

Understanding Survey Nonresponse Behaviours: Evidence and Practical Solutions



Public Services and Government

Understanding Survey Nonresponse Behaviours: Evidence and Practical Solutions

Authors: Rachel Ormston, Matt Hunt, Chris Martin, Alex Walker (Ipsos Scotland); Tom Huskinson (Ipsos Survey Methods Unit); Rohin Kotecha (Ipsos); and Peter Lynn (University of Essex)

Contents

Acknowledgements	i
Glossary of key terms	ii
Summary	iv
Barriers and solutions: Capability	iv
Barriers and solutions: Opportunity	v
Barriers and solutions: Motivation	vii
Conclusions	x
1. Background and approach	1
Aims of this research	1
The challenge of nonresponse	1
Summary of methods.....	4
Scope and limitations.....	5
Report structure and conventions.....	6
2. Barriers and potential solutions: capability	8
Low awareness.....	8
Failure to open or read the advance letter.....	10
Accessibility issues and concerns	12
3. Barriers and potential solutions: opportunity	15
Time.....	15
Social norms about taking part	18
4. Barriers and potential solutions: motivation	21
Avoiding ‘easy’ refusals	21
‘Social aversion’ and shifting expectations	24
Trust in government.....	27
Scepticism about whether taking part makes a difference	28
Concerns about data misuse	30
“Survey overload”	32
Expectation of reward	32
5. Conclusions	34
Choosing and testing potential solutions	34

Acknowledgements

We are very grateful to all those who took part in this research, particularly those members of the public, NatCen and Ipsos survey interviewers, and survey commissioners and experts who shared their time and their views with us in interviews, focus groups and workshops. We would also like to thank the Scottish Government advisory group for their input and advice throughout this project, with particular thanks to Susan Patterson and Nora Mielke for their supportive project management.

The Scottish Government would like to acknowledge the financial support provided by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) which helped make this research possible.

Responsibility for this report and its contents lies entirely with the authors.

Glossary of key terms

Behavioural science: Behavioural science applies theories and techniques from a range of academic disciplines to better understand why people display particular behaviours and what interventions might be effective in changing them.

COM-B: a model of behaviour change, COM-B identifies three key components which, in combination, drive individual behaviours:

- **Capability:** having the knowledge, skills and ability to engage in a behaviour.
- **Opportunity:** the physical and social external factors that make the behaviour possible.
- **Motivation:** the internal processes influencing decisions.

Cross-sectional survey: A survey of a representative sample of a defined population at a specific single point in time, or from samples of the same population at repeated points in time.

General population survey: A type of survey designed to collect data from a sample that is representative of an entire population, such as the population of Scotland.

Nonresponse bias: The bias that occurs when sample units (e.g. individuals, households) who do not respond to a survey differ in meaningful ways from those who do respond. Non-response bias means that certain types of people are underrepresented and the accuracy and generalisability of findings may be negatively affected.

Postcode Address File (PAF): A database of known postcodes in the United Kingdom, managed by Royal Mail. It is used as a sample frame for some UK surveys, including the Scottish Household Survey, Scottish Crime and Justice Survey and Scottish Health Survey.

Response rate: The number of sample units (people, households, etc.) who respond to a survey compared to the total number of people who were asked to respond (and who were eligible to do so). The exact calculation for determining response rates varies, depending on how partial interviews and cases of unknown eligibility are treated (see AAPOR response rates, above).

Respondent Centred Design (RCD): A survey design approach that places respondent experience, preferences and needs at the centre. The approach considers aspects of surveys such as ease of use, relevance, and participant feedback mechanisms.

Survey mode: The way in which survey data is collected, e.g. face-to-face, telephone, web/online.

Total Survey Error (TSE) framework: The generally accepted approach for assessing survey quality used by survey methodologists. The TSE approach methodically identifies all possible errors which can arise at each stage of the survey process.

Summary

Response rates to surveys across many parts of the world have been falling for decades. In Scotland, response to the three main general population, cross-sectional Scottish Government surveys (the Scottish Household Survey (SHS), Scottish Health Survey (SHeS) and Scottish Crime and Justice Survey (SCJS)) fell steadily from 2012 to 2019, driven by increasing numbers of people refusing to take part. Response rates in 2022 and 2023 were lower again compared with pre-pandemic levels.

This report summarises findings from research aiming to extend understanding of the challenges posed by nonresponse and proposes testable potential solutions to these challenges. It focuses on the three main Scottish Government general population surveys, but many of the findings are likely to be relevant to other surveys.

The research included five main components: a desk-based literature review; analysis of response rates to the three main general population Scottish Government surveys; qualitative research with professional survey stakeholders, including survey leads and contractors and survey interviewers; qualitative research with the general public; and a workshop with key survey stakeholders.

The research was informed by the COM-B framework, which identifies three key components underpinning behaviour: capability, opportunity and motivation. As such, findings focus on what 'drives' individual respondents to participate in surveys (or not), rather than on wider contextual factors that impact response rates (such as interviewer recruitment).

Barriers and solutions: Capability

- **Levels of awareness of surveys** are very difficult to measure, but awareness of Scottish Government surveys among members of the public who participated in this research was generally very low. This may contribute to a climate that makes potential respondents less receptive to taking part.
 - **Potential solution:** Targeted advertising to raise awareness of Scottish Government surveys and statistics. This could include location-based advertising (GP surgeries, council buildings, on public transport) and via social media (potentially in different languages).
 - **Cost/difficulty:** Variable depending on nature/level of any campaign.
 - **Additional reflections:** In terms of potential impact, it is important to note that few of those reached through any targeted advertising would subsequently be invited to take part in a Scottish Government survey. However, this advertising could form part of a wider strategy to improve understanding of the nature and value of Scottish Government research

and statistics.

- Interviews with the public highlighted the **challenge of getting potential participants to open and read advance letters**. Letters addressed to the householder may be seen as ‘spam’ and logos on envelopes attract mixed reactions. The SHS advance letter was seen as long and specific elements were felt to be off-putting.
 - **Potential solutions:** Test alternative envelope designs (using different logos/combinations of logos). Review the content of letters in light of feedback in this report.
 - **Cost/difficulty:** Low.
 - **Additional reflections:** Given the letters have been reviewed regularly over time there may be limited scope for significant further improvement, and even with improvements they may not be read.
- **Accessibility issues and concerns** that might reduce their likelihood of taking part were raised by disabled people interviewed for this research, including issues with the accessibility of the advance letter; concerns about whether the survey questions would be accessible; and concerns about whether survey interviewers would adapt to their needs, including wearing masks and offering flexible appointments.
 - **Potential solutions:** Reviewing advance letters and materials against accessibility standards (low cost/difficulty). Commissioning an accessible design organisation to review advance letters and materials (medium cost/difficulty). Highlighting accessibility options more clearly in letters and on the doorstep (low cost/difficulty). Additional disability awareness training for survey interviewers (medium cost/low difficulty).
 - **Additional reflections:** Analysis of nonresponse patterns does not indicate that disabled people are systematically underrepresented in surveys, possibly because of the correlation between disability and age (older people are more likely to be disabled and to take part in surveys). However, it is ethically important to remove barriers, regardless of the impact on nonresponse. A more radical, higher cost, potential solution to disabled people’s concerns about whether survey interviewers would adapt to their needs would be to offer different modes of participation – this is discussed later.

Barriers and solutions: Opportunity

- **‘Lack of time’** dominates stated reasons for nonparticipation in research. Though this may sometimes mask underlying barriers, willingness to give up an extended period of time does appear to influence views on taking part in Scottish Government surveys, particularly (though not only) for younger people.
 - **Potential solutions:** Test different options for shortening the surveys. For example: offering a ‘core’ face-to-face survey with option to

continue to a full interview (either face-to-face or by another mode); allowing survey interviewers to offer a much shorter 'core' interview to avoid refusals; or offering completion by other modes from the outset.

- **Cost/difficulty:** High – would involve significant trade-offs in terms of scope, completeness, and potentially data quality.
- **Additional reflections:** Views among both stakeholders and the public on whether the Scottish Government surveys should be shortened were mixed, though there was a clear preference among some younger participants in particular for a much shorter survey, suggesting that it may be worth testing one of these options. However, this would need careful testing to understand the trade-offs. Given the debate over the degree to which time is an actual or a perceived barrier, one option might be to test the impact of offering a very short initial survey, in the hope that this is sufficiently engaging that respondents then agree to carry on and do a longer main interview.
- **Additional potential solutions:** Clearly communicate and stick to the expected maximum time the interviewer will stay for (low cost/likely low impact, though could lead to more partial completions). Offer a guaranteed 'exemption' from other Scottish Government surveys for a period of time after participation (likely low cost/impact, though the implications of the loss of sample frame for other Scottish Government research would need to be considered).
- Stakeholders and survey interviewers felt **civic engagement had weakened over time** and that this may be contributing to higher nonresponse. However, the evidence for this from the literature and general public qualitative research was quite limited (perhaps inevitably, since those who agree to participate in research are themselves likely to be more engaged). At the same time, there was evidence that social norms may be shaping participation if people think that **Scottish Government surveys are not something 'people like them' take part in**. There was a clear stereotype that survey participants tend to be older, more informed, and potentially more 'used to' being listened to.
 - **Potential solutions:** Create content (either for use as part of a wider campaign around Scottish Government surveys and statistics, or for use by survey interviewers on the doorstep) challenging 'social norms' around a 'typical respondent'.
 - **Cost/difficulty:** Variable, depending on the level/type of content involved.
 - **Additional reflections:** This could form part of a wider strategy to improve public perceptions and understanding of government surveys and statistics.

Barriers and solutions: Motivation

- Analysis of patterns of response on SHS and SHeS over time and feedback from survey interviewers indicate that **highlighting the option to opt out** prior to an interviewer calling as part of the contact details section of the advance letter **increases office refusals**.
 - **Potential solutions:** Avoid/remove this wording from advance letters.
 - **Cost/difficulty:** Low, though it is important to balance this against the requirement to convey the optional nature of participation.
 - **Additional reflections:** It is possible that some of these potential respondents may have been persuaded to take part on the doorstep, but it is arguable that those who opt out ahead are less likely to take part in any case, so removing this wording may simply convert office refusals to doorstep refusals.
- The methodology literature highlights the importance of both confidence and experience in predicting how successful survey interviewers are in persuading potential respondents to take part. The Covid-19 pandemic was associated with increased challenges around interviewer recruitment and retention, leading to **challenges in quickly equipping new survey interviewers with the skills and confidence required**.
 - **Potential solutions:** Revisit training, particularly for new survey interviewers, focusing on key elements identified in the literature as critical, including: how to engage respondents quickly; how to tailor approaches; how to identify whether behavioural ‘scripts’ have been triggered, and how to dispel them; how to maintain doorstep interactions; increasing confidence; and specific refusal conversion techniques.
 - **Cost/difficulty:** Medium, depending on the level of additional training required and how this is delivered.
 - **Additional reflections:** While it is important to revisit interviewer training regularly, the main fieldwork providers in Scotland already invest considerably in this, and training cannot completely mitigate challenges around loss of experienced survey interviewers.
- **‘Social aversion’, alongside shifting expectations around how information is provided in the ‘online age’,** were both associated with discomfort with the idea of having a stranger in your home. This was particularly a barrier for younger participants who expressed uncertainty around how to behave when ‘hosting’ an interviewer. There was some evidence that this has increased both as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, and the shift to many more interactions taking place online, which led some to regard face-to-face, in-home interviews as an unusual or even ‘creepy’ request.
 - **Potential solutions:**

- A lower cost, more straightforward response would be to place more emphasis in messaging (in advance letters, on the doorstep, and more broadly in any public messaging around Scottish Government surveys) on explaining why they are conducted face-to-face, and what the benefit of this is (both for the respondent and the quality of the data).
- A more radical (and higher cost) solution would be to offer greater flexibility around **how** people complete the surveys. This could include proactively offering video calls, which participants suggested retained some of the benefits of face-to-face without needing to have a stranger in your 'physical space', and/or offering online or paper self-complete option(s) (which again, participants suggested as an alternative).
- Offering a greater degree of flexibility about **where** interviews take place – for example, offering to speak to respondents in a garden, garage, local coffee shop, or community space – might also help offset concerns about 'hosting' interviewers.
- **Additional reflections:** Providing clearer messaging on the reasons for face-to-face data collection may help address some participants' concerns. However, if people are unwilling to host strangers in their homes, this approach has clear limits as a long-term solution. Offering other interview modes may have a bigger impact, but could also potentially lead to higher refusals (as it is easier to cancel video appointments than face-to-face ones, for example). There would also be other potential trade-offs (for example, reduced data quality and completeness and loss of time series data if some questions cannot easily be transitioned to another mode), so this would need to be tested carefully. Conducting interviews in less private venues would also need to be considered carefully, given the potentially sensitive content of some sections of the Scottish Government surveys.
- Survey interviewers reported that **a lack of trust in both government and negative views of other public institutions**, like the NHS and the criminal justice system, were increasingly cited on the doorstep as reasons for people not wanting to take part in the Scottish Government surveys. Survey data confirms that trust in government does appear to have reached a particular low point in the years since the pandemic (see for example National Centre for Social Research, 2024b, and the [Ipsos Veracity index](#)). However, members of the general public interviewed for this research placed more emphasis on whether government would act on the findings, rather than a lack of faith in government per se, as the reason they might not take part.
 - **Potential solutions:** Place greater emphasis in survey communications on the survey being for Official Statistics and/or the research arm of the Scottish Government.

- **Cost/difficulty:** Low, as it primarily involves change of wording and/or logos (and could be easily tested via relatively inexpensive experiments with different logos, for example).
- **Additional reflections:** Qualitative interviews with the general public indicated that trust in government in general is less critical than engaging specifically with a lack of trust in how governments use survey data.
- Survey interviewers reported that the most common question they field on the doorstep is “will it make any difference?”. The general public expressed both a desire to feel they are contributing to improving things – for themselves, their community, their area, or society in general – and considerable **scepticism about whether government surveys actually have any positive impact in practice.**
 - **Potential solutions:** Providing a wider range of examples and evidence of the uses of survey data in survey materials that speak to the interests of different groups. Rather than focusing only on examples of how findings shape policies (which may themselves be contested), an alternative or additional option would be to frame their usefulness in terms of holding governments to account. Building in a clearer ‘feedback loop’ so that respondents are informed how the findings from their year might also boost the sense of value around taking part.
 - **Cost/difficulty:** Low – providing additional examples to interviewers should be inexpensive. Sharing findings with respondents would have a cost attached, but assuming this was done primarily by email this would again be relatively low.
 - **Additional reflections:** Given the emphasis within the general public groups on understanding the impacts of taking part, this is an important area to develop.
- Assuring respondents about confidentiality and explaining how privacy is safeguarded has been shown to significantly increase willingness to take part in surveys (Couper et al, 2008, Singer and Couper, 2017). However, **providing reassurance about data protection is becoming increasingly challenging**, due to greater awareness and alertness to scams and fraud. Disabled participants and those from Black backgrounds also expressed concern about their data being misused by government or others in ways that might damage their communities.
 - **Potential solutions:** Equipping survey interviewers with quick, tangible reassurances around data protection and misuse of data.
 - **Cost/difficulty:** Low – again, providing interviewers with additional information should be low cost.
- **‘Survey overload’** due to the growing volume of survey and feedback requests from both public and commercial bodies, which creates a more

challenging landscape. As a result, people find it more difficult to identify which requests are genuinely worth their time and effort.

- **Potential solutions:** Test ways of more clearly distinguishing Scottish Government surveys from ‘coffee cup’ surveys (a term used to refer to the feedback requests people receive after many everyday commercial transactions), including potentially changing their description from ‘survey’ to ‘important government study’.
- **Cost/difficulty:** Variable. Changing the description from ‘survey’ to ‘study’ would be inexpensive. However, if this were accompanied by an awareness raising campaign around the value of the Scottish Government surveys, this would be higher cost.
- **Additional reflections:** While it is important to consider how to respond to this barrier, any actions will be limited in their ability to affect the broader survey landscape, which is beyond Scottish Government control.
- The proliferation of commercial surveys may mean **more people now expect a financial incentive or reward for taking part in surveys.** General public participants in this research expressed mixed views on incentives – some were adamant they would not be willing to take part without an incentive, others felt the impact on society would be a greater motivation. There is strong evidence that incentives (particularly monetary ones) can boost response rates among underrepresented groups (e.g. see Mack et al, 1998; Singer & Kulka, 2002; McGonagle and Freedman, 2017).
 - **Potential solutions:** Test the impact of incentives on response rates across the Scottish Government surveys. This could include testing both differential incentives (where incentives are targeted at those known to be less likely to respond – for example, those in deprived urban areas) and/or discretionary incentives, where survey interviewers are able to offer incentives to avoid a refusal or convert a previous refusal.
 - **Cost/difficulty:** Medium-high, depending on the level of incentives, and how they are offered (targeted vs. universal).
 - **Additional reflections:** Although survey interviewers express reservations about incentives, there is strong evidence from the literature that they can make a difference (see references cited above).

Conclusions

This research has systematically mapped potential barriers to taking part in surveys, drawn together the evidence for each, and developed practical potential solutions. In doing so, it aims to contribute to extending and deepening understandings of nonresponse, while recognising that it remains a complex issue and that there is no ‘silver bullet’ solution.

The solutions discussed fall into four main categories: incremental improvements to survey design and processes; improvements aimed at supporting and strengthening the fieldforce; more radical changes to survey design and mode; and efforts to improve the wider survey environment.

In deciding which solutions, or combinations of solutions, to take forward, the Scottish Government should consider:

- which may have the most impact on underrepresented groups (e.g. young people and those from minority ethnic backgrounds)
- which changes are also an ethical imperative (particularly those relating to accessibility), and
- the opportunities to develop solutions that individually or collectively address multiple barriers.

In assessing the impact of any solutions being tested, it will be important to review the degree to which they have succeeded in addressing the specific barriers they were intended to target, as well as their direct impacts on nonresponse levels, cost, data quality and completeness.

1. Background and approach

Aims of this research

This report sets out findings from research conducted by Ipsos, with advice from Professor Peter Lynn, exploring the challenge of nonresponse on the Scottish Government's three main general population, face-to-face, cross-sectional Scottish Government surveys: the Scottish Household Survey (SHS), Scottish Health Survey (SHeS) and Scottish Crime and Justice Survey (SCJS).¹ This research was commissioned by the Scottish Government, with funding support from the Office for National Statistics (ONS).

In the context of this study, 'nonresponse' was focused on whether or not people participate in a survey at all ('unit nonresponse'), rather than whether they decline to answer particular questions ('item nonresponse') or drop-out early ('partial response').

The research had the twin aims of:

- producing robust research to extend understanding of the challenge posed by nonresponse on the three surveys, and
- producing actionable and testable potential solutions to these challenges.

The challenge of nonresponse

The challenge posed by nonresponse is neither new, nor Scotland-specific. Response rates to face-to-face surveys have been falling by some accounts for well over half a century, as evidenced by fieldwork outcomes to the US National Election Studies since 1952 (Steeh, 1981). A recent study of trends in survey outcome rates across four major cross-national surveys in Europe - the European Quality of Life Survey, the European Social Survey, the European Values Study, and the International Social Survey Programme - also found a significant and consistent decline in survey outcome rates over the first two decades of the 21st century (Jabkowski and Cichocki, 2024). It suggested that trends were unaffected by country-specific characteristics or survey methodologies.

Nonresponse and the Scottish Government general population surveys

The last iteration of the Scottish Government's Long-term Survey Strategy (2018), which sets the overall vision and plans for its population surveys, described the challenge of falling response rates for the Scottish Government's surveys:

¹ Key features of these three surveys are summarised in Appendix F, with links to further background where required.

“The people in Scotland who participate in population surveys do so voluntarily – sacrificing a sometimes significant amount of their time [...]. Unfortunately, our face-to-face collections have been experiencing a gradual, downward trend in response rates. A central risk is that this will result in an increasing impact of nonresponse bias in the results we report.”

All three of the major Scottish Government cross-sectional general population surveys have primarily been based on face-to-face approaches since their inception. Face-to-face approaches have tended to achieve the highest response rates in comparison with other modes. However, analysis of response rates for this research shows that between 2012 and 2019, there was a steady decline in the headline response rate across all three surveys, although the gradient of that decline varied between surveys:

- **SHS**: From 67.2% in 2012 to 62.4% in 2019, a drop of 4.8pp.
- **SCJS**: From 67.7% in 2012 to 58.7% in 2019, a drop of 9.0pp.
- **SHeS**: From 65.8% in 2012 to 55.6% in 2019, a drop 10.2pp.

Comparisons of response rates before and after the Covid-19 pandemic are complicated by changes in survey design post-pandemic. However, response rates in 2022 and 2023 (the latest years for which data are available) were lower than pre-pandemic, even when changes in design are taken into account in analysis.

- **SHS**: 43.9% in 2022 and 46.2% in 2023.
- **SHeS**: 37.3% in 2022 and 41.5% in 2023
- **SCJS**: 47.3% in 2022 and 46% in 2023.

The decline in the response rate to all three surveys over time has almost entirely been driven by an increase in the proportion of people who refuse to take part. The rate of non-contact (where it is not possible to make contact with an eligible respondent at an address issued to a survey interviewer) and other nonresponse (including, for example, being unable to take part due to ill health) has been broadly stable over the last 20 years. Appendix B of this report includes more detailed analysis of patterns of nonresponse over time on the three surveys.

Response rates and nonresponse bias

Response rates have typically been used as a key indicator of survey quality and a measure of potential bias in the data. However, as discussed in earlier research for the Scottish Government (Ormston et al, 2024), overall, research indicates a weak relationship between response rates and nonresponse bias (see for example Groves and Peytcheva, 2008; Hendra and Hill, 2019; Hutcheson et al., 2020; Micklewright et al., 2012; Williams and Holcekova, 2015). A recent statement from the UK’s leading survey experts, under the Survey Futures collaboration, argues that:

‘Surveys with low response rates can still produce high-quality data, and the reverse can also be true.’ (Maslovskaya et al, 2025)

High nonresponse bias occurs if those who do and do not respond to surveys differ in ways that makes a difference to the outcomes the survey is trying to measure – in other words, if response rates are highly variable between different groups, this is likely to reduce how well it reflects the target population. While a higher response rate can reduce the risk of such variability, it does not necessarily do so; nor does a low response rate necessarily increase it.

Particular demographic groups have traditionally been under-represented in face-to-face surveys. Analysis of response rates on the three Scottish Government surveys highlights lower response rates among: people living in deprived areas of Scotland; those in large urban areas; younger people; people from minority ethnic backgrounds; those with lower levels of education; and private renters. There is evidence that some (though not all) of these groups have become even less well represented in Scottish Government surveys over time. For example:

- The **age** gap in terms of response has worsened over time, with an increase in underrepresentation of the 25-34 group and overrepresentation of the 75+ group.
- Broadly, the surveys became more representative in terms of the **educational attainment** of respondents between 2012 and 2019. However, the gap widened between 2019 and 2022.
- In terms of **tenure**, ‘other renters’, which includes private renters, became increasingly underrepresented between 2017 and 2022.

Patterns by ethnicity, deprivation, and rurality were more complex, however. For example, those from minority ethnic backgrounds became more underrepresented from 2012 to 2019, but the gap in response between White and minority ethnic respondents narrowed between 2019 and 2022.

In the context of this research, it was important to consider not just what might be driving overall falling response rates, but what might be driving nonresponse among those groups least well represented in surveys. Boosting response among these specific groups would likely have the greatest impact in reducing nonresponse bias.

Applying a behavioural lens to survey nonresponse

Considerable efforts have been expended in recent decades by survey methodologists across the world on measuring, understanding, and attempting to address patterns of nonresponse in face-to-face surveys. However, the interaction of multiple potential factors in driving nonresponse, and the difficulty of isolating or assessing the influence of these factors, led the survey methodologist Michael Brick to state that:

“Even after decades of research on nonresponse we remain woefully ignorant of the causes of nonresponse at a profound level.” (Brick, 2013).

While recognising these limitations, the present research seeks to improve our understanding of nonresponse by examining its causes and potential solutions through a behavioural science lens. It has a particular focus on the three main general population Scottish Government surveys, though it is expected that the findings will also be useful for other surveys. Behavioural science applies theories and techniques from a range of academic disciplines to better understand why people display particular behaviours and what interventions might be effective in changing them. This research used the ‘COM-B’ model of behaviour change (Michie et al, 2011) to structure analysis of barriers to taking part in surveys, and to identify potential actions that might mitigate these.

COM-B identifies three key components underpinning behaviour:

- **Capability:** having the knowledge, skills and ability to engage in a behaviour. In this context, this relates to the ability of people to understand and complete the survey.
- **Opportunity:** the physical and social external factors that make the behaviour possible. In relation to surveys, this might include the setting, time available, or social dynamics.
- **Motivation:** the internal processes influencing decisions. This might include interest in the survey topic, ease of completion (perceived and actual), feelings of reciprocity, etc.

Summary of methods

The research was conducted between January and June 2025 and included five main components:

- **A desk-based literature review**, focused primarily on evidence on individual-level factors that might influence nonresponse, including those which might lend themselves to behavioural interventions.
- **Analysis of response rates to the three main general population Scottish Government surveys**, covering changing patterns of nonresponse over time, patterns of response by geographic factors, and comparisons of unweighted sample profiles with census data, where possible, in order to assess nonresponse bias.
- **Qualitative research with professional survey stakeholders**, comprising three online focus groups with experienced survey interviewers working on each of the three Scottish Government general population surveys and one group with commissioners and contractors.
- **Qualitative research with the general public.** The researchers spoke to 43 people in total, across a combination of online and face-to-face focus groups, paired and individual interviews. There was a particular focus on

those less likely to take part in surveys and/or those who may face particular barriers to participation. On this basis, those interviewed included a mix of age groups and people from urban and rural areas of Scotland, but also included proportionately more young people, disabled people, and people from South Asian and Black backgrounds.² Participants were also asked to speak to friends and family about what they thought about taking part in surveys and what the barriers would be, so that they could share wider perspectives on this within the group discussions.

- **A key stakeholder workshop** was held to share preliminary findings and potential actions with key stakeholders from the Scottish Government surveys and commissioners of other related UK surveys. The purpose was to gather feedback on the plausibility and feasibility of the preliminary findings and solutions ahead of finalising this report.

Further detail on the methods used are included in the Appendices to this report.

Scope and limitations

This research had a specific remit to explore behavioural factors that might impact on nonresponse. Behavioural models recognise the importance of context, including the ways in which the social and economic context can impact individuals' opportunities or motivations to engage in a particular behaviour. However, in focusing on what drives individual respondents to take part (or not) in surveys, it must be acknowledged that this research has less to say on wider contextual factors, such as recruitment and retention challenges in the survey industry. These workforce challenges have been particularly acutely felt by some survey organisations since the pandemic, when large numbers of survey interviewers left the fieldforce as face-to-face surveys were put on hold. Workforce issues can impact on response - where there are shortages of survey interviewers, sample may not be worked, or worked fully (that is, survey interviewers may not make the required number of calls at each address). Workforce issues can thus have a significant impact on nonresponse, but they were largely outwith the scope of this project.³

A key element of this research was the qualitative research with the public. As with any qualitative research, the aim was to capture a range of perspectives

² Young people are commonly underrepresented in surveys, and analysis of the three Scottish Government surveys for this research showed that the age gap in terms of response has increased over time. From 2012 to 2019, overall those from minority ethnic groups excluding white minority backgrounds also became more underrepresented, though representation did improve between 2019 and 2022 (see Appendix B for more detailed analysis on this). While the research team did not find specific evidence of disabled people being statistically underrepresented in surveys (possibly because of the correlation between disability and age), various studies have identified accessibility barriers to disabled people's participation in surveys (see Appendix A: Literature review for further discussion of this).

³ For further discussion of survey workforce issues in the post-pandemic period, see Charmna et al (2024) [The post-pandemic role of face-to-face fieldworkers](#), Survey Futures.

from groups of interest, rather than to obtain a statistically representative sample. However, it is important to acknowledge that the relatively small numbers of participants within each subgroup means we cannot be certain that other viewpoints would not have been captured if more people had been interviewed. This particularly applies to disabled people, given the diversity of barriers they may experience depending on both their specific disability and wider circumstances. It also applies to those with intersecting characteristics (for example, disabled people from minority ethnic backgrounds).

While the research was able to recruit a diverse sample in terms of disability, ethnicity, urbanity/rurality, and age, it was more challenging to recruit people with lower levels of educational qualifications. In the end, we were only able to recruit six participants with no or lower qualifications (up to Standard Grade or equivalent). As education is known to be a factor in survey participation – and there is some evidence that the gap in response rates between those with higher and lower educational qualifications has increased on the Scottish surveys (see Appendix B) – this must be acknowledged as a limitation.

A key limitation of this study is the inherent challenge of engaging genuine survey nonresponders in qualitative research. While qualitative research typically differs from surveys in important ways (e.g. recruitment methods, nature of the interview and incentives offered), it is likely that individuals who are reluctant to complete surveys are also less inclined to take part in any form of research, including qualitative interviews. Although recruitment methods were designed to target those less likely to respond to surveys, and potential participants who indicated they would be “very likely” to take part in a government survey were screened out at the recruitment stage⁴, it remains probable that the final sample was skewed towards individuals who are more positively disposed towards research in general, rather than those who are most resistant to participation. Interviews were also reliant on people’s own accounts of how they would respond to being asked to take part in a survey. While the use of a behavioural framework helped ensure we probed on a wide range of potential drivers, it must be acknowledged that people are not always able to accurately identify or articulate the main elements that shape their own behaviour. This makes weighing the relative importance of different factors that may impact on nonresponse particularly challenging.

Report structure and conventions

The main body of this report is intended to provide a relatively succinct account of the key findings from this research. More detailed findings from the first four individual elements of the research – the literature review, analysis of nonresponse data on Scottish Government surveys, stakeholder qualitative

⁴ With the exception of disabled participants and participants from Black and Asian ethnic backgrounds, as there was interest in whether they faced specific barriers to taking part regardless of willingness to do so.

research, and general public qualitative research – are included in Appendices A to D.

The remainder of the main body of this report is structured around the COM-B model, with a chapter on each element (Capability, Opportunity, and Motivation). Each chapter sets out potential barriers to taking part in surveys relating to that element of COM-B. They draw on the research conducted for this study to summarise the evidence for each barrier, before discussing potential solutions.

The concluding chapter reflects on the overall findings, including which potential solutions may be more or less straightforward to implement and what their impact might be.

2. Barriers and potential solutions: capability

The ‘capability’ element of the COM-B model relates to a person’s psychological and physical ability to engage in the behaviour. In the context of taking part in a survey, ‘capability’ might include whether a potential respondent understands what they are being asked to do and whether it is something they would be cognitively and physically able to do.

This research identified three main barriers relating to capability: low awareness; failure to open or read the advance letter (and therefore to understand what they are being asked to do); and accessibility concerns.

Low awareness

Summary

Low awareness of the three main Scottish Government surveys, or of government surveys and statistics in general, was seen by interviewers and survey leads as a barrier to capturing the attention of potential respondents. The general public research supported the view that awareness is low, and that when linked to a lack of appreciation of its purpose, this may be a barrier.

Awareness of surveys is something that is almost impossible to accurately measure (since surveys themselves would be the most obvious route for measuring this and would, by default, risk excluding those with the lowest levels of awareness). However, a lack of awareness was identified as the second most common reason for non-completion of the 2022 Scottish Census (in a doorstep exercise to follow-up non-responding households).⁵ There was also a belief among stakeholders interviewed for this study that there was a general societal lack of awareness or understanding of the purposes of government surveys and the importance of statistics to shaping and evaluating policy decisions. Prior awareness of specific Scottish Government surveys was certainly low among the members of the public interviewed for this study.

While not necessarily a critical barrier (the purpose of the advance letter and the interviewer calling is to introduce respondents to the survey and explain more about it), low general awareness of government surveys and a lack of understanding of their purpose or value (something we return to in chapter 5) can arguably contribute to a wider climate that makes potential respondents less receptive and the interviewer’s task more challenging.

⁵ [Data Collection Exercises – reasons for not yet completing Scotland’s census and CCS hard refusals](#)

Potential solutions

The main potential solution discussed by both professional stakeholders and general public participants was to advertise Scottish Government surveys and statistics more widely to raise public awareness. Suggestions for targeted advertising included:

- GP surgeries (for SHeS specifically – which could help increase its legitimacy)
- Council buildings
- Public transport, like buses and trains
- Social media.

A group with participants from South Asian backgrounds noted that they would be more likely to engage with social media posts if they were in the language they spoke at home, so tailoring social media adverts in different languages could help raise awareness among particular communities.

The cost of advertising would vary depending on the nature/scale of any campaign. The direct and immediate impact on response rates would likely be low overall, since few of those who hear about the surveys through advertising are likely to be invited to take part in them. However, it could, in the longer-term, have a role in promoting the overall value of government surveys and helping to establish a more positive public climate for them. Thinking longer-term, the Scottish Government could also work with NRS to identify opportunities to incorporate its main general population surveys with census communications, where appropriate. For example, the ‘thank you’ messages people receive after they complete the census could also reference helping government if people get requests to take part in other surveys for the Scottish Government or ONS.

ONS’s recent paper setting out their improvement plan for their economic statistics includes proposals to improve public recognition and views of official surveys and statistics, as part of an aspiration to drive a ‘refreshed citizen relationship’. However, this paper also recognises the wide uncertainty over the impact of this kind of marketing in its discussion of plans to try and drive a ‘refreshed citizen relationship’ with the organisation and its surveys, noting that:

“While citizen engagement, targeting marketing and communications campaigns are routinely employed by many organisations, this area of work within the plan has some of the highest levels of complexity and uncertainty. It remains a key area to improve and research, but realism is required as to the ability to cost-effectively reverse societal trends seen across the whole survey sector.” (ONS, 2025)

If the Scottish Government decides to develop similar plans to improve perceptions of its surveys and statistics, a similar degree of realism about its potential impacts is likely to be required.

Failure to open or read the advance letter

Summary

Survey interviewers suggested that few people open and read the advance letters before they call. This was supported by qualitative research with the general public, which indicated people struggle to distinguish them from 'spam' mail.

The three main Scottish Government general population surveys all send an advance letter with a study leaflet to all sampled addresses. This is intended to avoid 'cold calling', so that potential respondents are already aware the survey is happening and that an interviewer will be calling. The letters and leaflets also include some background on what is involved, and the purpose and uses of each survey.

However, the survey interviewers who took part in this study were dubious about whether many people actually opened or read the advance letters. This was confirmed by qualitative research with the public. Participants were told in advance that they would be sent a letter to open and read during focus groups (as the researchers wanted to see their 'real time' reactions to the content). Despite this, some participants had thrown away or misplaced the letter. It was suggested that the envelope looked like "spam", specifically because of the lack of personalisation (letters are typically addressed to 'The Householder' as the sample is drawn from the Postcode Address File, which does not include names).

"I probably would not open it. You know, if this is supposed to be some sort of government survey, you'd think that they would have some idea of who lives here" (Public Group 4, aged 25+, rural areas)

Participants expressed mixed views about the logos featured in the survey materials. For some, the SHS and Official Statistics logos provided reassurance or stimulated curiosity about the contents. Others however, voiced concerns that commercial or other organisations use official-looking logos as a tactic to deceive people into engaging with them.

Those participants who thought they would open the letter indicated that there would be a very small window of opportunity to encourage them to read it and that they were likely to skim the letter at most (some participants did not spot that there was additional text on the reverse until this was pointed out to them). Aspects of the design or content that appealed to participants included:

- The header 'Help improve public services in [your local area]', which stood out for some as conveying how taking part was relevant to them. However,

members of the stakeholder group noted potential tensions, as this wording might raise expectations that the survey is a more immediate route for feedback on issues with council services, rather than informing longer-term, wider government policy. SHeS interviewers also noted that the advance letter for the SHeS led some respondents to assume more of the survey was about the NHS, rather than their own health (which is the main focus).

- The reference number, telephone contact number, and guarantees of confidentiality were all seen as reassuring.
- The Scottish Government logo, which appears on the letter but not the envelope for the SHS, was reassuring to some participants. However, survey interviewers reported encountering potential respondents who said they did not want to engage in anything associated with the current Scottish Government. Survey interviewers also perceived an increase in individuals with anti-establishment or anti-politician views for whom any mention of the Scottish Government might be off-putting (a topic we return to in chapter 4).
- Generally, the writing style was felt to be easy to understand.

Alongside the features that participants found appealing, several aspects of the survey materials were viewed less positively. The letter was perceived as being too long, which some felt might discourage people from reading it in full. There was a general preference for the leaflet, which was considered more visually appealing and easier to digest. In addition, the inclusion of “an interviewer will call” was seen as off-putting for some, as they felt they had not agreed to this. Concerns were also raised about the accessibility of the letter to disabled or neurodivergent people; these are discussed in more detail below.

Potential solutions

Finding a way to personalise invitations – in particular, by adding names – would arguably be the most effective change here. However, given that changing the sample frame to allow for more personalised invitations is not currently feasible, redesigning the envelope and advance letter based on general public feedback presents the most suitable approach to encourage more people to open and read the survey materials. Any redesign should prioritise:

- Making the envelope stand out and distinguishing it from ‘spam’ mail or items perceived as irrelevant or negative (such as bills).
- Conveying information that will encourage people to ‘hear the interviewer out’ on the doorstep in as concise and engaging a manner as possible.
- Testing different logos or combinations of logos through experimental designs, due to the lack of consensus about their impact on response rates.

In addition, the content of the letters themselves could be reviewed and ideally shortened) in light of general public feedback (more detail on which is included in Appendix D). This review process could range from light touch, through to more expensive user testing and design processes. It is important to note, however, that advance letters for the SHS, SCJS and SHeS have already undergone regular review over time.

Survey interviewers emphasised the importance of having advance letters even if recipients do not read them, as these letters provide a reference point that helps establish legitimacy during doorstep interactions. At the same time, survey interviewers were sceptical that further improvements to the letters alone would substantially increase response rates, since skilled survey interviewers often succeed in persuading people even when letters have gone unnoticed.

Accessibility issues and concerns

Summary

Recent qualitative research has identified a range of accessibility issues and concerns that can prevent disabled people from taking part in surveys. This was supported by the views and experiences of disabled people interviewed for this study.

Several accessibility issues and concerns were identified as potential barriers that may prevent disabled people from taking part in surveys, starting with the advance materials. Disabled and neurodivergent participants raised concerns about the formatting, structure, length, and size of text on the survey advance letter:

“I probably would want to take part, but I would lose interest in this letter after the first line... the way that it's formatted tells me that they're not interested enough, in my opinion, to contact me in a way that's easy for me to process. So that would tell me right away, it's not for me.” (Interview 3, Neurodivergent person)

Beyond these initial hurdles, disabled participants identified further challenges related to taking part in the survey itself. These included concerns about whether the questionnaire would be accessible and understandable, whether survey interviewers would adopt measures (e.g. wear masks) to ensure a safe and comfortable environment, and whether there would be sufficient flexibility in scheduling of interviews to account for fluctuating symptoms.

“If [the interview] was like all in one chunk and it was going to be over an hour or something like that, A: I'd start to get fractious and B: I'd get quite fatigued, so I'd ask them to break it into chunks.” (Interview 4, Disabled person)

Concerns raised within this research reflect similar issues identified in ongoing work by ONS to explore barriers to participation among disabled people. This work found that even where advance letters mention that interviews can be conducted in alternative formats, potential respondents are not always clear if those accommodations will apply to them (for example, how self-complete sections are made accessible to those who are visually impaired, or whether sign language interpreters can be made available). Discomfort with having strangers in their home was also found to be higher among the disabled people they spoke to.⁶

Potential solutions

Addressing the accessibility concerns discussed above needs to involve both communicating existing accessibility options more clearly, and identifying and removing any remaining barriers. Specific actions could include:

- Reviewing advance letters and leaflets to ensure they meet accessibility guidelines, such as that referenced in the [UK Government's guidance on inclusivity and accessibility in survey development](#). Various online tools also exist for checking different aspects of accessibility, such as the reading age at which particular documents are pitched.
- Commissioning an accessible design organisation to review advance letters and leaflets to ensure they are as accessible as they can be.
- Highlighting accessibility options more clearly to potential respondents, both in letters and on the doorstep. This could include, for example, highlighting options to schedule or split interviews into multiple parts, to arrange sign language interpreters, and for survey interviewers to wear masks if requested.
- Considering whether survey interviewers would benefit from additional training around disability awareness, so that they are better equipped to respond to any adjustments that may be needed to secure participation from disabled people.
- While not specifically mentioned in the current research, enabling people with cognitive impairments or learning disabilities to participate in surveys also requires strong respondent centred survey design to ensure that the questionnaire, materials and interviewer approach can meet their accessibility requirements.

As discussed in chapter 1, there is limited evidence that disabled people are statistically under-represented in social surveys, so the impact of the above actions on overall response rates may be relatively limited. However, from an ethical and inclusivity perspective removing barriers (both real and perceived) to participation is important. Moreover, 'disabled people' are not one homogenous group. Taking a broader perspective on removing accessibility

⁶ Reported at ONS seminar for the Social Research Association (SRA), 5/12/24.

barriers could improve representation from specific sub-groups of disabled and/or neurodiverse people, and thus improve the representativeness of the sample.

More radical solutions could involve more proactively offering different modes of participation to encourage those who may be uncomfortable (whether for reasons related to their disability or not) with having survey interviewers inside their home. This is discussed further in chapters 3 and 4.

3. Barriers and potential solutions: opportunity

The ‘opportunity’ element of COM-B focuses on external influences that shape people’s opportunity to take part in a behaviour. In the survey context, this might include survey setting and social dynamics, both of which can impact people’s opportunity to participate.

This research identified two main barriers relating to opportunity: time, and social norms about taking part.

Time

Summary

Lack of time is consistently given as a reason for not taking part when studies have asked nonresponders about this directly. While the literature emphasises that ‘time’ can be used to mask other underlying reasons, qualitative research with the general public highlights genuine concerns about time as a key barrier, particularly (though not only) for younger people. Survey interviewers felt that time issues were exacerbated by rising home working, blurring the lines between ‘work’ and ‘free’ time.

Existing literature consistently identifies lack of time and disinterest as primary reasons people give for not participating in surveys⁷. For example, ‘too busy’ was the most commonly reported reason for noncompletion of the 2022 Scottish Census, despite the census being mandatory in the UK – a requirement that sets it apart from most social surveys.⁸

Within the general public qualitative research, there were genuine concerns about the length of the survey and if participants could realistically spare the required time. Indeed, phrases such as “time consuming” and “how long is it going to take?” arose spontaneously across general public interviews when participants were asked what came to mind upon hearing the word ‘survey’.

While lack of time may sometimes be used as a polite excuse, concern about the actual time commitment involved in surveys is nonetheless an important barrier for many potential participants. The influence of time in the decision to take part is likely to vary considerably between subgroups. It might be

⁷ See for example Brick and Williams (2013) [Explaining Rising Nonresponse Rates in Cross-Sectional Surveys](#). The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, 645(1), 36–59, and Smith, T.W. (1984). Estimating Nonresponse Bias with Temporary Refusals. Sociological Perspectives, 27, 473 – 489.

⁸ [Data Collection Exercises – reasons for not yet completing Scotland’s census and CCS hard refusals](#)

hypothesised that for older, retired people, time is not necessarily a major issue, but for parents of young children or others with a lot of caring and work responsibilities, it may be critical. The SHS, which was used as a case study in general public groups, takes around 45 minutes on average to complete⁹. Some general public participants, particularly (though not only) younger people, felt that 45 minutes was too long a time commitment. In addition to concerns about the stated length, participants were concerned that an interviewer-administered survey would actually take up more of their time in practice, with additional time needed for small talk and introductions:

“It's quite a long time. And then it won't just be 45 minutes because they'll be like coming into the house. It'll take time. It'll take more time than just that. It's just too long for me, I think.” (Public Group 2, aged 16-24, Rural areas)

Disabled people also highlighted challenges around the time commitment involved, particularly where there were already additional burdens on their time around managing their conditions.

Survey interviewers noted that the rise in home working since the Covid-19 pandemic has complicated how people respond to survey interviewers calling during the working day. While people may be more likely to be at home, they may be less likely to have time available when the interviewer calls, which survey interviewers felt might be leading to more refusals. They also noted the increased challenge of potential respondents working late into the evening, therefore becoming unavailable to be surveyed at times when they previously would have been free. The potential impact on refusals of blurring boundaries from home working was supported by comments from the general public:

“You could be working from home, but that's the last time you want anyone to come and visit you because you've got work to do.” (Public Group 4, aged 25+, Rural areas)

While existing research highlights lack of time as a common reason for nonparticipation, it is important to recognise that stated reasons may not always reveal the full picture. As Loosveldt and Joye (2016) note, the reasons people state for not taking part may not always reflect the underlying reason or their true motivations, with ‘lack of time’ potentially serving as an excuse or a more socially acceptable explanation when someone does not want to disclose their actual reasons. This was acknowledged by members of the

⁹ SCJS takes around 40 minutes, while the SHeS main interview varies depending on the number of people in the household, but lasts around 45 minutes for a one adult household, while the child interview lasts around 30 minutes (interviews for multiple adults in the same household are sometimes conducted concurrently to reduce the total time).

general public interviewed for this research – as one participant said, “if I want to do something, I’ll find the time”.

Potential solutions

The most direct solution to ‘time’ as a barrier would be to shorten the length of surveys. This could be approached in various ways, including:

- Reducing the content but keeping the same design (that is, continuing to interview respondents face-to-face but reducing the content).
- Dividing the survey into a shorter ‘core’ face-to-face survey, followed by an option to continue to a ‘full’ interview, either face-to-face or by another mode. This design could be applied universally (such that all respondents complete the ‘core’ survey, and those who are willing to do so continue to a full interview). Alternatively, interviewers could be allowed to offer a much shorter ‘core’ interview only to those who are uncertain about taking part to avoid refusals.¹⁰
- Offering the option of taking part by other modes (such as telephone, video or online) from the outset. Providing greater flexibility about both when and how people take part recognises that some people who are not able to make time for a face-to-face survey during interviewer working hours might nonetheless be willing and able to complete an online survey in their own time.

Whatever approach is taken, shortening the surveys and/or incorporating alternative modes would involve significant trade-offs in terms of the scope, completeness and, potentially, quality of data collected. There would also likely be significant costs, at least in the short term, associated with redesigning the surveys in this way.¹¹

Younger people interviewed for this research indicated that they might be more willing to take part in the SHS if the survey was 20 minutes rather than 45, or if there was an option to complete some sections later online. However, there were more mixed views on shortening the length among older respondents, with questions raised about whether the survey would still produce ‘meaningful’ data if it was much shorter.

Participants suggested that providing upfront information about the number of questions and the expected maximum completion time, and a commitment that the interviewer would leave on reaching this time, might help alleviate some of their concerns about the time commitment involved. In addition, it was suggested the government could offer people an ‘exemption’ from future

¹⁰ If this approach were adopted, there would be a need to consider how to disincentivise survey interviewers from offering the shorter ‘core’ interview routinely (for example, by setting pay for ‘core’ interviews at a much lower rate). Otherwise, it might lead to a significant loss of data.

¹¹ See Ormston et al, 2024, for a more detailed discussion of the cost implications of moving from a purely face-to-face to a mixed mode design.

government survey research for a fixed period after taking part (this was compared with the exemption people receive after serving on juries). In fact, the Scottish Government's approach to selecting the sample for the three surveys that are the focus of this research already ensures that the same addresses are not resampled in a 4-year period. This could be more explicitly highlighted at the outset, as an advantage of taking part. However, it would not be possible to guarantee that the same households would not be sampled for any other Scottish or UK Government survey. It would also be important to consider potential implications for other Scottish Government studies that currently use recontact data (that is, contact details for those who are happy to be contacted about future research after taking part) from the three surveys as sample frames.

Social norms about taking part

Summary

Stakeholders and survey interviewers felt that civic engagement had weakened over time, with the consequence that people are less willing to take part in activities for social benefit, including surveys. The evidence for this from the literature was uncertain. Although there is some evidence that other sorts of prosocial behaviour (e.g. formal volunteering and giving blood) have declined, there are many confounding factors that could explain this. There was clearer evidence from the general public that feeling surveys are not for 'people like them' might deter some from taking part, particularly those who are already less well represented or in minority positions.

Stakeholders and survey interviewers who took part in this research felt that people's sense of 'civic engagement' in general may have weakened over time, and that this might be contributing to higher nonresponse. Falling civic engagement has been a long-standing theme in social science literature, particularly since Robert Putnam's 'Bowling Alone' (1995), which hypothesised that the networks, relationships and norms (collectively termed 'social capital') that facilitate cooperation and mutual benefit among individuals and groups had been eroding over time. While focused on the USA, Putnam's theories have gained a wide audience across liberal democracies.

Establishing whether civic engagement, or 'prosocial' behaviours, are indeed in decline, and whether this is a plausible explanation of the rise in nonresponse observed on the Scottish Government surveys since 2012, is challenging. Many of the available measures are themselves derived from surveys and may therefore themselves be impacted by changes in nonresponse over time. However, there is nonetheless some evidence that certain sorts of civic engagement may have been eroded in recent years. For example, SHS data suggests that formal volunteering has decreased in recent years (Scottish Government, 2024). Research by Volunteer Scotland (2025) has suggested that economic pressures linked to the cost-of-living crisis may explain this decline; that people are less able financially to commit time or

resource to formal volunteering, rather than having become less ‘civic minded’. This is supported by the finding that rates of informal volunteering (where people provide unpaid help to others they are not related to) have remained broadly stable over time (Scottish Government, 2024).

The proportion of people in Scotland giving blood, which could be taken as another indication of ‘civic participation’, has also reportedly declined, particularly since the Covid-19 pandemic. However, again there are a number of confounding factors, including an ageing population and scaling back of mobile blood collection units post-2020.

Taken together, although there is some evidence of a decline in ‘prosocial’ behaviours, it is hard to be certain whether these are a reflection of a general reduced willingness to engage in activities ‘for the public good’, which might also translate into a reduced willingness to complete surveys, or whether there are specific demographic, economic or social factors impacting on these behaviours. While these factors may also impact on people’s ability to take part in surveys (via reduced time, for example, discussed above), they require different solutions to those that aim to increase people’s sense of civic engagement per se.

However, a sense of ‘civic engagement’ is not the only way in which social norms might impact on people’s participation in surveys. Whether or not people see Scottish Government surveys as something people ‘like them’ would typically do may also be an important influence on behaviour. There was a clear stereotype among members of the general public interviewed for this research that those who take part in such surveys tend to be older, with more time available, as well as being more informed and/or more “used to being listened to”. For some participants who did not feel they fit this description themselves, whether because of age, educational background, or minority position, this led them to feel government surveys were not things people “like them” would normally participate in.

“A lot of young people like from the ages from like 16 to kind of like my age, don’t take part in surveys. A lot more informed intelligent people take part in surveys, maybe that are younger ... but a lot of them that I know, people that are in an older demographic for the ages, maybe like 30 and a wee bit above that, they’re the ones that are actively taking the surveys. It’s mostly those kinds of people that are taking them, not really younger people.”
(Interview 1, under 25, lower qualifications)

Potential solutions

There are many creative ways in which ‘social norms’ around who a ‘typical respondent’ is could be challenged, such as creating video clips or using quotes from respondents who do not fit the above stereotypes talking about their reasons for taking part. While such activities are arguably unlikely to have an immediate impact on response, they could form part of a wider effort

to drive a 'refreshed citizen relationship' with Scottish Government surveys (see discussion in chapter 2).

4. Barriers and potential solutions: motivation

The ‘motivation’ element of the COM-B model relates to the internal processes influencing our decision-making, including ‘reflective’ and more ‘automatic’ processes. In the context of deciding to take part in a survey, this might include interest in the topic, beliefs about ease of completion, and feelings of reciprocity, as well as more automatic responses on the doorstep that may make people inclined to speak to an interviewer or not.

Much of the research literature seeking to understand why people do or do not take part in surveys has focused on barriers relating to motivation. This chapter discusses barriers relating to seven overarching themes: avoiding ‘easy’ refusals, ‘social aversion’ and shifting expectations, trust in government, scepticism about whether participation makes a positive difference, concerns about data misuse, “survey overload”, and expectation of reward.

Avoiding ‘easy’ refusals

Office refusals

Summary

Survey interviewers suggested that explicitly mentioning that people can ‘opt out’ by ringing the SHS helpline had increased refusals by making it easier to refuse before the interviewer can explain the survey to them. Analysis of patterns of office refusals over time support this view.

Both feedback from survey interviewers and analysis of patterns over time of office refusals to the SHS and SHeS indicate that small changes in wording to the advance letters can serve to increase people’s likelihood of refusing prior to survey interviewers having an opportunity to explain the survey to them.

Both the SHS and SHeS saw a rise in refusals direct to the office from 2012 to 2019 (from 1.9% to 4.3% and from 3.7% to 7.2%), with SHeS experiencing a particularly marked rise between 2017 and 2018. This coincided with a small but significant change in the wording of the SHeS advance letter, with the phrase “or don’t want to take part” added before the freephone number. This wording was subsequently removed in 2022, and office refusals fell back from 7.2% to 2.4% between 2019 and 2023.

Meanwhile, on the SHS, which in 2022 amended the heading of the ‘contact’ section from ‘How do I contact you?’ to ‘How do I arrange an interview, opt out, or find out more information?’, office refusals increased from 4.3% to 7.0% from 2019 to 2023. SHS interviewers were aware of this change to the advance letter and believed it had increased office refusals, including by enabling family members to ‘opt out’ participants (particularly older parents)

without giving the intended respondent an opportunity to decide whether or not they wish to take part.

Potential solutions

The obvious 'solution' to this issue would be to remove wording that highlights how to 'opt out' from the advance letter. However, this needs to be considered alongside the importance of conveying the optional nature of survey participation. Previous research exploring why people decided to take part in both qualitative and quantitative government social research found that emphasising the voluntary nature of a study could be a positive facilitator of participation (Graham et al, 2007). This was echoed in comments from participants in this study:

"I think the opting out bit is reasonably attractive because it's, it's not saying 'thou shalt be hounded to do this'. Yeah, there is a get out for you, even if you decide not to." (Public Group 4, aged 25+, rural areas)

Nonetheless, it might be more appropriate to emphasise that taking part is voluntary separately from highlighting the freephone number for seeking further information about the study or arranging appointments. Advance communications could also emphasise that interviewers can provide a better explanation than a letter of what is involved in taking part, to help potential respondents decide whether to participate. At the same time, the impact of removing this wording on overall refusals is likely to be fairly low. Reducing office refusals would provide survey interviewers with an opportunity to explain more about taking part, which may persuade some to participate. However, those who opt out in advance are arguably more likely than average to refuse on the doorstep too.

Interviewer skills and confidence

Summary

The survey methodology literature demonstrates the importance of interviewer confidence and experience in predicting whether they are successful in persuading people to take part. This was also emphasised by survey interviewers who took part in this study. However, interviewer turnover, particularly since the Covid-19 pandemic, creates challenges around how to quickly equip new interviewers with the right skills and confidence.

While advance letters can help 'prime' people to expect a visit from a survey interviewer, and potentially to receive this visit more openly than they otherwise would, the interaction with the interviewer on the doorstep is often crucial in determining whether a potential respondent goes on to take part in the Scottish Government surveys. As an SHS interviewer put it:

"I don't think anyone does an interview for the Scottish Government, they do it for you. They're talking to you."

Survey interviewers need to be able to respond to both ‘automatic’ and ‘reflective’ motivations that impact whether or not an individual will engage with them. Heuristic psychological theories of survey participation (e.g. see Groves and Couper 1998) posit that ‘automatic’ motivations are triggered when a potential respondent quickly attempts to interpret an interviewer’s intent and activates a corresponding ‘script’ in response. Because survey requests are rare, many people lack a dedicated script and instead default to a more cautious or dismissive “generalised stranger” script. This can lead to generic refusals like “I’m too busy” or “not interested”. Survey interviewers need to be able to quickly recognise and dispel these automatic reactions, as well as to engage with more considered concerns about taking part once they have a potential respondent’s attention.

The survey methodology literature highlights the importance of both interviewer confidence and experience in predicting how successful survey interviewers are in persuading respondents to take part. For example, Jackle et al (n.d.) and Blom et al (2010) both found that survey interviewers who believed people could be convinced to take part generally achieved higher cooperation rates. Survey interviewer experience has also been shown to be associated with higher response rates, even after controlling for other factors, like area characteristics and survey type. Survey interviewers interviewed for this study felt that it can take considerable time to learn the skills required to be a good interviewer, and to “know which piece of the armoury to use to ... persuade them (potential respondents).”

The Covid-19 pandemic was associated with increased challenges in the research industry around interviewer recruitment and retention, leading to losses in experienced survey interviewers in some parts of the research industry (Charman et al, 2024). This led to challenges around how to quickly equip new survey interviewers with the skills and confidence required to secure participation.

Potential solutions

The survey methodology literature identifies various elements that can help maximise survey interviewers’ likelihood of success in persuading people to take part, and which should be a key focus in training, particularly for new survey interviewers. These include:

- **How to engage potential respondents quickly** – within the first few seconds – through voice, tone and style.
- **How to tailor approaches** depending on the area, household and individual. Generic introductions and rigid scripts should be avoided, as they increase the chance of a ‘script’ being activated.
- **How to identify whether a behavioural script has been triggered**, and if so which one and how to dispel it. For instance, if the interviewer believes that a “salesperson” script has been activated, they must quickly dispel this

(e.g. “I’m not trying to sell you anything”).

- **How to maintain doorstep interactions**, as longer interactions are associated with increased chances of eventual participation.
- **Increasing interviewer confidence levels**, given the evidence that higher confidence increases response.
- **Refusal conversion techniques**, including reassurances about privacy, time commitments, scheduling (including potentially reframing the first contact as a request for an appointment), and the impact of the research (which can be a crucial ‘reflective’ motivation, as discussed below).

‘Social aversion’ and shifting expectations

Summary

Stakeholders felt that people had become more ‘socially averse’ since the Covid-19 pandemic, impacting on their willingness to allow survey interviewers into their homes. This was supported by interviews with the general public, who highlighted both increased discomfort about having strangers in their home as a result of the pandemic and confusion about why surveys needed to involve face-to-face visits at all, when it is possible to provide most information online.

There has been much debate about the long-term impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on people’s willingness to engage with strangers. Increased ‘social aversion’ was suggested by stakeholders interviewed for this study as a potential factor in increased nonresponse. Similar views have been expressed in other recent research with survey interviews (see Charman et al, 2024, Mesplie-Cowan et al, 2024). Interviews with the general public for this study provided some support for this theory. Participants commented that they felt they had become less willing than they once were to let people they do not know into their home. For some, this was fundamentally linked with the experience of the Covid-19 pandemic, either because they had become unused to receiving strangers or because of ongoing health concerns about having people in their home.

“Covid has very much changed how I feel about my home. ... I have got used to no one else coming into my flat. Really used to it. And quite anxious about anybody actually being inside my home.” (Public Group 3, aged 25+, urban areas)

Others linked it to wider safety and privacy concerns about letting strangers into their personal space.

A related recurrent theme was that people did not understand why the surveys needed to involve in-home interviews. In a context where most things can now be done online, face-to-face in-home interviews were seen as unusual or even “creepy”, as well as environmentally unsustainable:

“Why are they coming to my door? This feels like a bit of an antiquated system in the sense that that's a lot of petrol for somebody to be driving to somebody's house...I feel like there's much, much quicker, easier ways of communicating with people these days” (Public Interview 5, disabled person)

Participants (particularly younger participants) also commented that they did not know how they were meant to behave when ‘hosting’ an interviewer in their home:

“It could be awkward, I wouldn't know how to react - do I have to offer them tea?” (Public Group 2, aged 16-24, rural areas)

These comments underline that the barrier may not simply be ‘social aversion’, but an increased unfamiliarity with having strangers inside your home, and concern about how to navigate this situation.

Potential solutions

These findings have clear implications for survey messaging. There may need to be greater emphasis in advance materials and interviewer-respondent interactions on explaining why some surveys are still conducted face-to-face. This could include highlighting the value of face-to-face interviews to both respondents (for example, in being able to ask questions about the process and receive support from the interviewer to help them complete it, if needed) and government (for example, higher quality data). It might also include emphasising that survey interviewers are there to do a job, to avert any social anxiety people might have about ‘hosting’ them.

Clearer messaging around the reasons for face-to-face data collection may help allay the concerns of some participants. However, if people are becoming less willing to host strangers in their homes, there may be limits to this as a long-term solution. Offering to complete the interview in another location – such as on the doorstep, in a garden, coffee shop, or community space – might go part way to allaying concerns about ‘hosting’ interviewers in a respondent's private space. However, it would need to be carefully considered given the potential sensitivity of some questions in each of the Scottish Government surveys, which arguably require a private setting for completion.

A more radical solution would be to offer greater flexibility on how people complete the surveys. Participants' spontaneous suggestions for making the surveys more appealing included offering different modes of completion, including a self-complete paper or online survey (although some participants noted that they struggle to fill in online forms and surveys), or completing it via video-call.

Overall, there was a preference for video-interviews across the general public interviews conducted for this study. Video interviews were felt to retain some of the benefits of a face-to-face encounter, but without the need to ‘host’

someone in your “physical space”. However, this preference may have been shaped by the fact that in most cases, people were participating in interviews for this study by video-call. Both telephone and self-completion modes (either online or on paper) would also address concerns about allowing interviewers into your home. Online interviews, in particular, would meet participants’ expectation that surveys, as with many other daily tasks, should be accessible online.

It is also worth noting that, to date, take-up of video interview options on social surveys has been fairly low, although there is ongoing work exploring whether video interviewing might become an established survey mode in the future. This focuses on respondent familiarity and communications, fieldwork logistics, interviewer training, technical barriers, and integration with existing survey infrastructures (Conrad et al, 2023).

As discussed previously, any change in mode needs to be considered carefully, taking into account not only the potential impacts on response but also the implications for data quality and completeness (see Ormston et al, 2024, for detailed discussion of the issues involved in changing modes). This is not necessarily a reason to dismiss such radical changes – indeed, it may be that in the future, the case for allowing additional flexibility over mode of completion continues to increase in line with people’s changing expectations around the nature of social interactions. However, ideally, any such changes should be introduced only after careful testing to understand both the impact on response (for example, there is a risk that it is easier to cancel video interviews than face-to-face appointments, so response could decrease if this is offered as an alternative) and on other elements of survey quality (like data completeness and accuracy).

Trust in government

Summary

Stakeholders and survey interviewers felt that lower trust in government was contributing to higher refusals to surveys. Survey evidence suggests that trust in politicians and parties, while never particularly high, has indeed fallen further in recent years. However, it was less clear from the general public qualitative research that general lack of trust in government was a key barrier. Rather, lack of faith that government would act on survey findings was a central concern.

Trust is generally viewed as a critical factor in survey participation, as it influences whether individuals perceive the survey process as legitimate and worthwhile. Past research has suggested that in societies where governmental or research institutions are highly trusted, individuals are more likely to view surveys as credible and aligned with public interest, thus increasing the likelihood of participation (Hofferth, 2001).

Stakeholders and survey interviewers interviewed for this study hypothesised that falling trust in, or negative perceptions of, government – either in general, or in the current party of government – might be a factor in rising nonresponse to Scottish Government surveys. Survey interviewers observed that the political landscape has been more polarised in the past ten years, citing events such as the 2014 Independence referendum, the 2016 Brexit referendum and the enforcement of lockdown rules between 2020-2021 due to the coronavirus pandemic as factors that may have impacted on potential respondents' attitudes to taking part in things for government in general. In this context, it is worth noting that the most marked change in response rates to the three main general population Scottish Government surveys over the seven-year period from 2012 to 2019 was around 2013 to 2016, coinciding with the Scottish Independence and Brexit referendums (2014 and 2016 – see Appendix B). Survey interviewers reported that more people were expressing anti-establishment views on the doorstep as a reason for not taking part:

“Quite a lot of people are very vocal about not wanting to help the government. I don't know if that's just the areas I work in, but I'll get a lot of people say, 'I know, I've read the letter, I'm not interested in helping this government'.” (SCJS interviewers group)

This extended beyond views of the Scottish Government to negative views of the NHS (for SHeS) and the criminal justice system (for SCJS).

Trends on public trust based on survey data are vulnerable to the very phenomenon they are trying to track – in other words, if the people becoming less likely to take part in surveys are those who are becoming less trusting, surveys themselves may be less able to pick up this decline. Such evidence that does exist for a general decline in trust is also somewhat mixed. For

example, public confidence in official statistics actually increased slightly between 2014 and 2023, which would appear to go against a narrative of falling trust (National Centre for Social Research, 2024a).

However, there is evidence to support the view that wider trust in government has dropped in recent years. For example, the 2024 British Social Attitudes report found that a record high proportion of the British public ‘almost never’ trusted governments of any party to place the needs of the nation above the interests of their political party (National Centre for Social Research, 2024b). Similarly, the [Ipsos Veracity index](#) has found that, while there is no evidence that trust is declining across the board, politicians remain stranded at the bottom of the ‘trust’ tables, having reached a 40-year low in 2023. As such, declining trust in government could be a factor contributing to post-pandemic response rate challenges, particularly on government surveys.

Members of the general public who took part in this research expressed mixed views on the Scottish Government. However, trust in government per se was not necessarily seen as a barrier to taking part in surveys:

“I’d still give them an opinion and tell them I don’t trust them” (Interview 8, Lower qualifications)

Rather, a lack of faith that government would act on the findings was cited as a key reason why they might not take part.

Potential solutions

One possible response to declining trust in government as a potential factor in nonresponse would be to place greater emphasis in communications – including the advance letter – on the survey being part of Official Statistics and/or the research arm of the Scottish Government, to try and ‘de-politicise’ it. As discussed in chapter 2, this could be informed by experiments to test which combinations of logos, if any, are associated with higher response rates among different groups.

At the same time, as noted, addressing trust in government in general may be less critical than engaging specifically with a lack of trust in how government uses survey data. This is discussed in the next section.

Scepticism about whether taking part makes a difference

Summary

Both survey interviewers and the general public highlighted the importance of being able to explain how government surveys will make a difference as a key motivator for taking part. However, the general public expressed considerable scepticism about whether they did, in practice, make any difference.

Interviewers for the SHS said that the most common question they fielded on the doorstep was “will it make any difference?” This was echoed in the general

public interviews, with participants highlighting a desire to feel they are contributing to improving things – either for themselves, for society in general, for their own area, or for their community – as a key motivator for taking part.

“I think one thing that could improve people participating would be to start with explaining why the survey is being done and how the results will benefit the people that are doing the survey.” (Public Group B, participants from Black backgrounds)

However, there was considerable scepticism about whether government surveys do, in practice, have any positive impact. Those who had previously participated in public sector surveys (such as those conducted by their local council), or in survey adjacent activities (such as consultations) reported that they had not seen any change as a result. There was cynicism about whether surveys were used to make it appear that government was listening when decisions had in fact already been made:

“I've started to fill them in and thought they already have made their mind up what they're going to do. So I just don't bother. I just feel it's a waste of my time.” (Public Group 3, aged 25+ urban areas)

Potential solutions

Providing a wider range of examples and evidence of the uses of survey data in survey and interviewer materials would better equip interviewers to address what appears to be a key concern for potential respondents: whether taking part will make a difference. Survey interviewers commented that it was not always easy to show what difference the Scottish Government surveys make and wanted more examples of uses that they could draw of and tailor to the characteristics and interests of individual respondents on the doorstep. Considering how to ‘sell’ the value of representing different groups in government surveys could form part of this.

However, participants also highlighted challenges around developing effective examples of impact. For example, while some members of the public were very positive about the examples of uses of SHS data shown in the survey leaflet, others commented that the examples were too ‘central belt centric’:

“I just thought, what does that have to do with anyone who lives in the country? Absolutely nothing” (Public Group 4, aged 25+, rural areas)

There were also different views on what impacts were ‘positive’, with some expressing disapproval of specific policies mentioned on the SHS leaflet, such as free bus travel for young people.

Survey interviewers and survey leads noted that placing too much emphasis on the scope for the surveys to directly impact council services (for the SHS) or the NHS (for SHeS) risked misunderstandings about the nature and content of the surveys. This could subsequently lead to frustrations for respondents if

it led to their expecting the survey to incorporate a more immediate and direct feedback route on their experiences of services, rather than providing broader evidence to shape longer-term policy decisions.

These challenges do not negate the need to provide clearer and more varied examples of the uses of survey data, however. They simply highlight the need to approach this from the perspective of (different) potential respondents.

In addition to giving examples at the start as to how data has been used, an additional suggestion from the general public groups was to provide more feedback to respondents after they take part on what the results and impacts have been. This could involve, for example, sharing a short summary report with those who provide contact details to do so, once that years' findings have been made public. Committing to a 'feedback loop' to demonstrate to participants how surveys are used may help boost the sense that taking part is a worthwhile way to spend their time.

It may also be worth framing the usefulness of surveys in terms of holding government to account, by collecting information that anyone (including other parties, journalists, think tanks, charities and even the public) can use to see what is happening in Scotland, rather than focusing on the impact on specific government policies (with which potential respondents may or may not agree).

Concerns about data misuse

Summary

The literature indicates that assuring respondents their data will be handled confidentially significantly increases willingness to take part in surveys. However, qualitative interviews with stakeholders, survey interviewers and the general public all indicate that providing this reassurance has become harder in the light of greater awareness and concerns about scams, fraud and data misuse.

The findings above suggest that respondents want to know more about the positive uses and impacts of their data. However, participants also require reassuring that their data will not be used in an irresponsible or negative manner. Assuring respondents their data will be handled with utmost confidentiality and explaining how privacy is safeguarded has been shown to significantly enhance willingness to participate (Couper et al, 2008, Singer and Couper, 2017). However, interviews with stakeholders, survey interviewers and the general public for the present study all indicate that providing this reassurance is becoming increasingly challenging.

There was a general perception across interviews that people are more aware of examples of data scams, fraud and data misuse in general. Interviewers across all three surveys noted that some people would not take part because

of fears of scams. Although they carry ID cards, survey interviewers found these were not always sufficient to reassure a potential respondent.

Data from the SCJS highlights that a significant proportion of the population (one in ten) had experienced at least one type of cyber fraud or computer misuse in 2023/24 (Scottish Government, 2025), while the number of police recorded cases of fraud more than doubled between 2014/15 and 2023/24 (Scottish Government, 2025). In this context, it is unsurprising that survey interviewers are finding people are more concerned about fraud than they once were.

Moreover, the general public interviews highlight that even when potential respondents are convinced that a survey is a genuine government survey and not a scam, they may still have concerns about how the government will use their data. Disabled participants and those from Black backgrounds in particular expressed concerns about the potential for their data to be misused, linking this with examples they had read or heard about of misuses of data (not limited to survey data) collected from their communities:

“History hasn't been the best friend of collecting information of minorities in any capacity... Yes, it can be used positively, but the reality is that that information can be weaponised.” (Public Group A, participants from Black backgrounds)

“During the start of Covid we found out that autistic people, for example, were being added to DNR lists without our knowledge or consent... And obviously I recognise that surveys are anonymised and that sort of thing. I get that. But disabled people are very used to having our disabilities weaponised against us.” (Public Interview 3, neurodivergent person)

Potential solutions

Ensuring that survey interviewers are equipped with quick, tangible reassurances to concerns around data protection and misuse of data is key to addressing this barrier. The literature suggests that one effective strategy here is to actively demonstrate the security measures in place for data protection. This could include describing how data is stored securely, who has access to it, and how long it will be retained. Offering respondents the option to review and consent to specific data handling practices can also foster a sense of control and security (Novak, 2014).

“Survey overload”

Summary

The literature and qualitative research all indicate that capturing the public’s attention and convincing them government surveys are worth doing has become more difficult because people receive so many more survey and feedback requests than was the case in the past.

The notion of “survey overload” was mentioned across the literature and different interviewee groups included in this research. Survey interviewers reported increasing challenges in distinguishing Scottish Government surveys from what they referred to as “coffee cup surveys” (a term used to refer to the feedback requests people receive after many everyday commercial transactions). The general public clearly recognised this too, commenting on the cognitive challenge the volume of survey requests they now experience creates for them in working out which, if any, are actually worth their time and effort:

"you reach a kind of saturation point or kind of survey fatigue where ... you can't distinguish between what's important and what's not important. And just because someone tells you it's important doesn't mean it is. So if you're constantly overwhelmed with surveys, you lose the ability, I think, to discriminate." (Public Group 3, aged 25+, urban areas)

Potential solutions

Addressing ‘survey overload’ is difficult, since the Scottish Government has no control over the volume or nature of other surveys, or survey adjacent requests that the Scottish public receive. One response would be to develop and test possible ways of more clearly distinguishing Scottish Government surveys from other surveys. For example, changing the description in participant communications from ‘survey’ to ‘an important government study’ or similar could help draw a clearer distinction between Scottish Government and commercial surveys. However, this proposal received mixed feedback in the general public interviews, with some suggesting the alternative wording was too vague.

Expectation of reward

Summary

There were mixed views among survey interviewers and the general public on whether people expect to be financially rewarded for taking part in surveys. However, there is strong evidence from the literature that incentives can boost response among underrepresented groups.

Another consequence of the proliferation of surveys and feedback requests in contemporary society is that people are more aware that many of these requests come with an offer of immediate financial reward, such as a voucher

or a free coffee. While SHeS offers £10 High Street Vouchers to participants, neither the SHS or SCJS currently use incentives.

General public participants in this research expressed mixed views on whether they would expect to receive an incentive and how critical incentives were to motivating people to take part in government surveys specifically. Some participants were adamant that they would not be willing to take part in any surveys without a financial incentive; others felt the motivation for taking part in government surveys was primarily the potential impact on society.

"They want my knowledge, they want my information. They've got to give me something in return." (Public Group 4, aged 25+, rural areas)

"In the letter that they explain what it's for, why they're doing it, what the benefits will be, what they're going to do with it. This is an incentive in itself really." (Public Group 4, aged 25+, rural areas)

There was a belief that incentives could attract different kinds of people from those who would answer otherwise, leading to a more diverse range of opinions being included. This is backed up by many experiments with incentives on social surveys, which demonstrate that incentives (and especially monetary incentives) can boost response among underrepresented groups, including younger people, those from deprived areas, and those from minority ethnic backgrounds (e.g. see Mack et al, 1998; Singer & Kulka, 2002; McGonagle and Freedman, 2017).

Potential solutions

As indicated, incentives are a proven means of increasing response rates. However, introducing universal incentives across the Scottish Government surveys would be very expensive. Differential or discretionary incentives, which aim to target incentives at low responding groups or use them to avert a hard refusal, may be a more cost-effective way of using incentives by ensuring resources are targeted on those less likely to respond. In doing so, they may also be more effective in reducing nonresponse bias, which as discussed is arguably more important than the overall response rate.

However, survey interviewers who took part in this research noted risks around discretionary or differential incentives, suggesting that they could backfire and have a negative overall impact on response if respondents who are not offered an incentive hear about those who did. This was felt to be a particular risk in rural areas, where people are more likely to talk to their neighbours. Both survey interviewers and the general public raised concerns that introducing incentives to government surveys specifically could risk delegitimising them or that it would be seen as a waste of taxpayers' money:

"In a way (not having incentives) adds to the legitimacy, that this is important research, this is government stuff, we're conscious of taxpayers money." (SHS interviewers group)

5. Conclusions

As discussed in the introduction to this report, survey methodologists have been concerned with combatting nonresponse for many decades. Interest has only intensified as response rates have fallen. However, discussion of the underlying drivers of nonresponse has often been hypothetical and speculative. Applying a behavioural lens to understanding nonresponse has enabled this report to systematically map potential barriers that prevent people from taking part in surveys. The report draws together data from multiple sources, including research with underrepresented groups themselves, to examine the evidence for each of the barriers identified. In doing so, it is hoped that it contributes to extending and deepening understandings of nonresponse, as well as providing practical, grounded suggestions for how the Scottish Government might reduce nonresponse in its general population surveys.

In considering which solutions to develop further, it is important to keep in mind that there is almost certainly no ‘silver bullet’ that might return nonresponse to the levels seen in previous decades. The impact of factors like changing patterns of home working and the proliferation of commercial surveys on nonresponse may be impossible to fully mitigate. It is also important to be aware that survey methodologists increasingly recommend considering other indicators of survey quality (such as demographic representativeness against benchmark figures) instead of, or alongside, response rates. It would be timely for the Scottish Government to reconsider how it reports on survey quality across the three general population surveys, particularly in the light of the recent Survey Futures statement on this topic (Maslovskaya et al, 2025).

However, none of this negates the importance of understanding the drivers, implications of, and potential solutions to nonresponse – rather, it highlights the need for a well-evidenced and nuanced discussion, which it is hoped this report contributes to.

Choosing and testing potential solutions

The potential solutions discussed in this report fall into four overarching categories. Each of these address nonresponse from a different angle, and bring different challenges in terms of ease of implementation, as well as potential impact.

- **Incremental improvements to survey design and processes.** Solutions that fall into this category include those relating to redesigning advance letters, testing of logos and envelope designs, and refining interviewer messaging on the doorstep. These are generally reasonably low cost and straightforward to implement, at least individually. Their individual impacts on nonresponse may be modest, particularly given the considerable effort

that has already been invested by commissioners and contractors in delivering the three surveys to a high standard. However, the cumulative impact of multiple incremental improvements may nonetheless be more substantial. Whenever possible, experiments should be used to test the impacts of individual changes, to identify the optimum combination to roll-out. There may be opportunities to combine efforts and test different interventions on each of the three surveys at the same time, to maximise learning.

- **Improvements aimed at supporting and strengthening the fieldforce.** Given the critical role of survey interviewers in face-to-face fieldwork, effective training, particularly for new survey interviewers, is essential. Specific areas that should be addressed across the sector to help survey interviewers overcome the barriers identified in this report are outlined in previous chapters. Additionally, training should aim to boost survey interviewers' confidence and their belief in their ability to convince people to participate.
- **More radical changes to survey design and mode.** While incremental improvements to survey materials and interviewer training may go some way to addressing specific respondent concerns, some of the societal shifts identified in this report may be more immune to incremental solutions. More radical changes – such as substantially shortening the survey, breaking it into different parts, offering different modes of completion, or offering differential or discretionary incentives – carry much higher costs and risks. However, they could also have a more significant impact in terms of encouraging groups who are reluctant or unable to take part in the surveys in their current form to participate. The trade-offs and risks associated with changing and mixing modes have been discussed in detail in a previous Scottish Government report (Ormston et al, 2024). This should be read alongside this one in considering which, if any, of these more radical changes to develop and test. It is particularly crucial that these more radical changes are only introduced following carefully designed and controlled experiments to test their impacts.
- **Efforts to improve the wider survey environment.** A fourth group of potential solutions are focused less on persuading those sampled to take part, but rather aim to improve the 'receptiveness' of the public as a whole to Scottish Government surveys and statistics. Influencing the wider context in which surveys take place is arguably very difficult, and the impact on nonresponse uncertain. However, it may nonetheless be important to develop more consistent narratives and messaging around Scottish Government surveys and statistics to combat public distrust or indifference.

In determining which solutions to take forward, cost, complexity and trade-offs in terms of data quality will inevitably need to be weighed. Three additional, interrelated questions the Scottish Government may wish to consider are:

- which potential solutions may have the **most impact on underrepresented groups** (e.g. young people and those from minority ethnic backgrounds)
- which changes are also an **ethical imperative** (particularly those relating to accessibility), and
- where there are opportunities to develop solutions that individually or collectively **address multiple barriers**.

We discuss each of these briefly in turn below.

Increasing participation among underrepresented groups

Analysis of differences in response rates to the three main Scottish Government general population surveys conducted for this research confirms that response rates remain lower (and, in some cases, have fallen more than average) among: younger people; people from minority ethnic backgrounds; and those with lower levels of education. These are all groups that are of particular interest to the Scottish Government, as they are among the groups known to experience more negative outcomes across a range of areas. Improving their response rates would not only reduce overall nonresponse bias, but also provide valuable additional data about their experiences.

This report highlights various solutions that could, potentially, help target barriers to survey participation among young people, people from minority ethnic backgrounds, and those with lower levels of education. For example:

- Offering a shorter interview; providing alternative modes of completion; and offering incentives all found favour among young people interviewed for this research.
- The literature also indicates that offering incentives tends to have a disproportionate impact on response among underrepresented groups, including young people, those from minority ethnic backgrounds and those from more deprived areas.
- Interviewees from minority ethnic backgrounds (and disabled participants) expressed particular concerns about the potential for data to be misused, with negative impacts for their communities; solutions aimed at reassuring participants about data uses may be particularly important to encouraging their participation.
- Challenging stereotypes of who takes part in surveys – and doing more to reassure respondents that they can take part – may be particularly important to both younger people and those with lower levels of education.

Enhancing accessibility

While disabled people are not necessarily systematically underrepresented in surveys (possibly because age and disability are strongly correlated, and older people are more likely to participate), increasing the accessibility of surveys is

an ethical imperative. Interviews with disabled people for this research highlighted that accessibility concerns can arise across the survey process, from the advance letter to the experience of taking part in the interview itself.

Some of the barriers identified in this report may require actual changes, such as redesign of the advance letter. However, others are less about changing materials or approaches and more about ensuring that existing accessibility options (such as willingness to offer flexible appointments) are offered more clearly to potential respondents. Implementing these solutions would be low cost. Other potential solutions to concerns raised by disabled people may require more expensive changes, including offering different modes of participation.

Solutions that address multiple barriers

In addition to considering which potential solutions may have most impact for key groups of respondents, it will also be important to consider which will best address the range of different barriers identified in this report. Considering both these questions could help the Scottish Government determine how solutions can be 'packaged' together for maximum impact. For example,

- Efforts to raise awareness of government surveys in general could focus on illustrating their value to different groups in society (including underrepresented or potentially excluded groups like young people, disabled people, and those from minority ethnic backgrounds). They could also challenge norms about who takes part in surveys, by having people with different characteristics talk about why they took part in surveys and what they got out of it. A campaign around these themes could potentially impact on underrepresented groups and on a range of barriers, including: lack of awareness; social norms around survey participation; 'survey overload' (by helping people to assess how government surveys might be different); and scepticism about the impact of surveys.
- Some of the more 'radical' solutions, while more challenging to develop and implement, also have scope to impact across multiple barriers. For example, offering different modes for completing interviews, including self-complete, could help with concerns about time (by allowing people greater flexibility around when they take part), as well as 'social aversion' or other respondent concerns about having an interviewer in their home (including concerns among some disabled people about health risks).
- At the same time, some of the (relatively) simpler actions could also respond to multiple barriers. For example, any changes to the advance materials and interviewer training should consider accessibility, communicating the value of the surveys more effectively, how to distinguish the survey from 'spam' or from commercial surveys, enhancing reassurances around data protection and misuse, etc.

Assessing the effectiveness of solutions

Once decisions have been made about which solutions to implement or test, it is important to assess whether they have made any difference in practice. This will, of course, require examining response rate data. However, it will also be important to consider any evidence that the changes have succeeded in addressing the specific barriers they were intended to resolve, or whether these barriers persist.

Another important consideration will be their impact on response among underrepresented and potentially excluded groups', including the groups identified in this report. This links to the overarching point made at the start of this report – that response rates matter insofar as they drive nonresponse bias. At the heart of any assessment of the impact of solutions to nonresponse should be their impact not only on overall response rates, but whether and how they lead to a more representative sample.



© Crown copyright 2025

You may re-use this information (excluding logos and images) free of charge in any format or medium, under the terms of the Open Government Licence. To view this licence, visit <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/> or e-mail: psi@nationalarchives.gsi.gov.uk. Where we have identified any third party copyright information you will need to obtain permission from the copyright holders concerned.

The views expressed in this report are those of the researcher and do not necessarily represent those of the Scottish Government or Scottish Ministers.

This document is also available from our website at www.gov.scot.
ISBN: 978-1-80643-268-4

The Scottish Government
St Andrew's House
Edinburgh
EH1 3DG

Produced for
the Scottish Government
by APS Group Scotland
PPDAS1662546 (11/25)
Published by
the Scottish Government,
November 2025



Social Research series
ISSN 2045-6964
ISBN 978-1-80643-268-4

Web Publication
www.gov.scot/socialresearch

PPDAS1662546 (11/25)