

11th Meeting of the Heads of National Statistical Offices of East Asian Countries, 6-8 November 2006, Tokyo, Japan

National Statistical System Initiatives

Introduction

This paper reports on progress with implementing the new Official Statistics System (OSS) model that was agreed by government as a result of a major review undertaken in 2002/03 and 2003/04.

Background

The Review of the New Zealand Official Statistics System recommended the implementation of a new model of official statistics that would:

- strengthen and develop the overall system of official statistics
- document and retain the most important official statistical data as an enduring national resource
- ensure greater access to this resource for a range of users
- manage respondent burden from official statistics surveys on 'a whole of government basis
- reinforce the leadership role of the Government Statistician.

Current Situation

Statistics New Zealand has responded to the Review recommendations by implementing initiatives specified in the Review, and by developing organisational outcomes that reinforce the intent of the Review. Specific initiatives, grouped by elements of the new model, are:

Strengthen and develop the overall system of official statistics and reinforce the leadership role of Government Statistician

- developing domain plans designed to identify and prioritise user needs and existing sources of data across statistical domains (eg health, education, crime and justice, etc)
- Establishing the Ministerial Advisory Committee on Official Statistics (ACOS) - providing advice on Tier 1 statistics and the health of the OSS to the Minister of Statistics
- a public service chief executives group, initially to develop and endorse a list of Tier 1 statistics, and more recently to advise on priorities and feasibility of national statistical initiatives
- Develop a framework of OSS principles and protocols for use across government agencies and engaging with producers to support the application of protocols and review of standards
- developing a "bureau service" designed to promote awareness and offer assistance to government agencies on how to meet their OSS obligations, e.g. apply OSS protocols

- develop a set of basic core statistical skill unit standards for the National Qualifications Framework
- have statistics included as a specific area of study in the draft New Zealand secondary school education curriculum for 2006
- develop a professional statistician's network to provide a forum for networking and professional development amongst state sector employees working with statistics.
- conduct Official Statistics Seminars throughout the year – each seminar is on one key theme related to the OSS, and consists of a variety of speakers. Government sector agencies are encouraged to attend and learn more about the OSS.

Document and retain the most important official statistical data as an enduring national resource

- Establish a data archive to reference, through a metadata store, all sources of official statistics and to hold Tier 1 unit record survey data

Ensure greater access to this resource for a range of users

- develop an OSS portal (Statisphere) to provide access to sites containing official statistics, and information on surveys being conducted across government
- provide confidentialised unit record data files to be made available to researchers under licence
- develop a portfolio of linked datasets to help explain the impact of change and provide a more dynamic picture for New Zealanders (e.g. Linked Employer Employee Dataset, Student Loans dataset, Injury dataset)

More effectively manage on 'a whole of government basis' respondent burden from official surveys

- introduce a load management process for the Official Statistics System, including a process for approval of all surveys with a sample size greater than 2,500, to encourage collaboration across agencies, and
- a Statistics Notification System (SNS) which enables Statistics New Zealand to produce a comprehensive register of all official surveys and reduce duplication of work by departments and respondents
- develop a respondent load strategy that will extend across the government sector
- explore mechanisms to include statistics, produced by non-government Crown entities, as official statistics

How we addressed key challenges

At the time we were planning to implement the recommendations of the review in 2004, the key challenges facing Statistics NZ were listed as:

- Coordinating official statistics - The challenge was to build relationships and confidence in the value and feasibility of the new model, and in Statistics New Zealand's role as OSS leaders.
- Tactics in identifying, pursuing and promoting statistical leadership activities - Statistics New Zealand saw that maintaining the profile of statistical activity would be a key challenge in operating the new model effectively.
- Establishing the advisory committee - The new advisory committee had to be seen to operate independently of Statistics New Zealand if it was to be a useful advocate for the quality of official statistics.
- Influencing survey load across government - The challenge was to get the most leverage out of these arrangements in getting agencies to be disciplined about commissioning new collections.

Coordinating official statistics

Government agency Chief Executives have remained committed to the concept of the new OSS model, and have generally supported the implementation of key initiatives, such as a list of Tier 1 statistics, a survey notification system, and the establishment of ACOS. The reason for this commitment is significantly due to the following factors:

- the new model was endorsed as a Cabinet approved initiative, rather than a less formal policy directive
- intense networking by the Government Statistician and Deputy Government Statisticians at the CE and Deputy CE level
- strong support from the central agencies, especially Treasury and, State Services Commission
- a highly facilitative and consultative approach adopted when seeking the cooperation of other agencies
- an incremental approach that focused on establishing the mechanism required as opposed to ensuring that all processes and issues were dealt with as a prerequisite
- overall support for a good statistical system that supported policy decisions, and majority support for Statistics NZ as the leader of the system.

The next stage of this work is the application of quality protocols for Tier 1 statistics across public sector producers. This work will require Statistics New Zealand to engage with agencies and encourage them to assess the quality of their Tier 1 datasets.

Tactics in identifying, pursuing and promoting statistical leadership activities

Generally, Statistics NZ still struggles to have the importance of statistics and the OSS recognised as a national asset, although there have been a number of specific successes.

The successes, which have been acknowledged as innovative, insightful and relevant to the current environment for more data and in greater detail, include

- Macroeconomic data and analysis is recognised by users as being of high quality and essential to measuring economic progress and identifying appropriate interventions;
- improved Census 2006 Output Systems;
- development of a Business Performance / Growth and Innovation Framework;
- the Social Statistics Programme;
- the National Accounts Redevelopment program; and
- new data produced through integrating data from different sources - Linked Employer-Employee Data (LEED); Student Loans, and Injury Statistics.

The new Statistics New Zealand brand has helped lift the organisation's image, and with the assistance of more aggressive marketing, increased its exposure in the media as the source of key statistical performance measures, such as the CPI, GDP and employment/unemployment data. While improvements have been marked, there are still too many instances where statistical "footprints" appear in media publications, without attribution to Statistics New Zealand.

Seminars and promotions are informing the public sector and client groups on aspects of statistics, and the OSS. These seminars have proven successful, although the challenge is to attract more of the "unconverted" along. Some of the more popular seminars have been those that convey information to policy analysts about how to use statistics and identify reliable data; and presentations by the Chief Demographer on demographic trends in New Zealand.

Establishing the advisory committee

ACOS has been established under the Chair of David Caygill. David is a well respected Chair in his own right, was a Minister in a previous New Zealand government, and is well respected by both major political parties. Other members of ACOS are senior public sector managers, well regarded academics, including a professor in Māori and indigenous research, and the CE of Business New Zealand. The Committee has met with the Minister and has recently presented their first annual report to the Minister of Statistics.

While there are expectations that the Committee will be excellent advocates for the OSS, at this stage it is too early to try and assess the Committee's overall effectiveness.

Influencing survey load across government

A Statistics Notification System (SNS) for reporting all surveys in government has been established. The system's primary purpose is to make information about OSS survey activity available to both the public sector and in aggregate form to the general public. Chief Executives, responsible for conducting surveys, have agreed to cooperate with the system and have provided a full list of survey activity.

The first report from the SNS, while not revealing significant survey duplication, identified that:

- 13 agencies conducting 158 surveys of businesses, compared with 24 agencies that conduct 124 surveys of individuals
- Statistics New Zealand undertakes 74 percent by number of the surveys of businesses, compared to 13 percent of surveys (not including the Census) of individuals
- 48 percent of surveys of individuals run by other agencies are ad hoc surveys, compared to 12 percent of surveys of businesses.

There is obviously no “silver bullet” for dealing with respondent load. However, real gains can be made from understanding causal factors and investing wisely to minimise their impacts. Statistics New Zealand, apart from close management of clients and the introduction of survey approval and notification systems, is currently developing a respondent load strategy that aims to gather a current and accurate picture of respondent load issues, and recommend appropriate actions.

What Challenges Remain

While inroads have been made toward addressing the challenges that were identified in 2004, there is still some way to go before all of those issues can be said to have been appropriately addressed.

New challenges that are emerging for Statistics New Zealand are:

- to demonstrate that it is meeting all OSS obligations, such as quality protocols, and respondent load requirements, so it is beyond reproach when encouraging other agencies to participate
- for subject matter areas to engage with government agencies, and take the lead in achieving quality Tier 1 statistics across government
- for organisational expertise and resources to be used, to the greatest extent possible, to strengthen the sector’s contribution to a stronger, and less burdensome OSS
- to continue with efforts to increase statistical capability, and appreciation of the importance of a strong OSS
- to ensure that ACOS has adequate representation from providers of statistics as well as producers and users
- possible broadening of the scope of the OSS to include a range of other significant public sector organisations involved in undertaking or funding surveys of one sort or another.

Statistics New Zealand

October 2006