred outside of the 2015-16 reporting period, they are out of the scope for this self-assessment.


High level summary and conclusion

The ABS continually seeks to minimise the burden imposed on households and businesses through the collection of data while maintaining the capacity to properly inform. This section provides a high level summary and rating of ABS performance against 6 KPIs, as well as an overall rating for the 2015-16 reporting period.


The following traffic light system has been used:

	Good
	Satisfactory, but with some aspects for improvement identified
	Unsatisfactory, with significant areas for improvement identified


KPI 1 – Regulators do not unnecessarily impede the efficient operation of regulated entities.

Rating:  The ABS maintains active engagement with stakeholder and provider communities to ensure relevance and minimise costs and negative outcomes for providers.


KPI 2 – Communication with regulators is clear, targeted and effective.

Rating:  The ABS provides up to date and accessible guidance material and information, and regularly consults with affected stakeholders and providers, to ensure continued relevance of approach and to maintain stakeholder understanding of ABS decisions and advice.


KPI 3 – Actions undertaken by regulators are proportionate to the regulatory risk being managed.

Rating:  The ABS maintains a risk-based approach to compliance and enforcement, and remains vigilant in ensuring that this approach reflects the changing environment.


KPI 4 – Compliance and monitoring approaches are streamlined and coordinated.


Rating:  The ABS makes the minimum possible requests to the Australian public, and coordinates requests and information from it and other regulators, to ensure that requests are not duplicated.

KPI 5 – Regulators are open and transparent in their dealings with regulated entities.

Rating:  The ABS is responsive to the requests and questions of providers. The ABS publishes response rates annually in our Annual Report.

KPI 6 – Regulators actively contribute to the continuous improvement of regulatory frameworks.

Rating:  The ABS has cooperative and collaborative relationships with stakeholders and regularly shares intelligence with other agencies to contribute to the ongoing relevance of the framework.

The ABS' overall self-assessment rating is . Each KPI concludes with a subsection which details specific areas for improvement, including proposed enhancements to the KPI evidence and evidence sources.

KPI 1 – Regulators do not unnecessarily impede the efficient operation of regulated entities

1.1 ABS demonstrates an understanding of the operating environment of the business, or the circumstances of individuals, selected for surveys and the current and emerging issues that affect them.

Evidence 1.1.1	Evidence source
Resources allocated to engagement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in each state and territory.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Indigenous engagement managers and officers list on the ABS website. 2. Round Table on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Statistics meets at least annually.

The ABS has a combination of Indigenous Engagement Managers and Indigenous Engagement Officers in each Capital City Office (except Canberra) as part of its Indigenous Community Engagement Strategy.

The ABS Round Table on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Statistics met twice during 2015-16, with meetings held 21-22 October 2015 and 27-28 April 2016.

Evidence 1.1.2	Evidence source
Accessible and transparent process available for respondents to seek exemption from a survey due to specific circumstances.	Survey Participant Information web pages are: up to date; meet Government accessibility standards; and exemption information is easy to locate.

The [Survey Participant Information Portal](#) and associated web pages were updated frequently and met Government Accessibility Standards as described in the ABS Web Content Accessibility Guidelines. Information for providers to seek exemption needs to be clearer.

Evidence 1.1.3	Evidence source
Environmental scanning is undertaken regularly and at a minimum, on an annual basis.	Environmental Scan report provided to high level meetings, such as Australian Statistics Advisory Council.

The ABS Environmental Scan was presented to the ABS Management Meeting in November 2015. As ABS will no longer be conducting Environmental Scans in their current form, an alternate evidence source will be required in the future.

1.2 ABS takes action to minimise the potential for unintended negative impacts of surveys on respondents.

Evidence 1.2.1	Evidence source
Avoidance of duplication in business collections conducted by official bodies for statistics purposes.	Statistical Clearing House annual report on the NSS website. Statistical Clearing House section from Corporate governance chapter (5) in ABS Annual Report , 2015-16.

In 2015-16, 144 surveys were submitted to the Statistical Clearing House (SCH) for clearance. Of these, 71 received a full SCH review and approval, 13 received fast track approval, 5 were cancelled by agencies after submission, 19 were still being reviewed, and 36 were out of scope of SCH review. There was also one survey that did not receive SCH approval due to duplication concerns. Surveys categorised as "fast track approval" are those where the overall respondent burden is considered minimal.

The SCH has helped promote good statistical practices through the release of survey information guidelines on their website (www.nss.gov.au).

Evidence 1.2.2	Evidence source
Complaint resolution performance meets ABS Surveys Charter standards.	Annual Performance Statement criterion 13 (ABS Annual Report 2015-16 Chapter 4)

In 2015–16 the ABS received 460 written queries or complaints from businesses and 240 from households. Most approaches from businesses were seeking exemption from the requirement of participation in the ABS Survey Program. The ABS does at times provide general exemptions from surveys to certain small businesses in exceptional circumstances. Some providers are also granted temporary exemptions on compassionate grounds.

On average, the ABS responded to written queries and complaints within 10 days of receipt of the correspondence with 92% being sent written advice of the outcome within 28 days^{1, 2}.

1.3 ABS implements continuous improvement strategies to reduce the costs of compliance for survey respondents.

Evidence 1.3.1	Evidence source
Products, services and tools are available and improved to assist providers to meet their obligations.	Annual Performance Statement criterion 11 (ABS Annual Report , Chapter 4).

Respondents in all ABS surveys have the option to report via a number of channels. These include paper forms, electronic reporting or interviewer driven modes. Where available, approximately 90% of businesses used electronic reporting. Online take up rates for households exceeded the introductory target of 20%.

In 2015-16, the ABS has continued to develop, test and refine interactions with providers. The main areas of focus were:


- a new respondent online survey interface for business surveys and the Monthly Population Survey
- development of the electronic form for the 2016 Census

¹ Based on data available for written correspondence and outcomes from business survey providers only.

² The ABS Surveys Charter states that ABS will advise the outcome of complaints within 4 weeks.

- the development of new approach materials with the Commonwealth Science and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO) and other organisations to make responding to ABS surveys easier. This included producing and testing approach materials for the 2016 Agricultural Census and the 2016 Census of Population and Housing.

Specific areas for improvement

The ABS' overall self-assessment rating is  (satisfactory, but with some aspects for improvement identified) for KP1 – Regulators do not unnecessarily impede the efficient operation of regulated entities.

Evidence 1.1.2 relates to 'accessible and transparent process available for respondents to seek exemption from a survey due to specific circumstances'. While the frequently asked questions (FAQs) provide information on why participation is important and the obligation to provide data, the specific process to follow to request an exemption needs to be clearer. The information available to respondents will be updated to address this issue.

Improved reporting

The ABS proposes to revise the evidence source for 1.1.3 (Environmental Scans) for future reports.

KPI 2 – Communication with regulators is clear, targeted and effective

2.1 ABS provides guidance and information that is up to date, clear, accessible and concise through media appropriate to the target audience.

Evidence 2.1.1	Evidence source
Information is accessible and concise on the ABS website for survey participants on their frequently asked questions.	Survey Participant Information portal and associated web pages are: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • up to date; and • meet government accessibility standards. Covered by 1.1.2.

Evidence 2.1.2	Evidence source
Accessible and transparent process available for respondents to seek exemption from a survey due to specific circumstances.	Covered by 1.1.2.

Evidence 2.1.3	Evidence source
The ABS provides information to respondents on importance of data being collected, why collected, and how it is used.	Survey specific information provided to respondent.

Detailed information about the purpose, objectives and main users of specific ABS surveys is available either via the ABS theme pages, in the form of guide material produced for each survey or by contacting the help number listed on the survey questionnaire. An example of this information for the ABS Innovation Survey is included in the Survey Participant Information portal – Business FAQs.

2.2 ABS considers the impact on providers and engages with industry groups and representatives of the affected stakeholders before changing policies, practices or service standards.

Evidence 2.2.1	Evidence source
Resources allocated to engagement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in each state and territory.	Same as 1.1.1

Evidence 2.2.2	Evidence source
Proposed initiative likely to lead to significant changes in regulator burden due to changes in policies, practices or services standards are circulated to relevant stakeholder consultation groups (including but not limited to such groups as Careers Australia, National Congress of Australia's First Peoples, Small Business Ministerial Advisory Council, Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Australian Business Economists, Australian Bankers Association, Minerals Council of Australia) for feedback prior to implementation.	Information gathered during the biannual internal process to identify changes in provider burden.


In response to the [National Agriculture Survey Review](#), which involved extensive stakeholder consultation, and feedback from farmers, the ABS modified the scope of the 2016 Agricultural Census and 20015-16 Land Management Practices Survey resulting in approximately 43,200 small agricultural businesses not having to complete these surveys. Additionally, a single collection instrument was used for providers selected in both the 2016 Agricultural Census and 20015-16 Land Management Practices Survey further reducing provider burden.

Given 2015-16 was the first year of the ABS' 5 year transformation program, changes to our policies, practices and service standards are being proposed, developed and considered, with provider representative stakeholder consultation to be undertaken as these proposals mature.

2.3 ABS decisions and advice are provided in a timely manner, clearly articulating expectations and the underlying reasons for decisions.

Evidence 2.3.1	Evidence source
Complaint resolution performance meets ABS Surveys Charter standards.	Same as 1.2.2

Specific areas for improvement

The ABS' overall self-assessment is  (satisfactory, but with some aspects for improvement identified) for KPI 2 – Communication with regulators is clear, targeted and effective.

The specific area for improvement for evidence 1.1.2 (under KPI 1) also applies to evidence 2.1.2 'accessible and transparent process available for respondents to seek exemption from a survey due to specific circumstances'.

As mentioned in relation to evidence 2.2.2, the ABS is undergoing a major transformation over the coming years. It will encompass how we operate as an organisation, both internally and as part of the wider information community; our statistical infrastructure; our people and culture; and the statistical solutions we deliver.

Improved reporting

The ABS proposes to modify the example stakeholder consultation groups to reflect changes to these groups e.g. the Small Business Ministerial Advisory Council no longer exists.

KPI 3 – Actions undertaken by regulators are proportionate to the regulatory risk being managed

3.1 ABS applies a risk-based, proportionate approach to compliance obligations, engagement and regulatory enforcement actions.

Evidence 3.1.1	Evidence source
ABS methods of respondent engagement, and information available regarding obligation to respond and value of response, leads to requests for exemptions from surveys at or below 0.5% of households and businesses selected for ABS surveys.	Calculated from exemptions and response rate figures.

Requests for exemptions in 2015-16 were 0.07% for households and 0.08% for businesses, well below the 0.5% target rate for exemptions from surveys.

3.2 ABS preferred approach to regulatory risk is regularly assessed. Strategies, activities and enforcement actions are amended to reflect changing priorities that result from new and evolving regulatory threats, without diminishing regulatory certainty or impact.

Evidence 3.2.1	Evidence source
ABS surveys adopt target response rates, proportionate to regulatory risk and commensurate with fit for purpose statistics.	Annual Performance Statement criterion 12 (Annual Report 2015-16 Chapter 4)

The ABS sets high target response rates for collections to ensure surveys are representative of the whole population. Overall, the ABS continues to achieve very high response rates compared to other National Statistics Offices and private data collections. However, ABS has been experiencing a general decline in response rates across most surveys. There is a downward trend in survey response rates globally and the reasons for the decline are still elusive³.

³ National Research Council. (2013). *Nonresponse in Social Science Surveys: A Research Agenda*. Roger Tourangeau and Thomas J. Plewes, Eds. Panel on a Research Agenda for the Future of Social Science Data Collection, Committee on National Statistics. Division of Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press. Retrieved from http://www.nap.edu/catalog.php?record_id=18293

Response rates achieved for selected surveys

	Target response rate (%)	2015-16 Final response rate (%) (a)
Business surveys		
Retail Business Survey	95	92
Quarterly Business Indicators Survey	85	83
Capital Expenditure Survey	90	84
Economic Activity Survey	90	86
Business Characteristics Survey	95	94
Survey of Average Weekly Earnings	98	93
Survey of International Trade in Services	90	92
Household surveys		
Labour Force Survey	94	94
Multi-purpose Household Survey (b)	80	75
Survey of Income and Housing	84	80
National Health Survey	87	(c)


(a) Average response rates over the year for quarterly or monthly surveys.

(b) The Multi-purpose Household Survey covers a number of individual topics, enumerated monthly. Response rates are a simple average across all topics.

(c) Survey not conducted during the year.

Evidence 3.2.2	Evidence source
Accessible and transparent process available for respondents to seek exemption from a survey due to specific circumstances.	Same as 1.1.2

Specific areas for improvement

The ABS' overall self-assessment rating is  (good) for KPI 3 – Actions undertaken by regulators are proportionate to the regulatory risk being managed.

The specific area for improvement for evidence 1.1.2 (under KPI 1) also applies to evidence 3.2.2 'accessible and transparent process available for respondents to seek exemption from a survey due to specific circumstances'.

The ABS will continue to monitor and investigate the decline in response rates including reviewing the experience and findings of other national statistical agencies.

KPI 4 – compliance and monitoring approaches are streamlined and coordinated

4.1 ABS information requests are tailored and only made when necessary to secure regulatory objectives, and only then in a way that minimises impact.

Evidence 4.1.1	Evidence source
ABS ensures surveys are appropriate and necessary by tabling proposals for the collection of information before both Houses of Parliament in accordance with section 6 of the <i>Australian Bureau of Statistics Act 1975</i> .	Numbers are available on the Parliament of Australia website .

In 2015-16, ABS tabled 21 surveys in the Australian Parliament.

Evidence 4.1.2	Evidence source
Eliminating duplication in business collections conducted by official bodies for statistics purposes.	Same as 1.2.1

Evidence 4.1.3	Evidence source
ABS surveys adopt target response rates that reduce regulatory risk by removing the need to continually follow up difficult to contact respondents.	Same as 3.2.1

4.2 ABS frequency of information collection is minimised and coordinated with similar processes including those of other regulators so that, as far as possible, information is only requested once.

Evidence 4.2.1	Evidence source
Avoidance of duplication in collections conducted by official bodies for statistics purposes.	Same as 1.2.1

4.3 ABS utilises existing information to limit the reliance on requests from providers and share the information among other regulators, where possible.

Evidence 4.3.1	Evidence source
ABS advances data integration initiatives, thereby reducing the need for additional regulatory burden.	Annual Performance Statement criterion 7 (Annual Report 2015-16 Chapter 4) and documented approvals for ABS data integration proposals.

The number of registered users of ABS statistical data integration products increased by 46% in 2015-16 from 2014-15. Trials of a 'virtual' DataLab, giving convenient and secure access to selected researchers drove the increase.

There were 12 data integration projects approved during the 2015-16 financial year.

4.4 ABS takes into account, where possible, the circumstance and operational needs of the provider.

Evidence 4.4.1	Evidence source
Accessible and transparent process available for respondents to seek exemption from a survey due to specific circumstances.	Same as 1.1.2

Specific areas for improvement

The ABS' overall self-assessment rating is  (good) for KPI 4 – compliance and monitoring approaches are streamlined and coordinated.

The specific area for improvement for evidence 1.1.2 (under KPI 1) also applies to evidence 4.4.1 'accessible and transparent process available for respondents to seek exemption from a survey due to specific circumstances'.

Improved reporting

In 2015-16, the ABS sourced over half of its data from public and private sector administrative data sources and around 45% from surveys of businesses and people.

To enhance the evidence provided in relation to measure 4.3 'ABS utilises existing information to limit the reliance on requests from providers and share the information among other regulators, where possible', the ABS proposes to add the following additional evidence criteria and source 4.3.2:

Evidence 4.3.2	Evidence source
ABS utilises administrative data sources to reduce regulatory burden.	Information gathered to prepare Annual Performance Statement criterion 10 (Annual Report 2015-16 Chapter 4)

In 2015-16, the ABS delivered an estimated net annualised decrease of regulatory burden of \$807,600. Decisions contributing to deregulation include the following changes to selected collections:

- improved sample design reducing samples sizes
- increased take-up of e-forms
- cancellation of surveys
- substitution of survey data with administrative and transactional data

KPI 5 – Regulators are open and transparent in their dealings with regulated entities

5.1 Regulators are open and responsive to requests from providers regarding the operation of the regulatory framework, and approaches implemented by the ABS.

Evidence 5.1.1	Evidence source
Complaint resolution performance meets ABS Surveys Charter standards.	Same as 1.2.2

Evidence 5.1.2	Evidence source
Information is accessible and concise on the ABS Website for survey participants on their frequently asked questions.	Same as 2.1.1

5.2 ABS performance measurement results are published in a timely manner to ensure accountability to the public.

Evidence 5.2.1	Evidence source
Response rates for (key) surveys published.	Same as 3.2.1


Evidence 5.2.2	Evidence source
ABS regulator performance framework metrics and annual result publicly available by 31 December each financial year.	Annual regulator performance framework metrics and annual result published on ABS website.

The ABS self-assessment against the Regulator Performance Framework will be available on the ABS website once the final version has been certified by the Australian Statistician– by 31 December 2016. Dates are not available for previous publications because this is the first.

Evidence 5.2.3	Evidence source
ABS performance and activity is published annually.	ABS Annual Report

The ABS Annual Report for 2015-16 was released at 11:30 AM (CANBERRA TIME) on 13 October 2016.

Specific areas for improvement

The ABS' overall self-assessment rating is  (good) for KPI 5 – Regulators are open and transparent in their dealings with regulated entities.

KPI 6 – Regulators actively contribute to the continuous improvement of regulatory frameworks

6.1 ABS has cooperative and collaborative relationships with stakeholders to promote trust and improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the regulatory framework.


Evidence 6.1.1	Evidence source
Resources allocated to engagement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in each state and territory to ensure cooperative and collaborative relationships with data providers and promote trust and efficiency.	Same as 1.1.1

Evidence 6.1.2	Evidence source
Products, services and tools are available and improved to assist providers to meet their obligations.	Same as 1.3.1

6.2 ABS regularly shares feedback from stakeholders and performance information with policy departments to improve the operation of the regulatory framework and administrative processes

Evidence 6.2.1	Evidence source
ABS regulator performance framework metrics and annual result publicly available by 31 December each financial year.	Same as 5.2.2.

Specific areas for improvement

The ABS' overall self-assessment rating is  (good) for KPI 6 – Regulators actively contribute to the continuous improvement of regulatory frameworks.

Attachment

The validation mechanism

'Regulator performance will be assessed through annual, externally validated self-assessments against the Framework.' (Page 8 [Regulator Performance Framework](#)) This external validation is provided by a group of external stakeholders that have an interest in the ABS. The composition of the list of stakeholders was initially agreed jointly by the ABS, Treasury and the Minister in 2015. The stakeholder group was refined ahead of the 2016 self-assessment process in consultation with Treasury. The ABS RPF draft self-assessment was disseminated to the agreed list of stakeholders on 26 October 2016, with comments requested by 9 November 2016.

RPF Consultation summary

Comments on the ABS self-assessment were received from two of the external stakeholders. The ABS engaged individually with each external stakeholder prior to and post the consultation period.

Summary of stakeholder comments:

- the data the ABS produces is invaluable;
- ABS data is used to inform public commentary on their industry, including enabling the provision of advice to different industries as well as the development of public policy advice to government;
- ABS data is also used to inform individual investment decisions;
- current ABS data streams and services should be maintained;
- concerns regarding possible funding cuts to the ABS were voiced; and
- ABS statistics were noted as the most accurate and reliable and as a result are considered a key input into policy formulation.